NOTICE OF

Mural Paintings at Witton,

[TUNSTEAD HUNDRED.]

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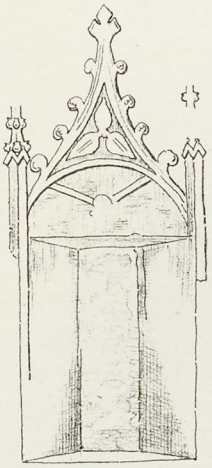
In the month of June, 1859, during a visit to the parish church of Witton, by North Walsham, which was then undergoing repair, my attention was arrested by some traces of colour on the wall where portions of the plaster had fallen away: by the kind permission of the vicar, and with some patience and labour on my own part, I was able to bring to light the paintings shewn in the accompanying illustrations. These paintings are all situated on the north wall of the nave, which presents a large unbroken surface, well suited for the display of subjects of this kind, which seem to have prevailed especially in this county, for it rarely happens that a single church undergoes repair without the discovery of mural paintings of more or less interest. But we must lament that these early examples of pictorial art in our country are too often, through ignorance or prejudice, entirely lost to the archæologist, without even a record of their existence.

Commencing from the west, the first subject is one which has now become familiar to us all, and we have here

"Great Christopher that painted is with body great and tall,"

placed as usual opposite the south or principal entrance of the church. The infant Saviour, holding the orb and cross,



RECESS IN WALL.

KING HENRY VI.

ST JOHN BAPTIST.

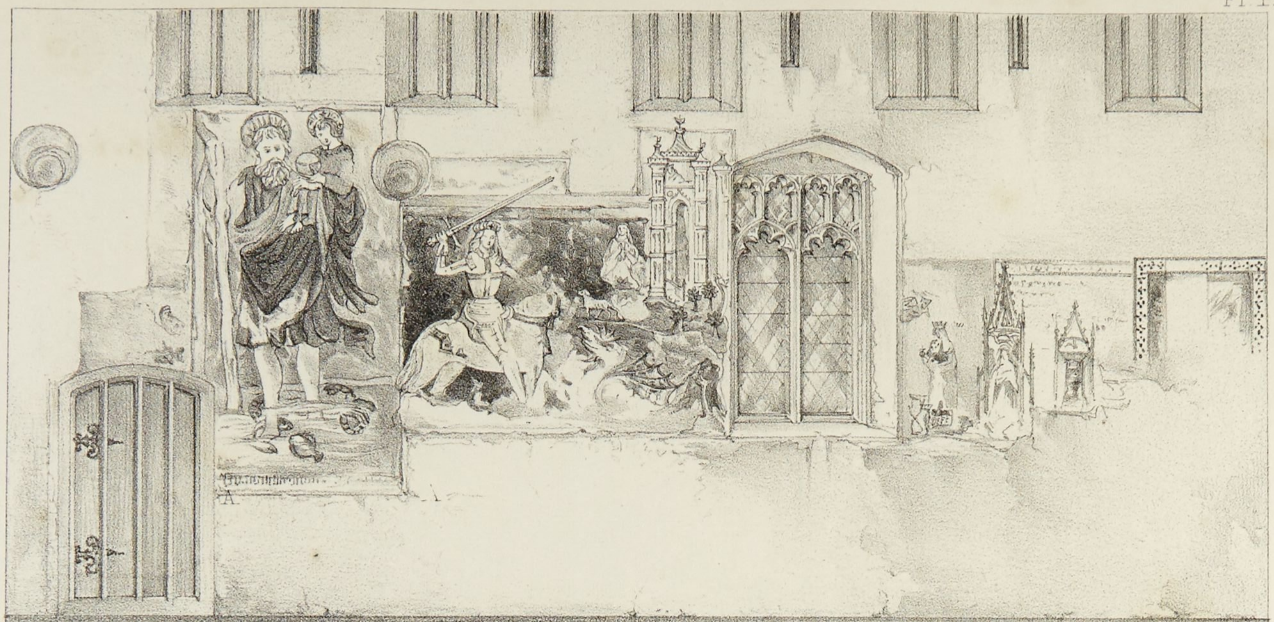
1 2 3 4 5

SCALE OF FEET.

G.W.W.M. del. Edw. Rite, anastat.

MURAL PAINTINGS, WITTON CHURCH.

Pl. 1.



Inscription at A.

Xfori : sci : sperie : quicunq : tuet Ill...

-G.W.W.M. del.

Day & Son Lithrs to The Queen.

MURAL PAINTINGS NORTH WALL OF WITTON CHURCH. [HUNDD OF TUNSTEAD.]

and clad in a green tunicle, with his head surrounded by a *nimbus* containing a cross *fleury*, is seated on the left shoulder of the giant; St. Christopher, leaning on his staff, treads in water, which contains fish of various kinds, together with a lobster and a crab, whose lively contortions are hardly consistent with their sanguine hue. On the right of St. Christopher, and directly over the north door, is a diminutive figure, with upturned countenance, representing the hermit, by whom, according to the legend, he was instructed in the Christian faith.

This example of the story of St. Christopher differs little from those generally met with. The principal figure is more than eleven feet in height, of bold design, and has at the base, in black letter with rubricated capitals, a fragment of the inscription, which is rarely found preserved:

Xfori : scī : specīe : qicuꝫ : tuet : Ill * * * * *

This is the first line of the couplet usually inscribed under representations of this saint, and expressing the mediæval idea regarding him as the helper of those that labour.[1] To

[1] This couplet, which varies slightly in readings, forms the opening of a Hymn to St. Christopher, of which Mr. Procter has obliged me with a transcript from a MS. Horæ (No. 25) p. 268, in the library of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Xpofer sancti specie quicuqꝫ tuetur
Illo nempe die nullo languore gravetur
Martir Xpofere p salvatoris honore
Fac nos mente fore dignos deitatis honore
Promisso Xpi quicquid petis optinuisti
Da pplo tristi bona que moriendo petisti
Confer solamen et mentis tolle gravamen
Judicis examen mitte (*mite*) sit omnibus, amen.

The volume which contains this is of especial interest to Norfolk archæologists. At p. 114 is an illuminated representation of the passion of our Lord on the cross, with this inscription, "*Thys cros that heyr peyntyd is Syng of the cros of bromholm is.*" The cross has two cross-pieces with a summit, and is like that figured by Blomefield as the miracle-working cross which made the priory of Bromholm so famous.

make it more easy to gain his help, he is sometimes depicted on the outside wall of continental churches, or his statue, painted in vivid colours, to render it visible from afar, is placed in some prominent position; and on this account he is with us generally found opposite the south door, in the position most convenient to be seen by those who resort to the church.

Next to St. Christopher, in an eastward direction, is an historical representation of St. George of Cappadocia, the patron saint of England, and favourite of the seven champions of Christendom, in his famous combat with the dragon. The saint is mounted on a white steed, his head is encircled with a coronet of eastern design, in the fore-part of which is the red cross; his armour, which is of the period of Henry the Fifth, or the beginning of the fifteenth century, consists of a *jupon* with a red cross on the breast; beneath this appears the *haubergeon*, or mail shirt; his arms are encased in steel, as were also his legs; with a sword raised above his head, the saint is dealing a final blow at the dragon, which must have formed a conspicuous feature; but the greater part of the monster, together with the legs of the champion, disappeared in the process of developement. The *housings* of the horse are of a dull red colour, with ornaments of yellow. In the back-ground of the picture is seen the princess Cleodolinda, accompanied by a lamb,[2] and arrayed in royal apparel.

"With folded arms, and knees full lowly bent,"

she beholds the conflict on which her life depends, and of

[2] It is generally thought that the lamb, when introduced, is emblematical of the purity of the virgin princess; but a reference to the history in the golden legend explains its presence. It is there related that the inhabitants of Silena first appeased the dragon by offering two sheep daily, "cum ergo jam oves pæne deficerent, maxime cum harum copiam habere non possent, inito consilio *ovem cum adjuncto homine tribuebant.*"—Jacobi à Voragine, *Leg. Aurea.* A sheep was therefore offered with the king's daughter, when the lot fell upon her after the sons and daughters of the citizens had perished.

which the king her father is an anxious spectator from the city-gate. The artist has represented the scene of the contest in a way which, although conventional, well conveys to the imagination the pestiferous haunt of the monster, which was situated, according to Jacobus de Voragine, in a marshy swamp without the city of Silena in Libya.

Although this subject is so popular, and examples have been found in our Norfolk churches, it is but rare that all the incidents of the story are so fully represented. Mrs. Jameson, in her *Sacred and Legendary Art*, recollects but one instance in which the princess has the lamb—in a little print by Lucas van Leyden. There is, however, in the vestry of St. George's Tombland, Norwich, a wood-carving which tells this story in a very similar way: it belonged to the guild of St. George in that city, and on the removal of their house, which stood on the west side of Tombland, was deposited in the neighbouring church; but this carving differs from the present example, where we have a family of dragons; one contending with the saint, a second scaling the walls of the city, while a young one half-fledged is issuing from the paternal lair—an arrangement certainly very rare, if not altogether *unique*.

The paintings to the east of the last described, are very irregular in their arrangement, but nevertheless interesting. The first is a figure of King Henry VI., or Saint Henry, as he is sometimes called, though never canonized, which is here observed by the absence of the *nimbus;* his crown, however, is supported by angels; he bears the orb and sceptre, and at his feet is his badge—a white antelope *gorged, chained, and armed, or*. This prince was much venerated by our forefathers, and some books of Hours contain prayers in his honour.[3] He seems to have been an especial favourite in this

[3] The MS. Horæ before alluded to, contains an Orison to Henry VI. commencing "Rex henricus pauperū et ecclesie defensor, &c." *Vers'*. "Ora p' nobis devote henrice."

county, and representations of him existed in many of our churches, of which examples remain on the rood-screens at Gately, Ludham, and Barton-Turf. Parkin, in his notice of the parish of Weasenham, says: "At the south-east end of the nave, or body, of the church was a stone staircase leading to the old rood-loft; over the door or entrance I saw some years since an old painted board with a portraiture of Henry VI. painted thereon, with the arms of France and England quarterly, and REX HENRICUS SEXTUS, with an antelope at his feet."[4] According to Sir Thomas Browne, the figures of Bishop Alnwyck and Henry VI. adorned the west front of our cathedral,[5] and an image of the latter of great note was at St. Leonard's Priory on Mousehold. The will of Walter Mellys of Horstead[6] contains the following, "*Itm ad lume henrici sexti* reg^{i} ij^{d}." From this we learn that the light of King Henry VI. was kept in the church there, and was probably established by the Society of his college at Cambridge, to whom in the nineteenth of his reign he gave the manor of Horstead, which is held by them to this day, together with the patronage of the living.

The effigy of this Lancastrian prince existed in many of our Norfolk churches; and the veneration of his memory in these parts may be attributed to the number of parishes in the county held of the Duchy of Lancaster, among which the parish of Witton was included. Nor was he a personal stranger to the county, for John Capgrave, "frere of Lenne," tells us that in the twenty-fourth of his reign (1446) "this most devout king, in the course of the solemn pilgrimages he

[4] Blomefield's Norf. Vol. v. fo. 1086.

[5] Posthumous Works, *Repertorium*, p. 24. Lond. 1723. Among the feoffees of the lands of the Duchy of Lancaster, devoted by Henry VI. to the foundation of Eton College, and King's College, Cambridge, are the names of "*William* (Alnwick) *bishop of Lincoln, and Walter Lyert, clerck, now* (1447) *bishop of Norwich.*" Alnwick held the see of Norwich from 1426 to 1436, when he was translated to Lincoln. See Nichols' *Royal Wills*, p. 291. Lond. 1780.

[6] Reg. Episc. Norw. Lib. *Wight*, fo. 14.

made to the most Holy Places, received into his favour the place of the Hermit Friars of St. Augustine in the town of Lynn."[7] In the year 1448 he visited Norwich, and in 1449 honoured the city a second time with his presence, and was entertained by Bishop Lyhart at his palace, which underwent great alteration for the occasion.[8]

Of the remaining paintings, the first is a figure of St. John the Baptist in a camels' hair robe, holding in his left hand a book, on which is the *Agnus Dei* with a cross staff, from which depends a banner; around this figure is a highly ornamented canopy of Perpendicular character. Beyond this is a plain recess in the wall, with an ogee crocketted head painted above, and traces of colour on the jambs: to this there probably belonged a bracket for the support of a light or image,—perhaps of St. Margaret, to whom the church is dedicated. A similar recess was found in Bacton church during recent alterations, and at Edingthorpe there exists a beautiful niche and bracket in a like position. To the east of this recess is a mass of dull red colour, surrounded by a *bordure* of black quatrefoils, which may have served as a dossel to a picture or image, but the wall in this place had been previously so broken by the erection of the pulpit, as not to leave sufficient for probable conjecture.

The irregularity and variety in the treatment of these frescoes shew that, if they all existed together, they are certainly the work of different periods. It is probable that when the popularity of a saint declined, or the fame of a new one arose, the ecclesiastics would take advantage of

[7] Johannes Capgrave de Illustribus Henricis, ed. Hingeston, p. 137. Lond. 1858. From the Privy Seals of 24th Henry VI. he was at Lynn on the 1st of August, and there directed the issue of a grant to the prioress and nuns of Crabhouse in this county.

[8] The works of this period were pointed out by Mr. Harrod in his able and interesting paper on the old episcopal palace and chapel, read at a meeting of our Society in May last, and contained in the present volume.

such changes in the minds of the people to excite a spirit of piety, or to promote the interests of their church; so the old and catholic St. Christopher in a chivalrous age may have given place to St. George; and in a succeeding age the piety and royal benevolence of a native prince may have induced the people to regard and honour, as a saint, a sovereign of whom it is said that he was "more calculated to adorn a cloister than to wear a crown." From the execution, the figure of St. Christopher appears the most ancient: it is painted in distemper on the rough cast of the wall, while all the other pictures are on a thin coating of whiting or plaster, which serves as a ground. The character of the armour in the legend of St. George indicates the work of the first part of the fifteenth century, or about the time of Henry V., in whose reign the Order of the Garter rose in consequence and splendour, the honour of St. George reached its highest point, and his feast increased in importance.[9] The date of the other pictures can be also very nearly determined: that of Henry VI. would be subsequent to 1461, the year of his death; the remaining ones, from the resemblance of the enrichments to the sculpture of the period, are of the latter part of the Perpendicular style.

In removing the white-wash, fragments of inscriptions appeared in several places; some in black letter with rubricated capitals, probably of the date of the Reformation, when texts were ordered to be set up in the place of pictures; others in italics of a later date; none were, however, in a sufficiently perfect state to be in any way legible.

[9] "In a councelle at London this ȝere (1414) was ordeyned that the festes of Seynt George and Seynt Dunstan schuld be dobbil festes." — Capgrave's *Chronicle*, p. 303. Lond. 1858. From the time of the council under Langton at Oxford in 1222, the festival of St. George had been kept as a holyday of the lesser rank; at the council above mentioned it was decreed to be "*festum duplex ad modum majoris duplicis.*" In 6th Edw. VI. it was abolished in England as a general holyday.

It remains for me to acknowledge my obligations to my excellent friend, the Rev. Francis Procter, M.A., Vicar of Witton, for facilities afforded in exposing these interesting memorials; I must also congratulate the parochial authorities on their good taste, in preserving them in the state in which they were discovered, and in which they now remain to be seen by those who may visit the church, which exhibits points of interest to the archæologist, beside those which I have attempted to describe.[1]

[1] See a notice of the Anglo-Saxon work in this church by the Rev. John Gunn. *Journal of the Archæological Institute*, Vol. vi. p. 360. Two circular windows, supposed to be of this period, are shewn in the view of the north wall which accompanies this paper; they are double-splayed, and situated high up in the original wall of the nave. In one of these windows a portion of a wooden frame was found, as at Framingham Earl (*Norf. Archæology*, iv. 363), but in the fragment which remained no holes existed as at Framingham.