

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ON
A WALL-PAINTING, REPRESENTING
“JONAH AND THE WHALE,”

DISCOVERED AT WALTHAM ABBEY.

*Read at a General Meeting of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, held at
Drapers' Hall, on Feb. 20th, 1893,*

BY

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Hon. Sec.

WITH REMARKS BY C. E. KEYSER, Esq., M.A., F.S.A., AND
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THE curious wall-painting which I have the honour of exhibiting to-night, was discovered last autumn, during the demolition of a group of five small gabled houses of one storey, on the south side of High Bridge Street, Waltham Abbey, and about 500 or 600 yards west of the Abbey Church. All traces of the buildings had long disappeared when the painting came under my notice, but from careful inquiries I have ascertained that two of the houses were larger than the rest, and may possibly have originally formed a single building. The painting was discovered in the house farthest to the west, which was one of the two larger than the others. A dividing partition between two apartments on the upper floor, was found to be panelled with oak. On removing this wainscoting the picture was disclosed, admirably preserved, both in its substance and its colours. In order to remove it without injury, it was found necessary to cut away the joists, above and

below, but I regret to say that a short inscription, which was observed on the wall, to the left of the picture, within a floriated border, was destroyed, without having been seen by any person except the workmen engaged in pulling down the building. The picture was removed, with much care, to the offices of the contractors, Messrs. Glover & Flowers, in Peel Grove, Bethnal Green, where I saw it in December last. The picture is perfect, but in the border which extends along the top and on either side there are a few gaps. No reparation has been attempted, but for the protection of the work, it has been encased in a stout glazed frame. The size of the picture is 6 feet 9 inches by 3 feet 9 inches.

Around the room and covering the picture, as already mentioned, was a wainscoting of oak, probably Jacobean, a panel of which I have brought for exhibition. This oak paneling was sold to a west-end dealer. It is curious that the painting should have been covered up some fifty or sixty years after its execution, probably through a change in the occupation of the house and a difference of taste between the incoming and out-going tenants. At all events, the circumstance was a fortunate one for the picture, which has thus been saved, not only from a too probable destruction, but from the formidable danger of whitewash, paint, and varnish, as well as exposure to light, by which the brilliancy of the colours would have been impaired. It is difficult to determine whether the house formed part of the Abbey buildings, as it is not known how far the monastic precincts extended westward of the church. The latest occupier was a solicitor, Mr. Allsup, whose family, I am told, had held the

property for several generations. From Mr. Keyser's excellent account of wall-paintings, published by the South Kensington Museum, it appears that no example of the subject of Jonah, of so early a date, has hitherto been met with. Mr. Keyser, who has examined the present painting, places its date at Edward VI's reign. Our Vice-President, Mr. Waller, has also seen it, and as we are favoured this evening with the presence of two such high authorities, I will leave its description in their hands.

The peculiar interest of this painting, appears to me to lie in the fact that specimens of wall-paintings are, from the perishable nature of their material, not to be found in our museums and galleries; they have rarely, if ever, been exhibited at meetings such as this. The existing examples lie scattered throughout the country, in churches and old houses, and necessitate a pilgrimage for their inspection. I am, therefore, glad to have the opportunity of bringing a perambulating specimen before the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, for exhibition and discussion.

A gentleman, long resident at Waltham Abbey, has furnished me with a water-colour drawing of High Bridge Street. The drawing is a little out of scale, the street being represented larger than it should appear. But, fortunately, the artist has included the house in which the wall-painting was found. This sketch may be useful in determining the date of the painting.

Mr. C. E. KEYSER pointed out, as an interesting fact in connection with the painting, that it was discovered in a domestic building, and not in a church. It was also noteworthy that the work should be found

under paneling, not much later in date than the painting itself. Having examined all the known mural paintings of England, he could confirm Mr. Welch's statement that no other example, on church walls or the walls of a domestic building, had dealt with the subject of Jonah being cast to the whale. Instances were known of Jonah occurring in series of prophets represented on screens, both in Norfolk and Devonshire, but the familiar incident here depicted was not met with elsewhere.

As to the probable date, Mr. KEYSER thought it might be placed any time about the middle of the 16th century. That period was not marked by any great changes in the style of painting, or in naval architecture, and the picture might belong to any date from the earlier portion of Henry VIII's reign to the first part of Queen Elizabeth's. The painting was characterized by much vigour, and an excellence which one would hardly look for in a picture intended for a small house. Not much light could be thrown upon it by comparison with other examples. A paper had been written by Mr. Fairholt (a great authority on the subject) on a similar painting found not very long ago at New Street, Salisbury. Mr. Fairholt gave some details as to the custom of painting on church and house walls.

Such pictures were executed in very *early times*. For instance, those portions of Westminster Hall which had been erected in the reign of William Rufus, were found to be coloured in this manner. The custom became still more prevalent, until the introduction of tapestry. It was believed that the principal

domestic buildings of this country were once embellished in this way, but the number of examples extant was not great. That at Salisbury was certainly an early example, and represented the subject of the Annunciation.

There were two series of paintings which were related to the present work :—

- (a.) A large series at Cowdrey House, in Sussex, which were destroyed by fire. But fortunately, before their destruction, a set of drawings had been made from them, and illustrations had been published by the Society of Antiquaries. They treated of several subjects, among them being the campaigns of Henry VIII. These included representations of shipping scenes, and though the ships depicted in them were war vessels, and that in the Waltham Abbey example was not a war ship, still there was a similarity of character. The date of the Cowdrey Hall paintings had been fairly well established as falling between 1545 and 1550, and in view of the correspondence noticeable in the drawing of the ships, the date of the present example might be assigned as not much later than those at Cowdrey.
- (b.) A series, still in existence, was to be seen at Carpenters' Hall, in the City of London. They had been carefully preserved, and protected by glass. A very full description of them was given in Vol. I of the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*. The four subjects of the series had an obvious reference to objects connected with the Carpenters' Guild : (1) Noah building the Ark ; (2) Josiah offering money from the treasury for carrying out the carpentry of the Temple at Jerusalem ; (3) Our Lord working in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth ; (4) Our Lord preaching in the Synagogue. The process by which the Waltham example was executed appeared to be the same as that followed in the Carpenters' Hall series. It was not easy to decide if the process was unusual, but Mr. Keyser thought that in the wall-

paintings occurring in churches the surface on which the picture was drawn was much thinner. Here the ground of the painting was formed of laths crossed at right angles, to which was added a thick layer of brown earth or clay strengthened with straw. Ancient fresco painters adopted this method, using finely chopped straw for the purpose. The Carpenters' Hall paintings were considered to date from the latter portion of Henry VIII's reign. So that here again some evidence was afforded for placing the Waltham Abbey specimen in the 16th century.

Mr. KEYSER drew attention to the anachronisms in the paintings, such as were generally to be found in pictures of the period referred to. Not only did the style of the ship and of the figures point to some date about 1550, but it might be observed that the vessel from which Jonah was thrown was flying the St. George's ensign,—a curious emblem to be carried by a ship 800 B.C. ! It showed, of course, how the artists of that day were accustomed to illustrate their subjects with designs which fell under their own eye.

With regard to the panels which Mr. Welch had exhibited, one peculiarity was observable. The central portion of the panel was no doubt oak, over which had been laid a coating of plaster. A pattern had then been impressed upon the plaster by means of stencil-plates, the design being painted over from time to time. It was curious that our ancestors should prefer to coat over a material which was now considered one of the most beautiful for artistic purposes. Mr. KEYSER closed his remarks by saying that speaking, not without some knowledge of the subject, he was prepared to maintain his opinion as to the date

he had given, and as to the uniqueness of the subject of the painting

Mr. J. G. WALLER pointed out that the painting was executed in *tempera*, that is, the colour had been mixed with size, a process now known as distemper. The method had been practised for a very long time, and though not exactly that of fresco proper, it involved the coating of a prepared ground for the final painting. As regarded the date, it could not be prior to the middle of the 16th century, and as regarded the SUBJECT, it was, no doubt, very rare.

Mr. WALLER thought the ship was not a representation of an ordinary vessel of Henry VIII's or Queen Elizabeth's time. It was interesting to note that the artist did not follow the mediæval usage of merely copying surrounding objects. There was here a kind of semi-classical composition, a feature which came out especially in the design of the prow. Certainly the artist could never have seen an English ship of such a construction, and his conception displayed considerable cleverness, though, of course, the figure drawing was bad. The rudder, again, was of a Roman type. The delineation of the whale, though it showed that the artist had never seen an actual specimen of the creature, indicated an amount of artistic faculty. It was certainly a singular composition.

Mr. WALLER concluded by remarking that while the subject here depicted was very rare in church art, it was one of the very earliest treated by Christian painters. It had been found in the Catacombs of Rome. In the early Christian period, indeed, the

artist was not allowed much freedom, and was only permitted to deal with subjects from the *Old Testament*. It was curious that these representations of the history of *Jonah* should be found only in very late and very early times.