

Mural Paintings

AT

WEST SOMERTON CHURCH.

COMMUNICATED BY

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It is but seldom that we have on our excursions an opportunity of inspecting Mural Paintings, and until last year, when we found some preserved at Fritton and Hardwick, we had not seen one in any of the churches visited since that at South Burlingham Church in 1858.

It is generally during church restoration—I use the word in its conventional sense—that mural paintings are found, and almost as surely are they within a fortnight or three weeks obliterated, either by being scraped off or by being re-whitewashed, in which latter case, although not lost for ever, they cannot fail to be seriously damaged.² An excuse for such Vandalism is never wanting: either the paintings are too fragmentary to be of any value, or, if more perfect, the execution is coarse or the subject apocryphal; whilst

¹ Read in the Church at the Meeting in August, 1867.

² Since the above was written, I have seen in the Prospectus of "A Catalogue of the principal Exemplars of Mediæval Painting in England," by Mr. E. L. Blackburne, some remarks which I cannot refrain from quoting here.

"Spared to a considerable extent by time and by the ruder hand of bygone fanaticism, it has remained for modern interference, in the shape of the cruelly misapplied term of 'restoration,' to remove from us irrecoverably, features of the highest value in an historical sense, objects of the greatest antiquarian



with those paintings which illustrate incidents of Holy Scripture, it is usually alleged that funds are wanting to restore them, and therefore they are swept away, and the uniformity of the plastered wall "restored" in their stead. Thus we lose paintings valuable alike to the artist and the antiquary, and which, as Mr. Gunn very justly observes, had they been found in Westminster Abbey, would have been deemed priceless and preserved most scrupulously. It is but a small comfort to know that of many of them drawings are preserved, for how very much less in value than the original is the best copy that can be made, and in too many cases we are without even this satisfaction. Occasionally we find exceptions to the rule of immediate destruction, and fortunately we have met with one to-day.

Some months since, Mr. J. T. Bottle, of Great Yarmouth, architect, having heard that in making a ventilator in the south wall of the nave of this church traces of colour had been detected, at once obtained permission from the churchwardens to clear off the numerous coats of whitewash. His exertions were rewarded by finding the whole space between two of the windows, in length about twelve feet, occupied by a very fine large and early painting, representing the "Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." Unfortunately the central portion of the upper part of the painting is irretrievably lost, the wall there having been interest, and of an artistic kind, remains of the utmost importance, viewed in connection with the question of the state and progress of English Art during the period referred to.

"Affecting all in a degree, there are none of these however to which this rule of demolition has more largely perhaps applied, and continues to apply, than to the painted decorations once so conspicuously, and with the limitations of greater or less extent, so commonly exhibited in all our ancient Churches. These seem fated, particularly as regards wall painting, to receive but a very small amount of consideration and preservative care. In the latter cases, as from time to time they are brought to light, discovery leads, for the most part, but to a recovery—not in the conservative sense, but in the contrary signification of the word,—if not to a more permanent and thorough destruction."

rebuilt some considerable time since, and the plaster at the lower right-hand corner is in a decayed state. The excellence of what remains makes us regret these mutilations all the more. Our Lord was represented with the world beneath His feet, seated upon a rainbow, the lower part of which is still left, but of the figure of our Lord nothing but the bare feet, marked with the print of the nails, remain. On either side of our Lord is depicted a seraphim, presenting to Him a kneeling female. The one on His right hand, perhaps His virgin mother, bares her bosom, and holds her right breast in her hand, as if pleading her maternity. The other figure has her hands joined in prayer. Lower down are two angels, habited in albes and wearing the usual type of angelic crowns, summoning, "with a great sound of a trumpet," the dead to judgment. The angel on the right-hand side of the painting is more perfect than his fellow, and his trumpet with its cross-ensigned banner is very distinct. Below are eleven nude figures, rising in various attitudes, and with varied expression of countenance, from the grave. Amongst them are represented a king and queen, mitred and tonsured ecclesiastics, and two knights, whose acutely-pointed bascinets, together with the broad bold style of drawing, indicate the reign of Edward III. as the date of the execution of the painting. The treatment of the subject corresponds with that of other mediæval representations of our Lord's second coming, but the kneeling female figures presented to our Lord do not, as far as I am aware, occur elsewhere.

On the north wall of the nave, opposite the painting just noticed, enclosed within a border of Decorated character, is a smaller painting of our Lord's Resurrection. This is considerably faded, but the figure of our Lord, habited in a green vesture, stepping out of the sepulchre, holding in His left hand the cross banner of the resurrection, and with His right hand giving His benediction, is tolerably distinct. One of the soldiers' bills lies on the ground.

There are indications that the whole of the walls were originally covered with paintings, and, although for the present operations are suspended, it is to be hoped that these paintings also may be uncovered, and, with those we now see, carefully preserved. Indeed, where there is any intention of obliterating mural paintings, it is a thousand pities that they should be uncovered at all; it seems to me like a fraud upon posterity which it will assuredly not forget to resent. We should regard these, and all other objects of ancient art, as precious heirlooms, preserved to us, it is true, by happy accident, but still not the less heirlooms, which we are bound in equity to hand down intact to succeeding generations.

Very little need be said about the church, no part of which appears to be earlier than the thirteenth century. The chancel desks are Late Perpendicular; the octagonal pulpit (with a modern door), and the screen, also Perpendicular, will, although mutilated, repay examination, the details being good. The font is a curious mixture, Perpendicular work on a much earlier base, bearing traces of a central and four other columns. In the octagonal upper story of the round tower is a bell, probably of the fourteenth century, from the Lynn foundry, inscribed in capitals—*JOHANNES DE LENNE ME FECIT*. There are but few of this type remaining. The gable springers of nave and chancel are worthy of notice.

In conclusion, I must again refer to the wall paintings, to hope that the Society will not leave Somerton without deciding to have at least the larger of these paintings drawn by a competent artist, and illustrated in the Society's *Original Papers*. It is rarely that examples of so much beauty are brought to light, and the Society cannot better fulfil the object for which it was established, *i.e.*, "The Encouragement and Prosecution of Research into the Early Arts and Monuments of the County," than by circulating such illustrations among its members.