

A Painted Inscription from 20–22 High Street, Reigate

20–22 High Street¹ was originally a two-bay two-storey timber-framed building with a cellar, of c1550–1600² which occupies a position on the north side of the street roughly midway between the High Street entrance to the castle and the late 18th century Old Town Hall. Little of the original building had survived alterations over the years save for most of the framing of the west wall, a truncated stone inglenook chimney and fragments of timber frame elsewhere. During 1989 what little had survived of the building, except for the westerly frame but including the chimney, was mostly swept away during extensive alterations.³ What survives is merely a shell.

While he was observing the alterations John McNally, Conservation Officer for Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, noticed that a girding beam at ceiling level in the rear of the ground floor of no 22 bore three mullion sockets for an unglazed window and asked the contractors for this timber to be put to one side. Unfortunately the timber was sawn in two and only much later was it realised that the portion with the mullion sockets bore traces of a painted inscription. By this time the other portion of the timber, which must also have been painted, had been disposed of.

A length of c1.25m survives of the girding beam. The original length was not recorded. Traces of paint survive for about 1m on both the inward face and soffit (fig 1). The right hand side of the beam, which has also been truncated by sawing, would presumably have been partly obscured by the chimney. The painted surfaces appear to have been covered with a limewash, of which only traces remain, and the decoration overpainted in black. The survival of the decoration and inscription is uneven and is particularly fugitive towards the left end of the surviving beam. Only in the middle of the beam can the survival be described as reasonable but even here the beam has suffered some recent damage.⁴

The Inscription and Decoration

It is probable that the inscription painted across this beam formed part of a two-line motto or proverb with a stylized flower or similar device set within vertical borders to divide the lines. The painted border beneath the inscription consists of a series of two pairs of thick and thin lines containing a frieze of diagonal elongated S strokes or twists alternating with pairs of dots.⁵ This decoration, without the accompanying lines, is repeated in a bolder fashion on the soffit. Above the inscription is another border of uncertain form. The beam has been truncated at a point near the end of the first of the two lines of lettering. Part of the last word in this line survives but is too faint to be intelligible. The remainder of the inscription is sufficiently well-preserved to enable a reading to be made although its meaning can only be comprehended in a broad sense.

The second line comprises two groups of four words separated by a stop. The second of these groups is the better-preserved and can be used to provide an understanding of the first, of which, in most respects, it appears to be a repetition. It appears to read 'We lese I find'. Thus, together, the two lines would seem to read 'We lese I fynd . We lese I find'. It has been assumed that the vowel, the apparent tailed 'o', in the fourth word is intended to be a 'y'. Similarly the second consonant in words 2 and 6 is taken to be an 's' in view of its clear dissimilarity to the 'f' in words 4 and 8. The incomplete word 5 was originally taken to be 'the' (and thus also word 1) but Mary Saaler (pers comm) has suggested that a capital 'W' would appear like a ligatured 'th' and thus 'We' appears to be the correct reading. The word 'lese' means 'lose' (eg in Chaucer,⁶ Tomas Tusser, the

Cely letters, Piers the Plowman etc) rather than 'less' (which is spelled 'lasse' in Chaucer) and this would tend to confirm the identification of words 1 and 5 as 'We'. Words 4 and 8, despite the difference in spelling, appear to read 'find'; 'fynd' in word 4 is a common variant form (Mary Saaler, pers comm). The apparent horizontal line in 'd' in word 4 may be due to the paint coming into contact with a nail which pierces the letter centrally. Having deciphered the inscription thus far a difficulty is presented if words 3 and 7 are read as the letter 'I'. While 'We lose I find' is not without coherence I am inclined to accept Mary Saaler's suggestion to me that an ampersand is what is represented here. A capital 'I', she feels, would appear more like a capital 'J'. It is concluded that the surviving line was intended to be understood as 'We lese & fynd . We lese & find' (We lose and find. We lose and find'. One might conclude that the missing first line took a similar form.

To the writer's knowledge two other painted inscriptions are known in Surrey, both from Guildford,⁷ but similar such sage saws may have been frequent in Surrey houses of the late 16th and early 17th century (to which date this inscription is concluded to belong) and are recorded elsewhere in South-East England⁸ and beyond. The original meaning of the complete inscription is uncertain and was probably rather weak to modern ears. However the concept of losing and finding, perhaps through perseverance, is frequent in literature, eg 'I have lost all and found myself', Clarke 1636, or 'He that findeth his life shall lose it and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it', Matthew 10. 39.

The timber is presently in the collections of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum at Singleton, West Sussex, where it is hoped it will be displayed with the other wall paintings in the re-erected Reigate house fragment from 43 High Street.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to record my thanks to John McNally, Conservation Officer for Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, for recovering the timber and bringing the inscription to my attention and to others who have helped me along the way with this note. The interpretation and meaning of the inscription were discussed at length with Muriel Carrick, John Chenevix Trench and Mary Saaler and many of their helpful and very useful comments are incorporated into this note, together with their information on parallels and literary texts. The responsibility for the conclusion, however, remains my own.

NOTES

1 Now (1991) Ritz Video, formerly Geoff Taylor, florist

2 Information on the structure and its date from John McNally. The inglenook appears originally to have heated no 20, suggesting that the east half (no 20) was residential while no 22 may have had a commercial use. No floor/ceiling joists had survived although a joist reused as a stud did have chamfering and a lamb's tongue stop, but may have come from another source in the 18th century. Only one of the main posts had a slight jowl which, together with the scantling of the beams, curved tension brace and diamond mullions indicates a date of c1550-1600. A replaced frame survives on the party wall of nos 18 and 20. The tension braces and box frame suggest a date of c1600. No 20 is mostly 1950s work. No 22 was almost entirely rebuilt in the 18th century as a 3-storey building. The double gambrel roof structure is of this period

3 Archaeological observations of the rear plot will be dealt with in a separate note

4 In the drawing accompanying this note, where a definite original edge to a painted component appears certain the edge of the paint trace is indicated by a continuous line

5 Muriel Carrick (pers comm) speculates that the whole formed part of a frieze above other painting. She writes also that the border motif is a fairly common form which can be seen at Byeballs Farmhouse, Great Samford, Essex; at The Cricket Pavilion, Felstead, Essex; and in a base border of her own house, Feering House, Kelvedon, Essex. Feering House also has a text from Deuteronomy, painted on a chimney breast, taken from the Geneva Bible which gives a 1560-1610 date range

6 'And he were caught, it was accorded thus,
That with a swerd he sholde lese his head'

Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, line 1215

- 7 Information from Matthew Alexander, Curator, Guildford Museum. The first is placed similarly to the Reigate example on ceiling level beams on the ground floor of 52-53a Quarry Street, Guildford. Mr Alexander comments that the style of lettering and decoration is identical with the Reigate example. The Guildford painting reads:

' . . . eschew lewd wyckedness . and joyfully embrace the [. . . .] of chastity . [. . . .] not, lye(?) not, nor speake that is filthy . detest from the hearte women ugle and wanton . (?)for many by these(?) means, are [. . . .] to [. . . .]'

The second, incorporated in a figurative painting on plaster at 13 Quarry Street, reads:

'O mortall man and wormes meate
remember death shall be thy Eynde
Slak not thy tyme nor doe not forgett
thy synfull lyfe for to amend'

- 8 At Campions, Swards End, Essex (tracing now in Saffron Waldon Museum) was a motto reading 'Give to the poor/Spende and be blest'. A longer motto found in 1925 on a ceiling beam at 18 North Hill, Colchester (Gurney Benham 1925/6) reads:

'(A ROULYNG) STON GADYR NOMOS
IN OUER MEKYL RIAT YS GRETLOS
IN MESUR YS NOLOS
BLYSYD B(E) C(RIST) (O)WIRE LORDE H(YS)
(CROS) DEO GRACIAS'

The same source refers to inscriptions contemporarily recorded as existing at residences of the Percys at Beverley and Wressel in Yorks. The inscriptions comprised over 600 lines, all rhyming, extolling the virtues of, for instance, thrift and moderation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gurney Benham, W, 1925/6 Early English wall inscriptions at Colchester, *Trans Essex Archaeol Soc*, 18, 96-101

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