

THE PENN DOOM

E. CLIVE ROUSE, F.S.A.

THE painting of the Doom, or Last Judgment, upon oak boards in Holy Trinity parish church, Penn, was found as long ago as 1938 (Plate I). The discovery is therefore well known, and the object itself has in the interval become famous. It may thus seem strange to write about it at length in 1963. But the fact remains that, apart from a brief reference merely recording its finding and its salient points, in the *Records*,¹ and a number of Press notices,² the Doom has never been published in detail.

DISCOVERY

In the spring and summer of 1938 extensive repairs were being carried out in Penn Church, the Vicar at that time being the Rev. Kenneth Mumford. During the work, in June, some badly decayed boarding, whitewashed and covered with lath and plaster, was removed from the easternmost bay of the roof above the chancel arch, filling in the space between the main tie-beam, the collar beam and the two queen posts (Plate II). The appearance of this area before the restoration can be seen in the Plate opposite p. 235 of Vol. III of the *Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire*. The old timber was further broken up on removal, and was pitched out into the churchyard, awaiting disposal on the local rubbish tip. Some pieces, with other rubbish from the church, did in fact find their way there before a workman, Mr. Randall, happened to brush the whitewash and plaster off a large piece and disclosed a face painted on the original surface. He reported this discovery to the Vicar, who at once got in touch with the Rev. W. H. Davies, then Vicar of Little Missenden, who, in turn, summoned me.

A superficial cleaning of this piece of wood was enough to establish the nature and importance of the discovery. The remainder of the heap was then taken to the Old Schoolroom, where I was able to assemble the planks and pieces and to put them into their original order, in spite of much whitewash, and laths and plaster still adhering.

I then spent two days combing through the rubbish tip for missing pieces; and was successful in recovering several fragments. Unfortunately, one or two of these were removed, and not replaced, when the Doom was lent for exhibition to the Victoria and Albert Museum many years later. The Museum authorities re-mounted the boards (I consider unsuitably), and in so doing spaced some of them incorrectly, as they remain today.

I was eventually authorised to clean and treat the painting (for details, see

¹ *Records of Bucks*. Vol. XIII (1934-40), pp. 362-3.

² *The Times* newspaper, 19th August, 1938, etc.

appendix): and after some five or six weeks this work was completed, the whole was mounted on a toning oak framework, and placed in the South aisle, where it still is, since its detail would have been lost had it been replaced in its original position in the roof (Plate III).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTING

The work is executed on sixteen oak boards (probably originally more) varying slightly in thickness, and greatly in width. The overall dimensions are: extreme width about 12 ft.: height at centre 6 ft. 6 in. The boards or planks are placed vertically, and fitted together at an overlapping chamfer on each side (Fig. 1).

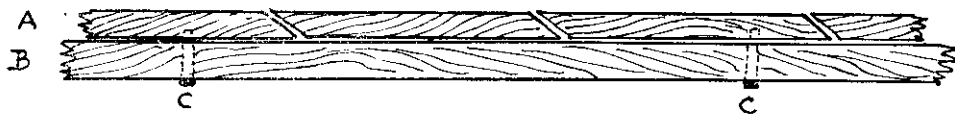


FIG. 1. Diagram to show construction of Penn boarded 'tympanum', in section. *A*, Boards chamfered to give over-lapping fit. *B*, Squared timber batten at back (there were two of these). *C*, Wooden pegs.

They were originally secured by battens across the back. The boards have every appearance of having been cut down or altered to fit into the position in which they were found.

The first thing which emerged in the course of cleaning was the fact that the painting is a palimpsest—a later and coarser repainting in crude but brilliant colours replacing and simplifying (perhaps for reasons of economy or space) a much earlier work of greater delicacy and more elaboration. It will be convenient to describe the later painting first, much as we see it today.

The whole composition is roughly divided horizontally across the centre by a wavy line. In the upper part the figure of Christ occupies the central place (Plate IV). He is seated on a rainbow, whose ends emerge from conventional clouds. His hands are raised to display the wounds and His feet rest on a sphere. The draperies of the cloak (red, lined with blue) are arranged to show the wound in the side. Round His head is a torse or wreath representing the crown of thorns: and from all the wounds there is a great effusion of blood.

Immediately to left and right are demi-angels clad in red and yellow amices and albs with girdles, emerging from clouds, holding symbols of the Passion—on the dexter the cross, and on the sinister the pillar and scourge. Beyond these, again, are flying angels similarly clad, but their robes striped in pink and white, blowing long trumpets—the Last Trump. The vestments of these angels are rich and unusual in colouring. From each of our Lord's shoulders spring inscribed scrolls: and there are scrolls below the trumpets. These belong to the earlier painting, and were painted out at the later period. They were re-exposed in the course of cleaning. Those on each side of the figure of Christ read, in good black-letter script with red initial letters: on the dexter (His right hand) **VENITE BENEDICTI PATRIS MEI POSSIDETE REGNUM** (Come ye blessed of my father, inherit your kingdom): and on the sinister (His left hand) **ITE**

MALEDICTI IN IGNEM ETERNUM (Go ye evil-doers into eternal fire. The scrolls below the trumpets each read RESURGITE MORTUI VENITE AD JUDICIUM (Rise ye dead and come to judgment). (Plate I.)

The lower half of the picture has a green ground powdered with small flowers. The centre is occupied by two graves or coffins from which two figures emerge, hands raised in wonder or adoration, gazing upwards at the figure of Christ. The figure on the dexter side is a priest, identified by his tonsure. This clearly represents the General Resurrection (Plates V and VI).

Flanking this on each side and extending to the limits of the present boarding are two groups of figures, clearly intended for the Apostles (Plate I). The group on the dexter side contains six Apostle figures, all, except the last, bearded, and he therefore probably represents St. John, though none carry symbols. All wear long gowns and cloaks in a wide range of exceptionally rich colours. This group is led, slightly separated, and at a higher level, by a seventh figure, that of the Virgin wearing a gown of yellow and red and a scarlet cloak with pearl hems. The group on the sinister contains five Apostles (probably originally six, as there is a board missing here and the end board is mutilated), led by a seventh figure, balancing that of the Virgin on the other side, clearly St. John Baptist, with long and unkempt hair and beard, as is usual. All have the same wide variety of richly coloured garments (Plate I).

The repainting seems to have followed the original composition fairly closely, certainly as far as the main figures are concerned. But the earlier painting differed in three important particulars. The first has already been referred to—namely the presence of the series of inscribed scrolls, on a blue and white “sky” background, all of which were painted out at the later date. (Compare Plate VII, as found, and Plate I.) The second is in the method of representing the General Resurrection, which was much more elaborate. The presence of no fewer than six or even more figures emerging from graves or tombs can be traced beneath the over-all green and flowered ground, with which they were subsequently painted out, only two figures emerging from graves being substituted in the centre. This would all seem to be an economy measure, and a simplification and concentration on the main points, especially if the painting had been moved and placed higher up. But the third point of difference is more difficult to explain. In the earlier painting there had been a most beautiful representation of the Weighing of Souls, and this was entirely painted out, the figures of St. Michael and the Virgin being partly covered by the two latter resurrecting figures.

In the course of cleaning and treatment it was possible to reveal a part of this scene by removing the later green foreground and other parts where they did not materially affect the later composition. The scene was placed in the lower centre, immediately beneath the sphere on which our Lord’s feet rest; but the lower part of the central board is missing. Just in front of the figure of St. John Baptist is the figure of St. Michael (Plate V). The top of his wing touches the cloud at one end of the rainbow, and his head and halo can be seen against the left-hand base of the pillar Passion Symbol. The Virgin’s inclined head and halo are just to the right of the other end of the rainbow: and the folds of her cloak extend down below the grave of the resurrecting priest (Plate VI). Here also can be seen one pan of the scales held by St. Michael. The beam of the balance rises at an angle,

and the other pan is suspended from it, beneath one of the upraised hands of the other resurrecting figure, by three cords. They can be seen passing down through this figure's grave (Plates V and VI).

The extreme right-hand board is something of a puzzle. It does not fit on precisely with the general outline, and to do so it would need to be placed much farther to the right, thus increasing the width of the boarding, its base being higher and the top slope lower than the next board towards the centre (Plate I). This would make space for two or even three more boards; and the whole thing could not then have been fitted into the framework of the roof space above the beam. Moreover, the later painting is almost obliterated from the surface, only some confused outlines of the earlier work remaining. The poor condition of this board is probably to be accounted for by entry of water from the roof over a considerable period; and the possible interpretation of what it represented will be discussed in the next section. Similarly, the upper slope of the present extreme left-hand board is out of line with the next, though the spacing is not here in doubt. The base is cambered to fit on the contour of the roof main tie-beam. All this further suggests a change of position at some time.

ICONOGRAPHY: PARALLELS: POSITION: DATE

The iconography of the composition presents no particularly unusual features when compared with many Doom paintings. The whole subject in medieval art was treated as a great drama in a number of scenes; and while the scenes varied in detail and selection, the main framework was always much the same. Thus the central figure of Christ in Majesty or Judgment, seated on the rainbow, His feet on the sphere, flanked by angels bearing symbols of the Passion and angels blowing the Last Trump, is constant, and is found at Penn. The Virgin and St. John Baptist usually lead groups of Apostles, Martyrs or a Heavenly Host, as at Stoke-by-Care, Suffolk. But this is usually on the upper plane of Heaven. In the case of Penn they are somewhat unusually placed on the same level as the General Resurrection on earth. The Resurrection itself is treated normally, though there are no angels assisting, as is often the case: nor is there any group of souls awaiting judgment. The most remarkable omission is perhaps the absence of any procession of the Blessed to the Heavenly Jerusalem where they are usually received by St. Peter; and a balancing procession of the Damned to the Torments of Hell with its monster's jaws for mouth. It is possible that this latter scene was shown on the right-hand or South end, but, equally, there may not have been room, and the unusually full texts on the inscribed scrolls may have been a substitute. The inclusion of the Weighing of Souls by St. Michael, and the Virgin interceding is also quite a normal feature of a Doom painting, though it is as often omitted or represented separately elsewhere in the church. (It is shown on the North wall at Broughton, Bucks., as part of the Doom and separated from it at South Leigh, Oxon, and Corby, Lincs). There is no trace of silhouettes being left for any carved figures of the Rood Group, suggesting that if the painting in its original position was a true tympanum, there was at that time no Rood Group on top of the screen. And at the time of the second painting, the whole had been moved up into the roof, well above any position which would normally be occupied by carved figures in front of it.

But of course the most remarkable point about the Penn Doom is the fact that it is painted on wood and belongs to a rare and interesting group. There are in fact only four others painted on panel known to survive in England—Wenhaston (Suffolk); Dauntsey (Wilts.), Micheldean (Glos.), and St. Michael's church, St. Albans (Herts.), the latter having been partly on the wall and partly on a wooden tympanum filling the upper part of the chancel arch. There was a fifth, at Gloucester Cathedral; but this was burnt and completely destroyed during the 1939–45 war, having been sent up to London for "restoration" from the safety of Gloucester, for some unaccountable reason, at the height of the air raids.

It may be useful to compare these other examples and their arrangement. The Wenhaston Doom is probably the best known (Plate IX). It originally formed a tympanum over the rood screen, filling the upper part of the chancel arch. It was covered with whitewash, and was removed in 1892 and dumped in the churchyard in much the same way as the Penn Doom. It was only saved as the result of a shower of rain in the night washing some of the whitewash off and revealing the painting. It is now preserved in one of the aisles, and consists of horizontal boarding, showing the silhouettes for the carved figures of the Great Rood (the Cross being raguly) and the figures of St. Mary and St. John which stood in front of it on the Rood Screen. In spite of the limited space available, a very full treatment of the subject has been achieved. Christ on the rainbow is placed just off-centre on the left, with St. Mary and St. John Baptist on the right. The General Resurrection takes place at the top right. Right centre is St. Michael weighing souls: left centre St. Peter receiving the Blessed, who (far left) make their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. The far right is occupied by a Mouth of Hell, with souls drawn into it by a chain.³

Dauntsey is also a true tympanum, but is of very rough workmanship, consisting of nineteen or twenty boards very crudely fitted together, set vertically and divided horizontally across the centre (Plate VIII). The spaces for the rood figures are not so clear here. The figure of Christ occupied the top centre, with the sun and moon, and trumpet-blowing angels. St. Mary and St. John Baptist kneel below the central figure. On the far upper left St. Peter receives the Blessed: and on the far upper right is a procession of the Damned on the way to Hell. The lower boards have, in the centre, the General Resurrection, flanked by a procession of the Saved on the left, and Damned souls drawn into the Mouth of Hell on the right.⁴ Both these paintings are very late, round about 1500.

The painting at Micheldean is unusual, in that the Doom is combined with a number of panels with scenes from the Life of Christ (shown in diagram form in Fig. 2). It was found and miraculously preserved, as long ago as 1831. This is hardly a true tympanum, though it occupies the upper part of the space where the chancel arch would normally be, between the top of the screen and the curved roof, there being actually no structural division between nave and chancel.⁵

³ C. E. Keyser, *Archaeologia*, LIV, Part i: *Catalogue of an Exhibition of British Primitive Paintings*, 1924, pp. 26, 27, Plate XXIV. Borenius and Tristram, *English Medieval Painting*, 1927, p. 42 and Plate 85. Aymer Vallance, *English Church Screens*, 1936, pp. 24, 29; Plate 46.

⁴ Aymer Vallance, *op. cit.* p. 24, Plate 47.

⁵ C. E. Keyser, *List of Buildings having Mural Decorations*, 1883, p. 178; Aymer Vallance, *op. cit.* p. 22; W. Hobart Bird, *Ancient Mural Paintings in the Churches of Gloucestershire*, p. 23; and *Old Gloucestershire Churches*, 132.

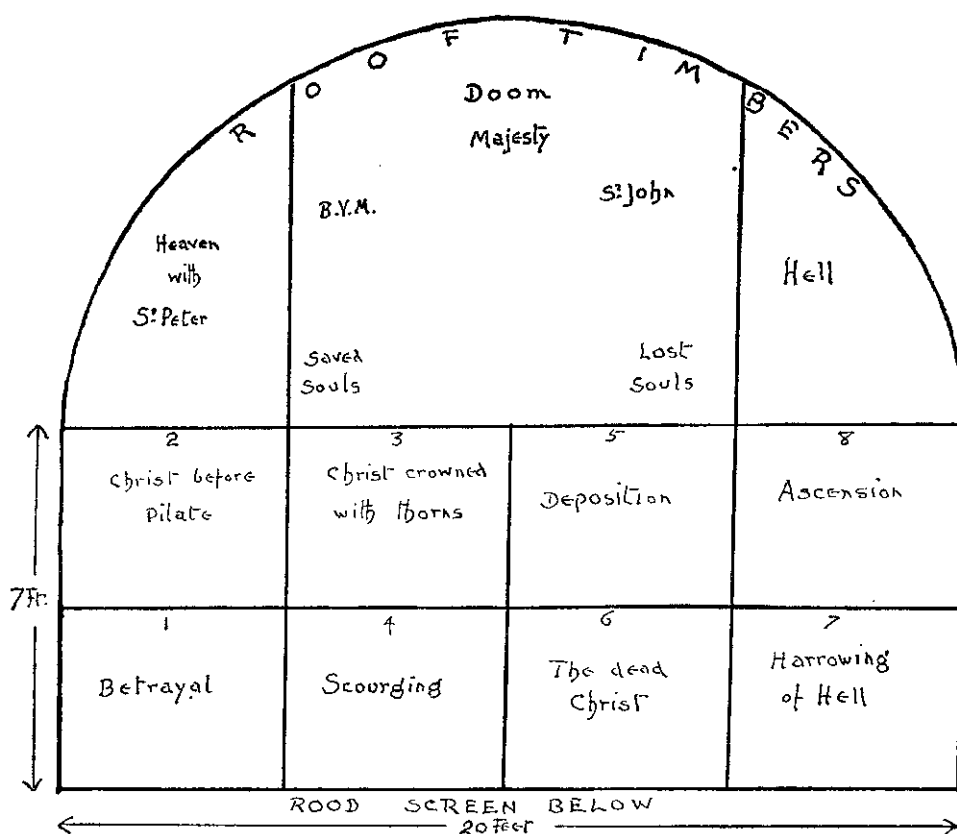


FIG. 2. MICHELDEAN, Glos. Diagram to show arrangement of Doom painting and Passion scenes above Rood screen.

It is now so obscured by opaque, decayed varnish and dirt, as to be virtually invisible from the ground. The Gloucester Doom⁶ was about 9 ft. square, normal in composition, and very late in date. Its original position in the church is uncertain; but it is stated to have been in front or placed on top of the rood screen.

The painted wooden fragment in St. Michael's Church, St. Albans, now preserved in the vestry, found in 1808, originally filled the top of the Norman Chancel arch, and only shows six souls rising from graves or coffins, with the silhouette of the cross in the centre.⁷ The rest of the composition, now destroyed but luckily recorded, was painted on the plaster of the wall above the chancel arch (Fig. 3).

There are, of course, a few other boarded tympana in England, such as Winsham (Somerset), Ludham (Norfolk), Kenninghall (Norfolk), Glentham (Lincs.; destroyed), and other later ones. But these hardly concern us as they have the Crucifixion and subjects other than the Doom. The whole question of

⁶ C. E. Keyser, *op. cit.*, p. 113, where it is ascribed to the time of Henry VIII or Edward VI: *Archaeologia*, XXXVI, 370.

⁷ Aymer Vallance, *op. cit.*, p. 21, and figure.

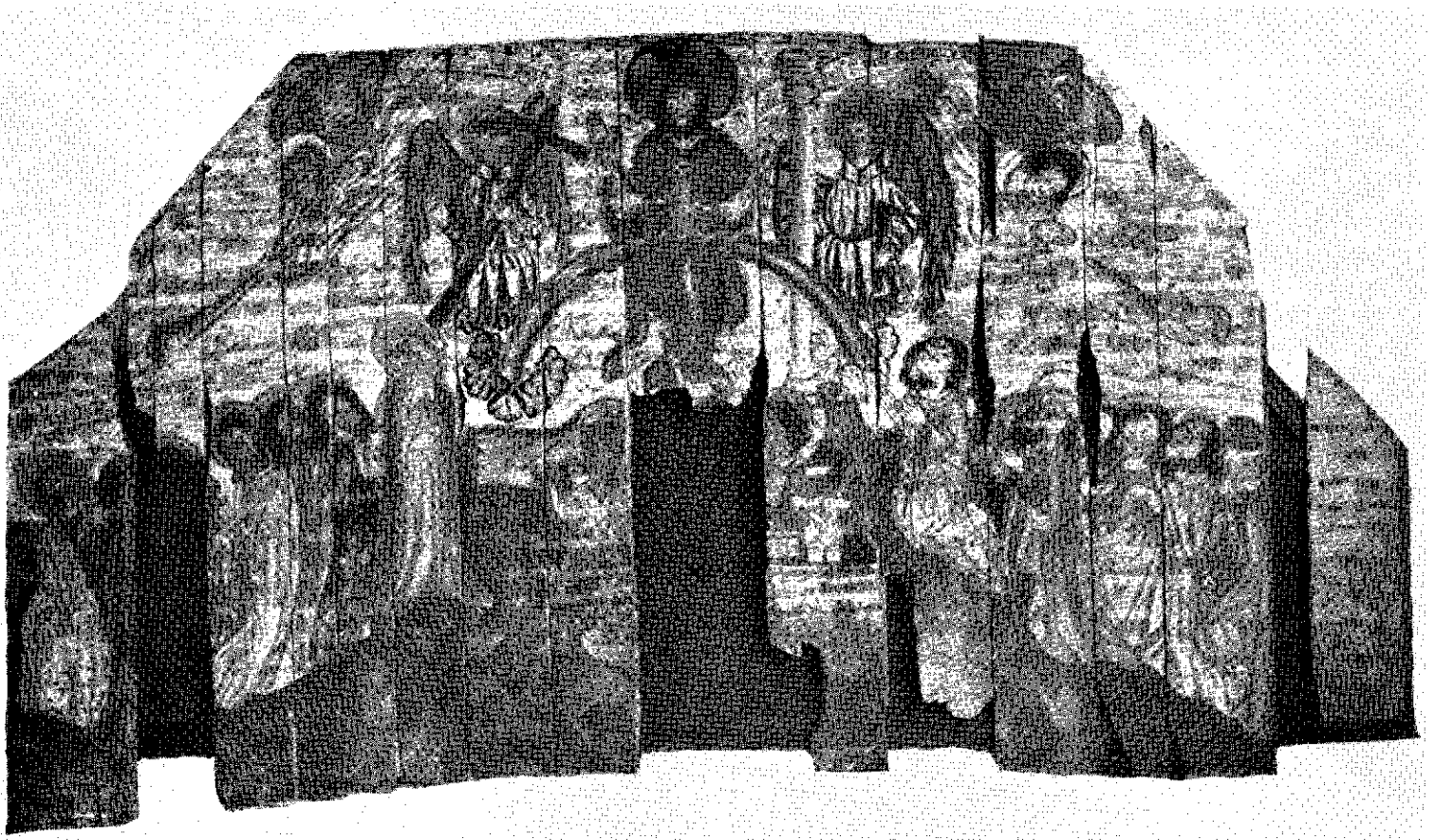


PLATE I. The Penn Doom, as re-assembled, uncovered and cleaned, June, 1938.

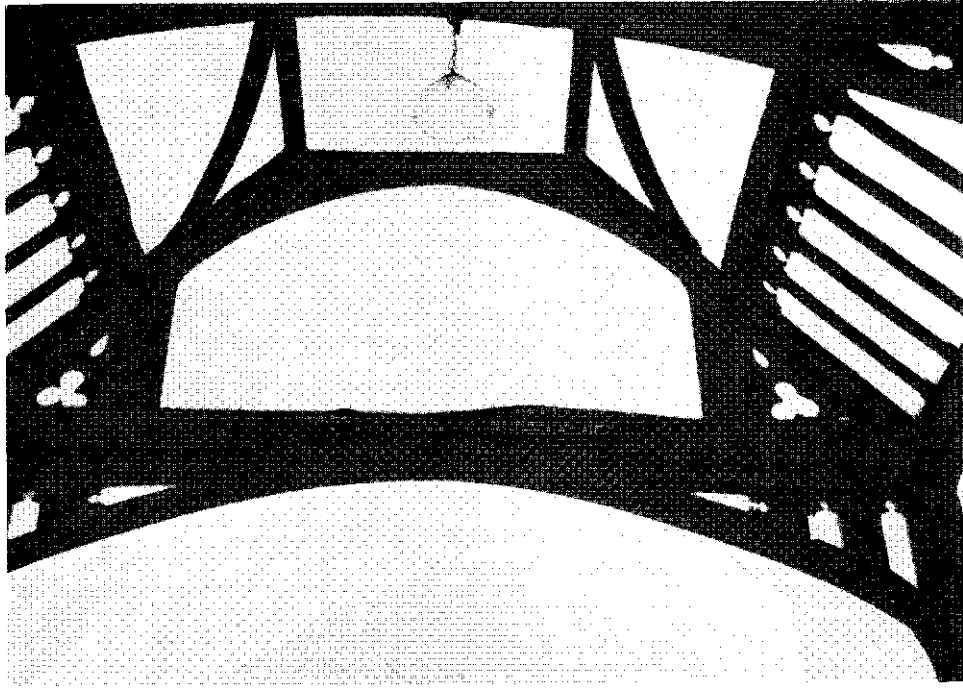


PLATE II. The space above the East tie-beam of the nave roof above the chancel arch at Penn where the Doom boards were found.



Photo, Roberts

PLATE III. Penn Church, looking East, showing Doom as placed in the South aisle.



PLATE IV. Detail of central figure of Christ.



PLATE V. Detail, showing St. John Baptist, resurrecting figure, and earlier painting of St. Michael weighing souls, beneath.



PLATE VI. Detail showing part of figure of the Virgin, resurrecting priest, and earlier head and robe of the Virgin in the weighing of souls scene.



PLATE VII. The boards of the Penn Doom roughly re-assembled and freed of laths and plaster and some whitewash immediately after discovery, but before cleaning.

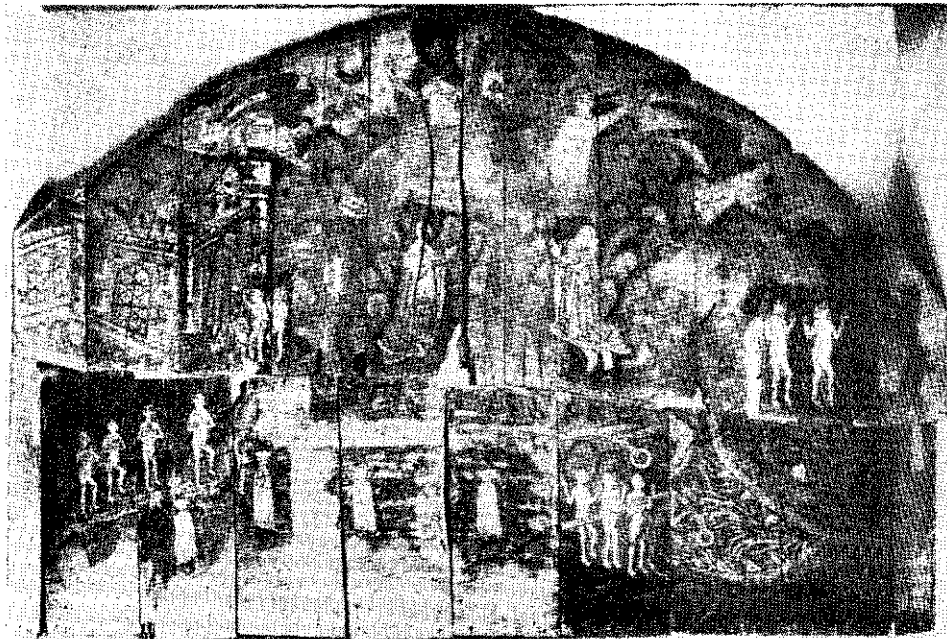


PLATE VIII. Boarded tympanum with Doom painting at Dauntsey, Wilts.

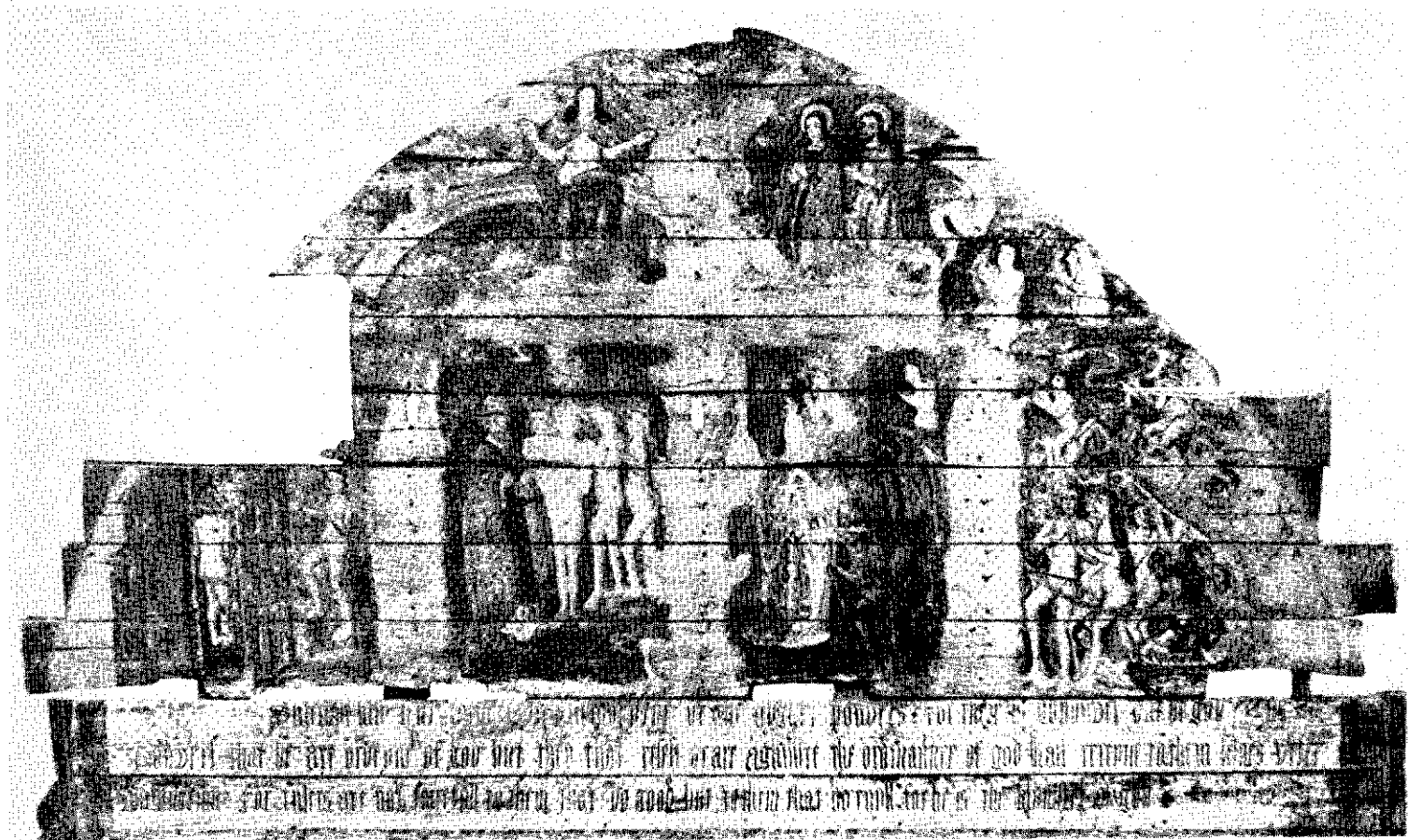


PLATE IX. Boarded tympanum with Doom painting at Wenhaston, Suffolk.



British Museum

PLATE X. Illumination from Brit. Mus., Arundel MS. 302. Christ in Judgment with SS. Mary and John Baptist. Reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Brit. Mus.



PLATE XI. Perm. Detail, to show two periods of painting and technique. Figure of St. Peter.



FIG. 3. ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH, ST. ALBANS, Herts. Doom partly on wall above chancel arch, and partly on boarded tympanum. Only the latter survives. From an engraving after Henry Cook in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries.

the Doom, the Great Rood and the tympanum were fully dealt with by Aymer Vallance.⁸

This leads us to a consideration of the problem of whether the Penn Doom was ever a tympanum in the true sense; and, if so, when it was moved to the position in which it was found, and why.

This is not easy to determine since the medieval chancel arch was replaced in the eighteenth century⁹ (Plate III) and we have no means of knowing what it was like. Here the matter of dating is important. On stylistic grounds one is inclined to date the earlier painting at the very end of the fourteenth century, or round about 1400 or soon after. (The Complex of the tympanum, the Doom, the rood screen and group, etc., does not occur with any regularity much before this.) The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments dates the fine roof as early in the fifteenth century,¹⁰ and I am inclined to think the earlier painting cannot be as late as this. One must allow a reasonable time to elapse before a fine artistic work of this sort was so drastically altered—not less than fifty years, one would think. And again, on stylistic grounds, the later painting would appear to belong to the very end of the fifteenth century.

Professor Francis Wormald was good enough to comment on the style and dating some time ago. He says "I don't think that the original Penn Doom can be much earlier than 1390. The style seems to belong to the rather Netherlandish-looking style which seems to have become established in England about 1390 when the Whitefriars Missal in the British Museum was being illuminated. The whole style in England was in a state of flux between Abbot Lytlington's Missal and the style of the Great Bible, Royal MS. I.E.IX in the British Museum. If we put Penn at 1400 and B.M.MS. Arundel 302, in which there are certain likenesses to Penn, at 1450 at the latest, we might still be more or less in agreement. Arundel

⁸ Aymer Vallance, *op. cit.*, Chapter III, pp. 16–26, with numerous illustrations.

⁹ Actually, it appears in 1733. See Gilbert Jenkins, *A History of the Parish of Penn*, 1935, pp. 139, 140.

¹⁰ *R.C.H.M. Bucks.*, Vol. I, South, pp. 266–7.

is a poor relation of B.M. Harley MS.4333 (Lydgate; Life of St. Edmund) which is dated 1433. I think you will agree that the heavy technique is a bit like Penn.”

I certainly agree that the heavy technique is very similar to Penn (Plate X), and the great effusion of blood, to which the late Mr. Aymer Vallance drew attention, is characteristic of the treatment of the subject towards the end of the fifteenth century. I still feel that a date considerably later than 1450 must be given for the second painting, and its transference to a more confined space in the roof.

We have no clue as to provenance. The advowson of Penn Church was given before 1241 by the Turville family to Chacombe Priory in Northants., with whom it remained until the Dissolution.¹¹ The house was a small and unimportant Augustinian foundation and had, as far as is known, no artistic reputation in its scriptorium. The main period of Penn's prosperity, in the fourteenth century, when the tile manufactory was in operation,¹² is too early for our subject. None of the incumbents at roughly relevant dates is of particular note.¹³ The painting was therefore most likely to have been the gift of a wealthy resident, patron or well-wisher, who might have called on almost anyone for its execution. The comparative nearness of Penn to London suggests that an artist from the city is most likely to have been employed, at any rate at the later date.

¹¹ *Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire*, Vol. 3, 1925, p. 240.

¹² J. G. Jenkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 56.

¹³ J. G. Jenkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 32, where he gives an annotated list of Vicars.

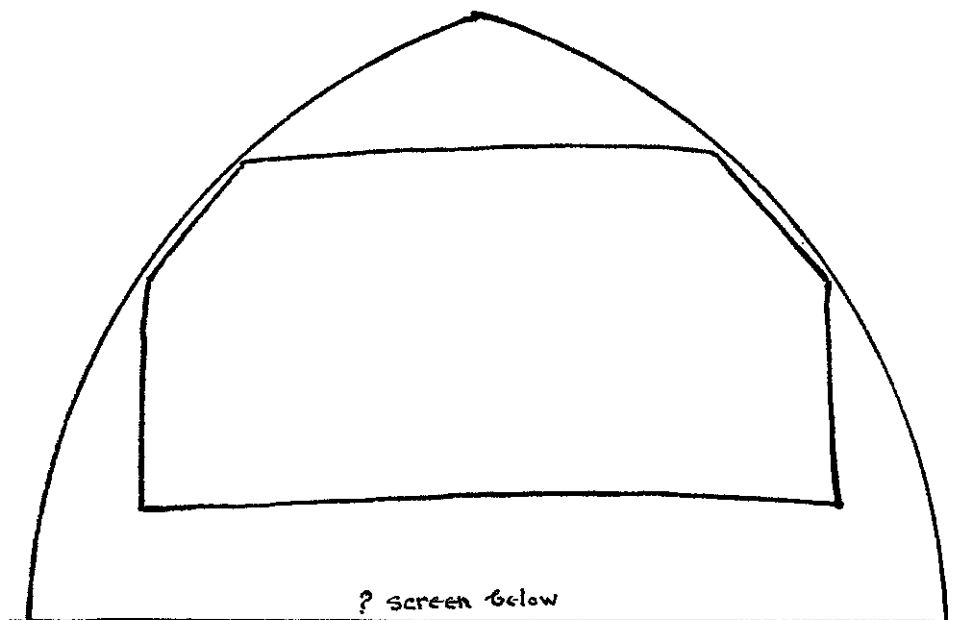


FIG. 4. Rough diagram to show how the present shape of the Penn Doom would have fitted into a medieval pointed arch, thus giving additional space at sides and bottom if it had been cut down from a full tympanum. Compare fig. 3.

To conclude, therefore, it seems likely that the original painting was executed at the end of the fourteenth century, and was a true tympanum, filling the upper part of the medieval chancel arch, which would have been wider at the base than the present boarding, and would have extended upwards to an arched apex. It would thus have been able to embrace a more extensive treatment of the subject (Fig. 4).

For some reason unknown, this was removed, cut down to fit the roof space and repainted something like a century later. This is suggested by the fact that the present top edge of the boarding cuts the outer angels' wings and touches the inscribed scrolls. The lower sides also have clearly undergone some modification. It would thus have remained undisturbed when the medieval chancel arch was replaced in 1733, but may well have been lathed and plastered at that date to cover decay in the boarding, since it was only whitewashed at the Reformation.

At any rate, it is matter for great satisfaction that this rare and interesting specimen has been preserved.

APPENDIX

TREATMENT: MATERIALS: TECHNIQUE

It may be useful to say something about the problems and methods of treatment, and of the technique of the painting itself.

The first step was to remove the remaining laths and hair plaster with which the painting had at one time been covered. The plaster was easily detached by hand: and most of the laths (hand split oak) could be split from the nails, though it was necessary to slip thin card beneath to avoid risk of damage to the surface. The most serious problem was the removal of the hundreds of nails with which the laths had been secured. These had all rusted in solid, and very few could be drawn without the risk of splintering the surrounding wood and thus damaging the painted surface. A method was devised of cutting the obstinate nails off flush with the surface by a specially sharpened pair of thin pincers. A piece of thin rubber with a small hole was pressed over each nail, thus protecting the surrounding surface, while the pincers were pressed down to cut it off flush with the board. Holes were filled with putty and toned down; and an oil primer used on the cut nails.

The painting had then to be freed of its coat of whitewash (received presumably at the Reformation) and subsequent dirt. This presented no serious difficulty and was accomplished by a combination of flaking, gentle scraping and brushing with a sable brush. The painting partly in this state is shown in Plate VII. Much care had to be exercised in a number of areas, where the underlying paint layer was detached, or liable to flake. The whole was then cleaned with damp swabs of cotton wool and a mild solvent where necessary. It was not found possible altogether to mitigate the curious horizontal banded appearance left by the laths and plaster, as these had alternately bleached and darkened the wood and pigments, and in some cases corroded the paint layer down to different levels. The clearance of some of the features of the earlier, underlying painting has already been referred to.

Unstable areas were secured by a wax fixative, and the whole surface was given two applications of a solution of white beeswax in turpentine to act both as preservative and to enhance the colour. A free-standing object is perfectly safely treated in this way. It should be emphasised that no touching up or repainting whatever was done; the brilliant pigments are precisely as found. I did not feel it desirable to fill in the missing boards or parts of them. The backs of all boards and the new supporting framework were treated with insecticide: and a curtain on runners was arranged hanging well clear of the surface to keep excess of light away and give protection when not actually exposed for inspection.

The earlier painting is in a totally different technique from the later, probably executed in tempera (though there is no gesso ground visible, merely a very light priming), and is delicate and largely in line with a more restricted range of colours, where these are visible. Plate XI will show this well in the figure at the head of the right-hand group of Apostles behind St. John Baptist, probably intended for St. Peter. It will be seen that the two complete sets of features are visible, the smaller and more delicate belonging to the earlier painting, with small, vermilion mouth: while the larger, coarser ones, with exaggeratedly bushy eyebrows, heavy nose and large mouth belong to the later. The figure details and drapery of the first work had black outline, and were filled in with flat, simple colours. The later, probably in oil, with very heavy impasto in places, has the drapery elaborately shaded and the colours merged (see also Plate IV). The range of colours in this later painting is astonishing and unusual, including vermilion, carmine, orange, lemon, pink, blue and green.