

The Fourteenth Century Painted Ceiling at St. Helen's Church, Abingdon.

By ARTHUR E. PRESTON, F.S.A.

The existence in the Lady Aisle of St. Helen's Church of an ancient decorated roof consisting of full length figures painted on wooden panels has always been more or less known, but owing to the unlit position of the paintings, and the dust and dirt of centuries that had been allowed to accumulate on them, the importance of the ceiling as a work of mediæval art was practically unrecognised. Recent examination and careful cleaning of the panels have shewn the ceiling to be an almost or quite unique example of late fourteenth-century workmanship in this country. An illustrated article by Dr. Borenus has already appeared in the *Burlington Magazine* treating of the ceiling in its artistic aspects.¹ In the course of his remarks he says :—

Panel paintings dating from the late fourteenth century and of indubitably English origin are notoriously very rare. The recovery of this long series of pictures is therefore all the more welcome. . . . They are all painted in oil with much vigour and spontaneity of touch, direct on the panels themselves ; their condition presents various stages of preservation from a tolerably intact quality of surface to an almost complete perishing of the pigments.

Amongst its other claims to attention, St. Helen's, Abingdon is a well-known five-aisled Church mostly of the Perpendicular period. It arose on or near the site of the small Nunnery of Helenstowe which came into existence towards the close of the seventh century—and even before Abingdon Abbey itself. By the end of the eighth century the Nunnery had disappeared.

¹ *Burlington Mag.* June 1936. An English Painted Ceiling of the late Fourteenth Century by Prof. Borenus, Ph.D., D.Lit., F.S.A.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON. *



Plate 6.
PROPHET ZEPHANIAH ;

NORTH SIDE.
KING SALATHIEL ;
UNIDENTIFIED KING.

Panels 5 to 8.
PROPHET OBADIAH ;

The circumstances under which the Church of St. Helen was founded and the date are unknown, but it was in Saxon times, and by 995 A.D. the Church is mentioned as possessing sanctuary rights.¹

No part of the Saxon building remains, the earliest existing portions dating from a rebuilding in the first half of the thirteenth century. To this period must be assigned the tower and part of the Eastern wall of the two Northern aisles.

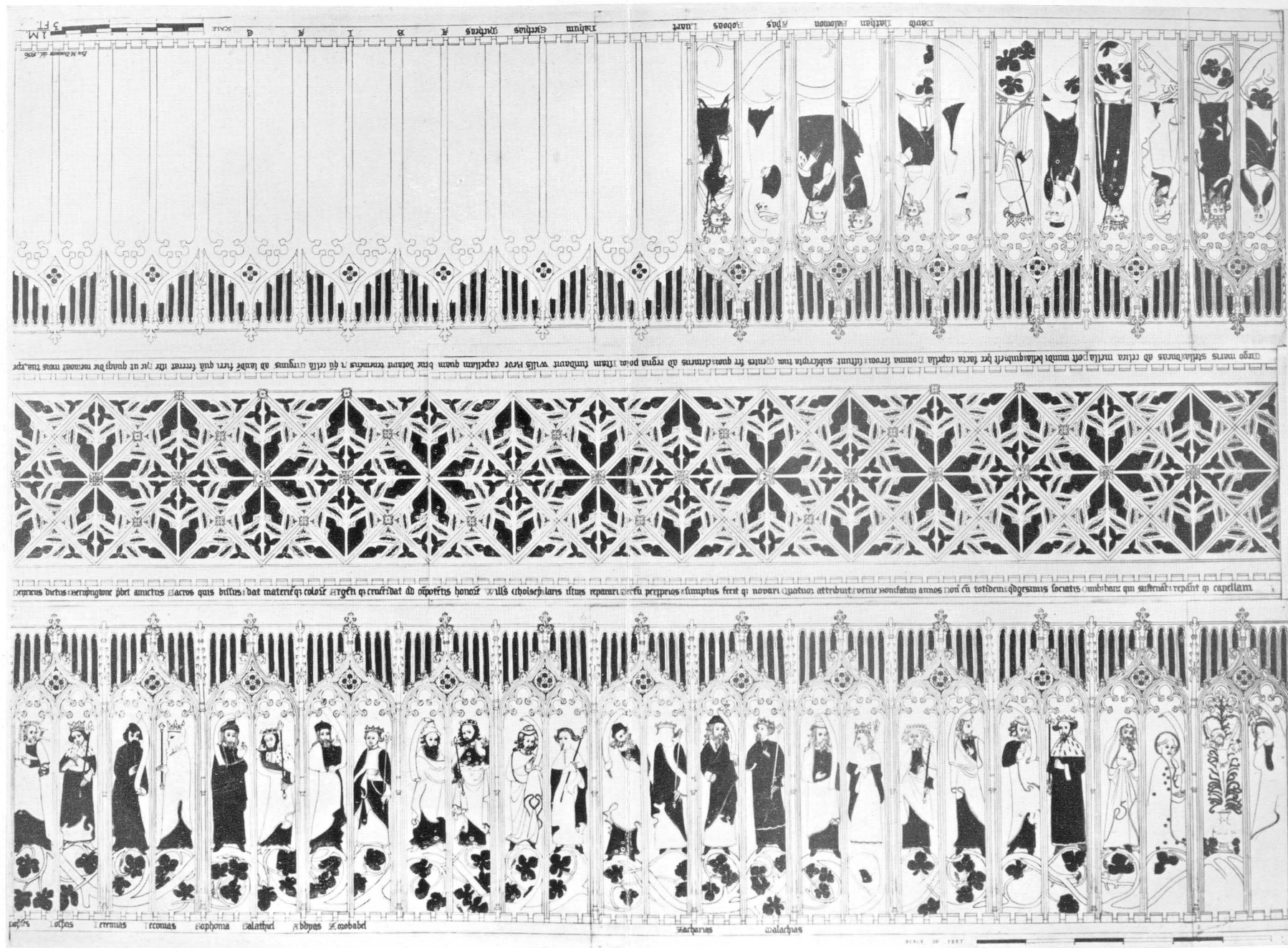
At the time these aisles were built, the Church may be regarded as consisting of a rectangular body, serving as nave and chancel with a narrow South aisle ; and with a great square tower rising against the North wall at its East end. The spire was a later addition. In a general reconstruction begun in the fourteenth century the chancel and nave were moved over to the South side of the structure, i.e. to the site of the existing nave and chancel ; and the earlier building was at the same time converted into two aisles, the inner one being widened.² The outer North aisle became known as the Jesus aisle, and the enlarged inner one as the Lady aisle. In the chapel at the East end of the latter the painted ceiling was subsequently placed. Adjoining the existing nave on the South side is St. Katherine's aisle, built in the early fifteenth century. The southernmost aisle of all, known as the Reade aisle, was added in 1539.

The history of the church is (with the notable exception of the Lady aisle) more interesting than its architecture. From an early period the advowson belonged to Abingdon Abbey, but it was not till 1258 that the monastery was empowered to appropriate the revenues.³ The names of six of the rectors who held the living before appropriation are known, the last but one, instituted in 1248, being Ethelmar de Valance, half-brother to King Henry III, and a little later intruded Bishop of Winchester.

¹ *Chron. Mon. Abingdon (Rolls Series)* I. 394.

² This description is based on notes recently supplied by Mr. A. W. Clapham, C.B.E., F.B.A., F.S.A.

³ Reg. Wickwane. *Surtees Socy.* Vol. 114. p. 336.



Southern Slope.

Horizontal Centre.

Northern Slope.

West End.

East End.

Plate 12.

DIAGRAM OF THE PAINTED CEILING AT ST. HELEN'S, ABINGDON.

(Drawn by Miss Eva Dormer).

Although the Abbey was in possession of the Rectory of St. Helen's and its revenues, the fourteenth-century reconstruction was undertaken by the parishioners themselves acting independently and apart from the monastery. The Abbot and monks were too preoccupied with their own affairs to trouble about improving the town Church. Almost always burdened with debt, the Abbey was at times subjected to gross mismanagement, the most notorious instance being the misrule of Abbot John de Sutton, dismissed by the Pope in 1322. As his successor the monks elected their prior, John de Canynges, a weak and timorous man.

During the whole of the fourteenth century the relations between Abbey and townspeople were in a constant and severe state of tension. Antagonism and not harmony prevailed between them, and from time to time manifested itself in riots and disorders, mostly connected with markets and fairs and rights of overlordship claimed by the Abbots. The most serious of these riots took place in 1327 towards the end of the rule of John de Canynges, when the commonalty of the town, helped by the leading citizens of Oxford, sacked and looted the Abbey. Even when the causes of trouble were purely secular, the disaffected townspeople used St. Helen's Church as a meeting place. Towards the close of the century, when a quieter state of affairs in the town prevailed, a new and fierce dispute arose between the Vicar and congregation of St. Helen's on the one hand,¹ and the Abbot on the other. The quarrel concerned the denial by the Abbot of a parish graveyard to St. Helen's Church, and reached its climax in 1391 and so accidentally coincided with the conjectural date of the roof paintings.

The Vicar of the time was one Henry Bryt, a new comer of energy and force, first met with in Feb. 1391, but who may have been instituted during a vacancy of the See of Salisbury in 1388. The reigning Abbot was Peter de Hanney—an overbearing man who filled the office for the long stretch from 1361 to 1399. He

¹ The clerical staff at St. Helen's at this date comprised the Vicar and at least seven chaplains, all of whose names are known. (Assize Roll No. 1504, m. 19-23).

was intolerant of opposition and every contest in which he was involved resulted in rights claimed by the Abbey being conceded. In the popular mind he may have been looked upon as the typical Abbot of the day; for in the *Vision of Piers Plowman* written in the latter half of the fourteenth century, the poet, after a long tirade against the corruption of the religious Orders, ends with a prophecy of their downfall in the following well-known words:—

And thanne shall the Abbot of Abyngdone
And al his issue for evere,
Have a knok of a kyng,
And incurable the wounde.

THE GUILDS.

Owing to the dominating position of the Abbots as feudal lords of the town, no merchant or craft Guilds had been allowed to spring up within its borders, and all local activities seem to have centred in the Chantry Guilds in St. Helen's Church. Two such Guilds are known to have existed, viz:—the Guild of Our Lady and the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, the latter destined to become the more important of the two, although of less ancient foundation. The earlier Guild, or Chantry of Our Lady, was certainly in existence by 1247, when it is mentioned in a dated deed as a well established and flourishing body.¹

The special functions of this Guild were concerned with the fabric of the Church, the daily celebration of the Mass of St. Mary, and the relief of sick members.² The available evidence presents the Guild to us as a body with a corporate seal and elected officials established before the middle of the thirteenth century. Five or more proctors were appointed annually by the parishioners to collect funds and to see that the objects of the Guild were duly carried out.³

THE LADY CHAPEL.

There is good reason to believe that the Lady aisle and the painted ceiling were the work of this Guild or some of its individual

¹ MS. calendar of Christ's Hospital Deeds, Abingdon, No. 11.

² *Ibid.* No. 57.

³ *Ibid.* Nos. 17 and 21.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON.

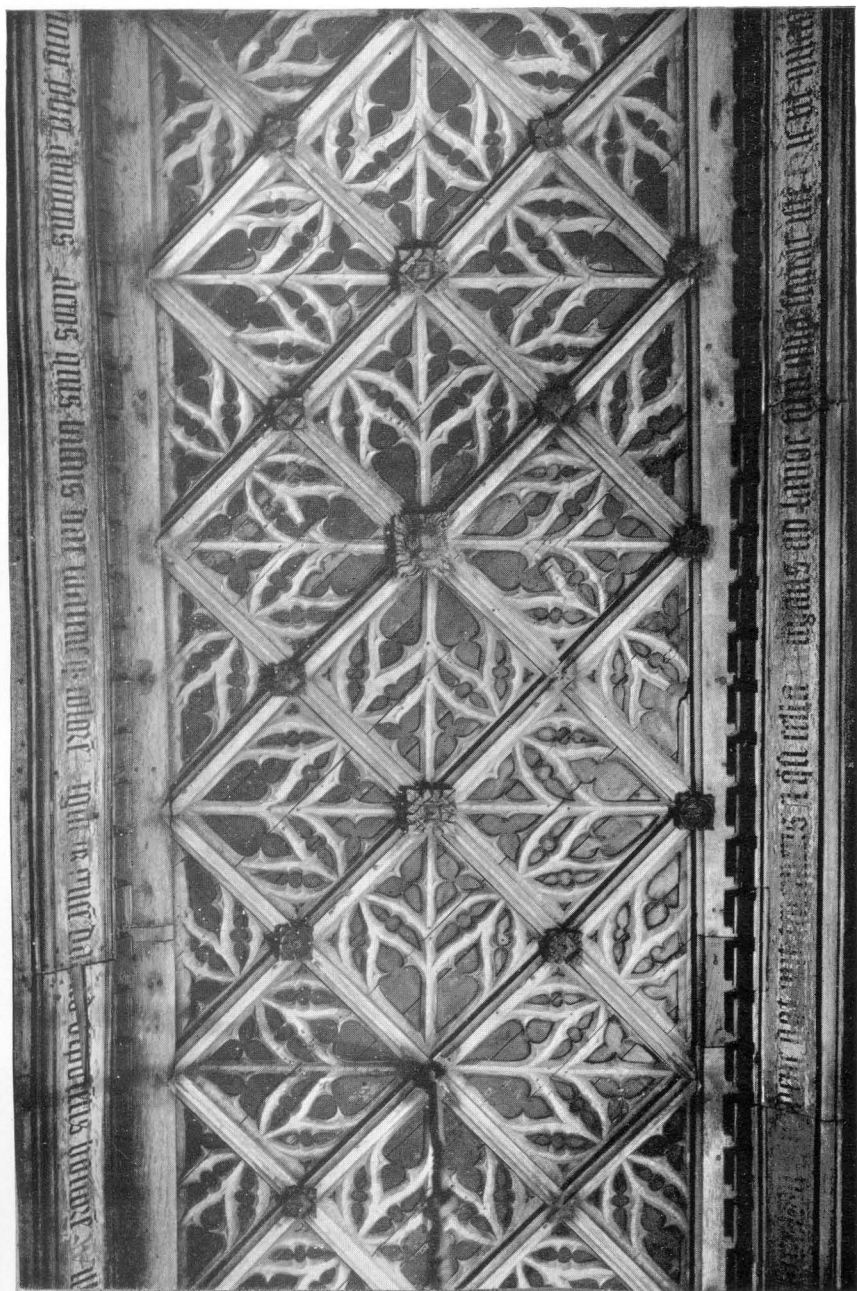


Plate 1.

PART OF HORIZONTAL CENTRE.

members. Some account of the founder of the Chapel (William Reve) and others concerned with it will be given later. The Western part of the Lady aisle was perhaps a later expansion of the reconstruction scheme, since the roof seems not to have been erected before the middle of the fifteenth century. The roof of this part has carved and moulded principals, springing from moulded wood brackets. The main timbers are all moulded, and there is a frieze of quatrefoiled panels, each inclosing a shield. Traces of letters in red paint can still be seen on some of these shields. The letters may originally have formed the inscription which Francis Little, a gossiping local historian of the early seventeenth century, says was discernible in his day (1627) but they are now gone.¹ The inscription was as follows:—

IN THE WORSHIP OF OUR LADY,

PRAY FOR NICHOLAS GOLD AND AMIE.

The inference is that Nicholas and his wife, who lived (as we know) in the middle of the fifteenth century, took some important part in the making of the roof.

THE DECORATED CEILING.

It is however the decorated ceiling of the Lady Chapel that claims our chief interest. Whilst various restorations have robbed the church of some of its best features, the Lady Chapel ceiling which survives is almost unique amongst painted wooden ceilings in this country.² The ceiling, in length about 25ft. 7ins., takes the form of a central horizontal portion flanked by two sloping sections. The horizontal portion is about 4ft. 4ins. wide, and is divided into squares by moulded ribs set diagonally. The square and triangular panels thus formed are richly traceried. Carved bosses cover the intersections of the ribs, but no paintings occur on this part of the ceiling.³

¹ *A Monument of Christian Munificence* by Francis Little, 1627 (James Parker. Oxford. 1872) p. 17.

² Report of Messrs. Howard, Greening-Lamborn and Long, of Oxford, 1932. *St. Helen's Parish Magazine*, Jan. 1935.

³ See illustration, Plate I.

The sloping portions on the North and South side are made up of arched and cinquefoiled wooden panels in pairs, each pair under a crocketed ogee arch with rectilinear tracery in the spandrels above, and a quatrefoiled circle in the spandrel between the arches and the ogee. There are thirteen pairs of panels on each side, and a slender buttress terminating in a crocketed finial separates each pair. The mouldings throughout are very refined, and the carving of tracery, bosses and crockets very delicate. The whole of the exposed woodwork is believed originally to have been decorated in colour.¹

THE PAINTED PANELS.

The panels of the sloping portions are of an average height of 4ft. 9ins. by 9ins. wide; in their complete state they were all painted with full length figures on a vermillion background. The figures stand on the branches of a painted vine trail, which ran horizontally from end to end of the chapel, at the base of the panels and disregarded the dividing ribs. Originally there must have been twenty-six painted panels on each side. In 1872 the Church and the whole roof suffered restoration, and at that time fourteen panels on the Southern slope were found to be decayed and were removed. There is no presumption that the removed panels had been contiguous, but those surviving were, neglecting their proper sequence, all pushed up to the Eastern end and fourteen new unpainted panels inserted at the West end. Misplacements can in several places be detected by a break in the vine trail on which the figures stand. Where the vine trail flows continuously, it may be assumed that the panels remain in their original order. Of the colouration scheme of the panels as a whole, Dr. Borenus says :—

The presence of certain notes of apple green, ice blue and plum colour is distinctive, just as is the restriction in the use of browns and yellows. Gold is freely used, for example in the crowns and sceptres; the vine stem is dark grey, with green leaves. In rendering of the forms, there is—allowing, of course, for a certain schematism—real power of drawing, producing in not a few

¹ Howard's report *supra*.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
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Plate 2.

SOUTH SIDE.

Panels 1 to 4.

UNIDENTIFIED PROPHET ; UNIDENTIFIED KING : PROPHET ELIJAH ;
UNIDENTIFIED KING.

cases characters of real impressiveness and the handling of colour helps to make the whole scheme extraordinarily effective.

THE CARVED WOODWORK.

Fortunately all the carved panel-heads and almost all the mouldings and buttresses have survived, but portions of the fascia or name-plate have been replaced by modern work.

Incised upon many of the carved panel-heads and mouldings between the panels, arabic numerals of the type in use at the end of the fourteenth century were discerned by Mr. S. C. Ratcliff at the time of the recent cleaning. The panel-heads are in pairs, and the two which form each pair were apparently marked with the same number. On the North side of the roof these numbers may be observed in regular sequence from 1 to 13.¹ On the South side the numbers continue, but the panel-heads are not in the order of the numbers.²

The numbers on the mouldings are harder to identify, and the sequence is seriously disarranged. The highest number found is 26, and the lowest 2. Some of the numbers occur twice, and it is almost certainly safe to assume that the mouldings like the panel-heads were numbered in pairs.³

The numbers were probably placed on the carved panel-heads and mouldings as a guide to the carpenters in erecting them, and

¹ In only a few cases is one of the numbers missing, and without exception it is the second of the pair of panel heads which is thus unmarked.

² The numbers 14 and 15 have been omitted altogether. The numbers 16 to 27 occur in pairs, except 17, which is on one panel head only (the adjoining panel head being without a number). The easternmost pair of panel heads are marked with the Roman numeral ten (x). Some of these numbers can be seen on the photographs.

³ The characteristic shape of the figure 4 (resembling a coil of rope with two loose ends at the lower right and left corners) and that of the figure 7 (like a capital *lambda*) are visible on plates 2 and 8 respectively. It will be noticed that the latter is upside down. The cypher is like the letter O with a line drawn across it.

seem to have been made with special punches. There would appear to be no reason for doubting that the numbering is contemporary with the work and consequently forms one of the earliest examples (apart from manuscripts) of the use of Arabic numerals in England.

THE SUBJECT OF THE PAINTINGS.

The series of painted panels begins at the East end of the South side and finishes at the East end of the North side. It is composed of Kings and Prophets in pairs, save for the Annunciation group at the latter point, and forms an elaborate rendering of the Tree of Jesse; the royal figures represent the earthly ancestors of Our Lord, whilst the prophets, who hold scrolls upon which Messianic prophecies are inscribed, stand for his spiritual forebears.¹

The subject of the Tree of Jesse was popular with mediæval stained-glass painters, and there are examples of the subject in wall paintings; but no other existing English example is known of the employment of such figure painting in the decoration of a roof. There used to be something of the same character at St. Leonard's, Colchester,² and in the ceiling of the chapel at Naworth Castle, Cumberland, both now gone.³ There are examples outside England, e.g. the late twelfth-century roof at St. Michael's, Hildesheim, Hanover.⁴ It is remarkable to find such an important example of mediæval figure painting in the Abingdon district, which has very few other specimens. The nearest instances are fragmentary figures on the screens at Stanton Harcourt and Bloxham, Oxon, and in Bucks at Monks Risborough, and North Crawley.⁵ Dr. Borenus says "In a more general way the

¹ cf. *Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* by Dr. Arthur Watson, London, 1934.

² *Morant. Hist. & Antiqs. of Essex* (1816) Vol. I. (Colchester) p. 129; *Archl. Journal*, Vol. 45, p. 418.

³ *Burlington Mag.* June 1936, p. 276.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Howard's Report, *supra*.

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Plate 3.
SOUTH SIDE.
PROPHET JACOB THE PATRIARCH ; KING JESSE ;
KING DAVID.

Panels 5 to 8.
PROPHET SAMUEL ;

presence of so many figures of Kings is interesting, because by the time this roof was painted there was a long-standing tradition in England to include figures of Kings on panels in the decorative scheme of interiors ;" and he refers to the full length figures of Kings (still existing) on the panels of the sedilia in Westminster Abbey dating from the very beginning of the fourteenth century.¹

IDENTIFICATION OF THE FIGURES.²

The names of the painted figures formerly appeared on a fascia or name-plate immediately below the panels, but only a few sections of this fascia remain, some of them being illegible and some out of place.³ Where the fascia is in *situ* and can be read, it is found in the case of the Prophets that the name under each figure corresponds with the Prophet to whom the words on the scroll are attributed. Where, however, a Prophet's name is missing, it is possible to recover it if the quotation on the scroll is sufficiently legible.

On the Northern slope the figures are better preserved and less misplaced than on the Southern side, and afford sufficient proof that the genealogy of Our Lord as portrayed, is based on the first chapter of St. Matthew (verses 1-16) which contains fourteen names from Jesse to the Captivity, and a like number from the Captivity to Joseph. With this knowledge as a basis

¹ *Burlington Magazine*, June 1936, pp. 275-6.

² Based on observations by S. C. Ratcliff, as printed in the Appendix, p. 142 *post*.

³ On the South side three sections of the original fascia or name-plate survive, and extend for the space occupied by twenty panels. From them a few names of both prophets and kings can be recovered, for which the corresponding figures no longer exist. Of the two sections of original name-plate on the North side, that at the West end has been slightly trimmed in order, it may be presumed, to get rid of some decayed wood. The names painted on it are (as a result) not now exactly below the figures to which they belong. The second section is fitted closely to the first, and similarly the names on it are not exactly below the corresponding figures.

and using other available data, it has been possible to reconstruct to an extent the original order of the paintings; but not completely, because the roof scheme in its entirety allowed for only twenty-five names out of the twenty-eight from Jesse to Joseph. Of these, seven Kings are now missing on the South side, whilst some of the Prophets have both name-plate and scroll illegible. The Kings are in chronological order and usually paired with a contemporary Prophet. In the original scheme the royal pedigree must have begun with Jesse (probably preceded by Jacob the Patriarch in the Easternmost panel of the Southern slope). After Jesse came twelve Prophets and twelve Kings, seemingly all of the pre-Captivity period.

Passing over now to the Western end of the Northern slope we find in the first panel Moses holding the Book of Law, and next to him King Josias under whom the Captivity began. Though Moses lived so long before him, Josias is paired with the great Law-giver, because it was in his reign that the Book of Mosaic Law was rediscovered. The series on the North side proceeds with ten pairs of Prophets and Kings, the Kings being selected from the succeeding twelve names in Matthew's genealogy. An elderly figure without an emblem—most probably St. Joseph—comes next, followed by an Annunciation Group. Doubtless the mediæval chapel in its finished state embraced a picture of the Nativity in the stained-glass East window.

THE ANNUNCIATION GROUP AND LILY CRUCIFIX.

Although the paintings in the final three spaces on the North side have received injury, they form a particularly interesting group.¹ Till recently they were quite obscured. On panel 24 is a kneeling figure of the Angel Gabriel, and in the last panel of all a mutilated painting of the Virgin; between them is a pot of lilies—often to be found in representations of the Annunciation. But on the lily is a figure of the Crucified Christ—a very rare

¹ See Plate II.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
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Plate 4. SOUTH SIDE. Panels 9 to 12.
PROPHET NATHAN; KING SOLOMON; PROPHET AHIJAH; KING REHOBAM.

feature. According to Dr. Hildburgh¹ only thirteen examples are known, all of which are English, the Abingdon example being one of the earliest in date. The first to appear was about 1375. This treatment of the subject has never been met with outside England, so that the presence of the Lily Crucifix stamps the St. Helen's paintings as of English workmanship.

(List of Panels next page)

¹ *Archaeologia* lxxiv. (1925), p. 203 et seq.; and *Antiquaries Journal* XII, p. 24.

LIST OF PANELS.

The following list gives the paintings in their present order, and where necessary suggests their probable place in the original scheme.¹ The texts painted on the Prophets' scrolls are from the Vulgate, and these notes are referenced thereto; the translations in square brackets are from the Authorized Version of the Bible.

SOUTH SIDE (beginning at East end).

(Panels 1, 2, 3 and 4 are reproduced on Plate 2).

No. 1. Prophet. Unidentified. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll illegible. Panel out of place—probably came from further West.² The present No. 5 (Jacob the Patriarch) may have originally been placed here.

Colouration.—Scarlet under-robe, green over-robe, and purple cap. Dark hair and beard.

No. 2. King. Unidentified. Modern blank name-plate. Out of place—probably from further West. The present No. 6 (Jesse) originally here perhaps.

Colouration.—Dark green under-robe, dark purple cloak, crown and sceptre. Curly grey hair and beard.

No. 3. Prophet. Elijah. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll: *Ecce nubecula parva quasi vestigium hominis* [Behold there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand] (3 Kings XVIII. 44, spoken to Elijah). Out of place—**from further West.** The present No. 7 (unidentified) possibly came here originally.

Colouration.—Green under-robe, scarlet cloak and green cap. Dark hair and beard.

¹ See Appendix p. 142 *post* for S. C. Ratcliff's notes on original order of the Panels.

² *Ibid.*

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Plate 5. NORTH SIDE. Panels 1 to 4.
PROPHET MOSES ; KING JOSIAH ; PROPHET JEREMIAH ; KING JECONIAH.

PANELS. SOUTH SIDE—*contd.*

No. 4. King. Unidentified. Modern blank name-plate. Out of place—probably from further West. The present No. 8 (David) probably placed here originally.

Colouration.—Scarlet under-robe, blue over-robe, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

(Panels 5, 6, 7 and 8 are reproduced on Plate 3).

No. 5. Prophet. Jacob the Patriarch. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll : *Non auferetur sceptrum de Juda* [The sceptre shall not depart from Judah] (Genesis XLIX. 10, spoken by Jacob). Originally No. 1.

Colouration.—Scarlet under-robe, light purple over-robe, dark purple cap. Brown hair and beard.

No. 6. King. Jesse. Modern blank name-plate. Originally No. 2.

Colouration.—Blue under-robe, light purple over-robe, ermine tippet, crown and sceptre. Dark hair.

No. 7. Prophet. Samuel. Original name-plate. Only traces of name. Words on scroll illegible. Originally No. 3, and the present No. 11 (Ahijah) probably came in here.

Colouration.—Green under-robe, light purple cloak, red cap. Dark hair.

PANELS. SOUTH SIDE—*contd.*

No. 8. King. David. Original name-plate inscribed David. Originally No. 4, and the present No. 12 (Rehoboam) probably came in here.

Colouration.—Light purple under-robe, green cloak, crown and sceptre. Grey hair and forked beard.

(Panels 9, 10, 11 and 12 are reproduced on Plate 4).

No. 9 Prophet. Nathan. Original name-plate inscribed Nathan. Words on scroll: *Dominus quoque transtulit peccatum David* [The Lord also hath put away thy sin] (2 Kings XII. 13, spoken to David by Nathan). Originally No. 5.

Colouration.—Red robe, dark purple cloak lined pale blue, red cap. Grey curly hair and beard.

No. 10 King. Solomon. Original name-plate inscribed Salomon. Originally No. 6.

Colouration.—Red under-robe, purple over-robe with ermine lining, crown and sceptre. Light brown hair.

No. 11 Prophet. Ahijah. Original name-plate inscribed Ayas. Words on scroll: *Non auferam omne regnum de manu ejus* [Howbeit I will not take the whole Kingdom out of his hand] (3 Kings XI. 34, spoken by Ahijah). Originally No. 7.

Colouration.—Green under-robe (with red background shewing through), green over-robe, light purple cap. Dark hair and beard.

No. 12 King. Rehoboam. Original name-plate inscribed Roboas. Originally No. 8.

Colouration.—Blueish-green under-robe, light purple over-robe, crown and sceptre. Brown curly hair and forked beard.

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Plate 7.

PROPHET HAGGAI ;

NORTH SIDE.

UNIDENTIFIED KING ;
UNIDENTIFIED KING

Panels 9 to 12.

PROPHET ZECHARIAH ;

PANELS. SOUTH SIDE—*contd.*

Nos. 13 to 26.

The remaining panels on the South side (Nos. 13-26) are all blank, and were inserted at the restoration of the Church in 1872 to replace the decayed originals. The ancient name-plate remains beneath, but only traces of the names themselves.¹

UNIDENTIFIED KINGS—SOUTH SIDE.

The two unidentified Kings above, and the seven missing Kings must have been taken from the following: Abia, Asa, Josophat, Joram, Ozias, Joatham, Achaz, Ezekias, Manasses and Amon (Matthew I, verses 7 to 10). The names Joatham and 'Ezechias' (i.e. King Hezekiah) can be deciphered beneath panels 14 and 16 respectively. The name of the prophet Micheas appears under No. 17, but only traces of the other prophets' names remain.

NORTH SIDE (beginning at the West end).

The names are not now exactly under the panels, but have been shifted slightly to the West.

(Panels 1, 2, 3 and 4 are reproduced on Plate 5).

1. **Prophet. Moses.** Original name-plate inscribed Moyses.² Words on book: *Servate precepta mea* (not traced in Vulgate but cf. "And ye shall keep my statutes and do them." Levit. XX. 8. and cf. Levit. XXV. 18). In original position.

Colouration.—Very dark purple or black under-robe, purple over-robe. Dark hair and beard, large rayed halo.

2. **King. Josiah.** Original name-plate inscribed Josyas. In original position.

Colouration.—Dark red under-robe, very dark purple cloak, ermine tippet, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and pointed beard.

¹ See p. 123, n. 3 *ante*.

² For position of name-plate see *ibid*.

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

3. Prophet. Jeremiah. Original name-plate inscribed Jeremias. Words on scroll: *Creavit dominus novum hominem super terram* [The Lord hath created a new thing in the earth] (Jeremiah XXXI. 22). In original position.

Colouration.—Dark green under-robe, dark plum-coloured over-robe, dark cap. Dark hair, beard and moustache.

4. King. Jeconiah. Original name-plate inscribed Jeconias. In original position.

Colouration.—Dark blue under-robe, red over-robe, ermine collar and cuffs, crown and sceptre. Dark hair, curly grey beard.

(Panels 5, 6, 7 and 8 are reproduced on Plate 6
as Frontispiece).

5. Prophet. Zephaniah. Original name-plate inscribed Sophonias. Words on scroll: *Juxta est dies domini magnus* [The great day of the Lord is near] (Zephaniah I. 14). In original position.

Colouration.—Purple robe, dark blue cloak, dark purple cap. Dark hair and beard.

6. King. Salathiel. Original name-plate inscribed Salathiel. In original position.

Colouration.—Green under-robe, plum-coloured cloak, ermine tippet, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

7. Prophet. Obadiah. Original name-plate inscribed Abdyas. Words on scroll: *Sicut fecisti fiat tibi* [As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee] (Obadiah v. 15). In original position.

Colouration.—Blue under-robe, red cloak, purple cap. Curly iron-grey hair and beard.

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

8. **King.** Unidentified. Original name-plate inscribed Zorobabel. Panel out of position: formerly perhaps No. 14 on the same side, or may even have been transferred from the South side. The present No. 18 probably represented Zerubabel and originally came in here.

Colouration.—Red under-robe, dark blue cloak, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

A section of the name-plate ends at No. 8 and possibly the next length was originally further to the East and beneath panels 13-21.

(Panels 9, 10, 11 and 12 are reproduced on Plate 7).

9. **Prophet. Haggai.** The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Name illegible. Words on scroll: *Veniet desideratus cunctis gentibus* [The desire of all nations shall come] (Haggai II. 8). Panel in original position.

Colouration.—Green under-robe, purple cloak, red cap. Dark hair and beard.

10. **King.** Unidentified. The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Name illegible. Panel out of position: probably this was No. 18, and the present No. 14 originally came in here.

Colouration.—Blue under-robe, scarlet cloak, ermine lined, gold collar or chain, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

There is said to be a similarity between this figure and the contemporary portrait of Richard II in Westminster Abbey.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON.



Plate 8.
PROPHET MALACHI ;

NORTH SIDE
UNIDENTIFIED KING ;
UNIDENTIFIED KING.

Panels 13 to 16.
PROPHET HABAKKUK ;

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

11. Prophet. Zechariah. The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Name illegible. Words on scroll : *Ecce veniet rex tibi justus et salvator* [Behold, thy King cometh unto thee : he is just, and having salvation] (Zechariah IX. 9) Panel out of position : possibly the present No. 15 originally came here, Zechariah being at No. 19.

Colouration.—Red under-robe, light green cloak, blue cap. Light-brown hair and beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

12. King. Unidentified The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Traces of five letters, but name illegible. Panel out of position : probably this and No. 16 have changed places.

Colouration.—Light purple under-robe, dark red cloak, ermine tippet, coronet and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

(Panels 13, 14, 15 and 16 are reproduced on Plate 8).

13. Prophet. Malachi. The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Name illegible. Words on scroll : *Ecce ego mitto angelum meum* [Behold, I will send my messenger] (Malachi III. 1). Panel out of position : probably this and No. 21 have changed places.

Colouration.—Dark purple under-robe, scarlet cloak, light purple cap. Grey hair and beard.

14. King. Unidentified. The section of original name-plate beneath is out of place. Name illegible. Panel out of position : probably this was No. 10, and the present No. 8 originally came here.

Colouration.—Scarlet robe, dark blue cloak ermine lined, crown and sceptre. Dark hair and beard.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON.



Plate 9. NORTH SIDE. Panels 17 to 20.
PROPHET JONAH ; KING ZERUBBABEL ; KING MATHAN ; PROPHET JOEL.

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

15 Prophet. Habakkuk. Name-plate inscribed Zacharias is out of place. Words on scroll : *Apparebit in finem et non mentietur* [At the end it (i.e. the vision) shall speak and not lie] Habakkuk II. 3). Panel out of position : probably this was No. 11, and the present No. 20 came here.

Colouration.—Scarlet under-robe, dark purple cloak, green cap. Light brown curly hair and forked beard.

16. King. Unidentified. Name-plate beneath (inscribed Mathan and Malachias) is out of place.¹ Panel out of position : probably this and No. 12 have changed places.

Colouration.—Purple under-robe, blue over-robe, crown and sceptre. Auburn hair and beard.

(Panels 17, 18, 19 and 20 are reproduced on Plate 9).

17. Prophet. Jonah. Modern blank name-plate : words on scroll : *Clamavi ad dominum et exaudivit me* [I cried . . . unto the Lord and he heard me] (Jonah II. 3). In original position.

Colouration.—Dark purple under-robe, light purple cloak, red cap. Long grey hair and curly forked beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

18. King. Zerubbabel. Modern blank name-plate. Out of position : probably this was No. 8, and the present No. 10 came in here.

Colouration.—Light green under-robe, golden girdle, dark purple cloak, crown and sceptre. Grey hair and beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

¹ See p. 123, n.3 *ante*.

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

19. King. Mathan. Modern blank name-plate. Out of position : probably this was No. 20, under which the name-plate inscribed Mathan must originally have come ; the present No. 11 probably coming here.

Colouration.—Dark purple robe, light purple cloak, crown and sceptre. Curly white hair and beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

20. Prophet. Joel. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll : *Convertimini ad dominum Deum* [Turn unto the Lord your God] (Joel II. 13). Out of position. Probably this was No. 15, and No. 19 (Mathan) came in here.

Colouration.—Purple robe, green cloak, red cap. Light brown curly hair and beard.

A break in the vine trail occurs here.

(Panels 21, 22 and 23 are reproduced on Plate 10)

21. Prophet. Isaiah. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll : *Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium* [Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son] (Isaiah VII. 14). Out of position : probably this and No. 13 (Malachi) have changed places.

Colouration.—Grey-blue robe, red cloak, red cap. Dark grey hair and beard.

22. King. Jacob (father of St. Joseph). Modern blank name-plate. In original position.

Colouration.—Red under-robe, dark purple over-robe, ermine cape and cuffs, crown and sceptre. Light-brown hair.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON.



Plate 10. NORTH SIDE. *Panels 21 to 23.*
PROPHET ISAIAH ; KING JACOB (FATHER OF ST. JOSEPH) ;
ST. JOSEPH.

PANELS. NORTH SIDE—*contd.*

23. St. Joseph. Modern blank name-plate. In original position.

Colouration.—Light purple gown, blue over-robe with hood. Curly hair and beard almost white.

(Panels 24, 25, and 26 are reproduced on Plate II)

THE ANNUNCIATION.

24. The Angel Gabriel. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll : *Ave gratia plena dominus tecum* [Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee] (St. Luke I. 28). In original position.

Colouration.—Scarlet cloak. Light brown hair, halo (wings obliterated).

25. Lily Crucifix. Modern blank name-plate. In original position.

Colouration.—Pot containing a lily, green leaves, white flowers. On the lily a figure of the Crucified Christ with arms extended and hands grasping the branches of the plant.

26. The Blessed Virgin Mary. Modern blank name-plate. Words on scroll : *Ecce ancilla domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* [Behold the handmaid of the Lord : be it unto me according to thy word] (St. Luke I. 38). Original position.

Colouration.—Dark under-robe, light purple over-robe. Halo and dove above head.

UNIDENTIFIED KINGS, NORTH SIDE.

Assuming that the genealogy in St. Matthew I. (11-16) were followed by the artist, the unidentified Kings (five in number) must have been taken from the following : Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Sadoc, Achim, Eliud and Eleazar.

INSCRIPTION ON THE CORNICE.

On the cornice above the sloping portions of the roof is the following inscription in rhyming Latin hexameters. The initial letter of each line is rubricated.

SOUTH SIDE.

Virgo maris stella ducas ad celica mella
Post mundi bella quibus est hec facta capella
Nomina servorum sistunt subscripta tuorum
Mentes fer quorum clemens ad regna polorum
Istam fundavit Willelmus Reve capellam
Quam bene dotavit tenementis et quasi cellam
Virginis ad laudem fieri quam fecerat iste
Hic ut quaque die memoratur mors tua, Christe.

NORTH SIDE.

Henricus dictus Bernyngtone prebet amictus
Sacros quis bissus dat materiemque colorem
Argentique crucem dat ad omnipotentis honorem
Willelmus Cholsey laris istius reparari
Tectum per proprios sumptus fecitque novari
Quatuor attribuit venie Bonifatius annos
Nonus cum totidem quadragesimis sociatis
Omnibus hanc qui sustentant reparantque capellam.

(English Version)

SOUTH SIDE.

O Virgin, star of the sea, mayest thou lead to heavenly sweetness after the troubles of this world, those by whom this Chapel was made.

The names of thy servants stand written beneath, whose souls in thy mercy bear thou to the kingdoms of the skies.

Willam Reve founded this chapel which he well endowed with tenements and which he had caused to be made, as it were, a shrine for the praise of the Virgin, so that here, every day, thy death O Christ, may be commemorated.

THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED CEILING
AT ST. HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON.



Plate 11. NORTH SIDE. Panels 24 to 26.
THE ANNUNCIATION :—
ANGEL GABRIEL ; LILY CRUCIFIX ; B.V.M.

NORTH SIDE.

Henry, named Bernyngton, supplies the sacred vestments, to which fine linen gives substance and colour, and gives also a cross of silver to the honour of the Almighty.

William Cholsey caused the roof of this shrine to be repaired and renewed at his own cost.

Boniface the ninth grants four years' Indulgence with as many *quadrage*¹ to all who associated together maintain and repair this chapel.

FOUNDER AND BENEFACTORS.

The brief allusions in the Inscription to the Founder of the Chapel and the after benefactors may be supplemented by a few further particulars gathered from ancient local records.

WILLIAM REVE.

The founding of the chapel by William Reve is referred to in the verses as a past event, and from certain records in possession of Christ's Hospital, Abingdon (and once belonging to the Guild of Our Lady) it is known that one William Reve (or William le Reve as he is usually styled) was sometimes acting as proctor of the Guild and as witness to local deeds between the years 1245-88.

Whether *Reve* were his surname or his vocation in life cannot certainly be determined, but the occurrence of his name in the form of *le Reve* in Latin deeds tends to shew that it had already become a surname. William possessed a tenement in East St. Helen's Street,² which was probably his dwelling-place. Nothing is known of his personal history, and no information has survived concerning his endowments of the Lady Chapel as spoken of in the inscription.

HENRY BERNYNGTON.

Henry Bernyngton, referred to as donor of the vestments and a silver cross, was chaplain to the Guild of Our Lady and is met with as such in local deeds between 1363 and 1393.

¹ A *quadrage*na is a period of forty days.

² Cal. C.H. 28.

He took a prominent part in the dispute with the Abbey about a graveyard for St. Helen's church, and was one of the first to busy himself in procuring the necessary land. In 1383 we find his name coming first amongst the grantees in a deed by which the land was obtained from the then lord of the Manor of St. Helen's.¹

WILLIAM CHOLSEY.

William Cholsey is recorded in the verses as having "caused the roof of this shrine to be repaired and renewed at his own cost." Apparently this meant that the money for the painted ceiling was provided by him. Cholsey's name appears in local deeds between 1355 and 1363² but he was certainly dead before 1373, when his wife Alice is described as "late the wife of William Cholsey."³

He appears to have lived in Little Bridge Street,⁴ in a tenement later known as "Cholsey's Place,"⁵ but no other details of his career have come down to us. As the paintings could not have been done till about 1390 they must have been paid for out of moneys bequeathed by Cholsey for the purpose, or applied thereto by his executors.

THE PAPAL INDULGENCE.

Boniface IX was Pope from 1389 to 1404, and the concessions to be allowed to those who should maintain or repair the chapel are specified in the Calendar of Papal Letters⁶ as follows:—

1391, 2 Kal. March (28 Feb.) St. Peter's Rome (2 Boniface IX). Relaxation of four years and four *quadragene* to penitents who on the four feasts of St. Mary the Virgin, visit and give alms to her altar in the Church of St. Helen, Abyndon.

¹ Cal. C.H. Nos. 335-6.

² *Ibid.* No. 229 *et al.*

³ *Ibid.* No. 291.

⁴ This was not the modern Bridge Street leading to the Thames, but a narrow thoroughfare now known as Bury Street, leading Northwards from the Market Place to Bath St. The Bridge from which the ancient name was taken was over a small watercourse flowing Eastwards to the old Stert and serving a mill called "Crab Mill" in Otwell Lane. Both stream and mill have long ago disappeared.

⁵ Cal. C.H. No. 383.

⁶ *Cal. Papal Letters* IV. p. 407.

The words used in the verses suggest that the Indulgence had special reference to the members of the Guild of Our Lady.

DATE OF THE PAINTINGS.

The evidence furnished by the inscription of the persons concerned in the work is of great value. Not only is the chapel shewn by implication to be the creation of members of the Guild of Our Lady, but the date of the roof paintings is, within narrow limits, fixed. The verses having clearly been put up in the lifetime of Pope Boniface IX (i.e. before 1404), the language used indicates that by the date of the Indulgence William Cholsey's project of reparation and renewal had been finished. At any rate there can only be slight risk of error in assuming that, except for the writing in of the inscription, the pictures and whole work had been completed by the time the Indulgence was issued in Feb. 1391.

THE ARTISTS.

Of the artist or artists who designed and carried out the scheme, no information has come down to us. Although unknown, it may be safe to assume that they were men of repute and ability, specially secured for the purpose from London or elsewhere. There are indications that the draughtsmanship was the work of different hands and that some of the craftsmen were more skilful than others.

PUBLISHED REFERENCES TO THE PAINTINGS.

It might have been expected that Francis Little—the Abingdon historian of the seventeenth century—would in the course of his observations on the Lady Aisle have made more than a brief and misleading reference to the painted roof. Clearly he had no means of acquainting himself with the informative inscription running round the cornice.¹

The brothers Lysons in their volume on Berkshire (1806)² speak of the Painted Ceiling, and rightly reject a popular tradition that it had come from the Abbey Church. In their day the

¹ *A Monument of Christian Munificence* 1627 (James Parker. Oxford 1872) p. 17.

² Lysons, Vol. I. pt. 2 (Berkshire) p. 225.

figures were recognised as Kings and Prophets belonging to the Tree of Jesse, and a few of the names on the fascia are recorded by them. They also give the sense of the Latin inscription, but misread the founder's name as William Beve (instead of Reve)—an error which held its ground for over a century and was only recently detected.

In observations on mural and similar paintings in 1847, E. L. Blackburne¹ made perfunctory reference to the ceiling, without recognising its artistic significance. The late C. E. Keyser in 1883 did the like.²

RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH IN 1872.

During a general restoration of the Church in 1872 the Lady Chapel ceiling was taken down, and whilst the panels were on the floor of the church they were examined by the writer of the present article who took part in deciphering the inscription on the cornice.³ The interest of the late James Parker of Oxford was aroused, and a metrical version in English by him has since been quoted in various guide-books.

When in 1872 the decayed panels on the South side were discarded and new wood inserted, the original order of the surviving panels (as already noted) was unfortunately not preserved. No attempt was made to clean off the dust and grime of centuries, and some of the panels were varnished.

CLEANING OF THE PAINTINGS IN 1935.

A report on the roof was made in 1932 by the late F. E. Howard and Messrs. Greening-Lamborn and E. T. Long, all of Oxford.⁴ As a result, the cleaning was put in hand in the early part of 1935 and skilfully carried out by Mr. E. T. Long: the

¹ *Sketches Graphic and Descriptive for a History of the Decorative Painting Applied to English Architecture during the Middle Ages*, London (1847) pp. 46-7.

² *A List of Buildings in Great Britain and Ireland having Mural and Other Painted Decorations*, London (1883) p. 1; cf. *ibid.*, p. lxxvi.

³ See St. Helen's *Parish Magazine*, Oct. 1872.

⁴ *Parish Magazine* Jan. 1935.

varnish was removed, the paintings cleaned, and preservative applied. No restoring or touching up was done. Whilst the scaffolding was up photographs were taken by the Clarendon Press, reproductions of which illustrate this article. A diagram in black and white of the entire ceiling made by Miss Eva Dormer will shortly be placed in the Church, suitably mounted and glazed.¹

Special electric lighting was also installed in 1935, to enable the paintings to be clearly seen.

CONCLUSION.

These observations on the rare and splendid monument of mediæval art in St. Helen's Church may fittingly be brought to an end by reproducing here the conclusions arrived at by so great an authority as Dr. Borenus. In his final summing up he says :

From whatever point of view we regard it, the recovery of the Tree of Jesse at Abingdon must be classed amongst the most notable additions to the existing material which have ever taken place in the domain of English Mediæval painting. No future study of the latter subject can henceforth afford to ignore this magnificent example of painted ceiling decoration in England during the reign of Richard II, all the more so as it also has important bearings on international aspects of the history of art in this period.

Supported by testimony of this kind, Abingdon may well pride itself on possessing, amongst its many treasures, so impressive an example of pictorial art in England of the time of the last of the Plantagenets.

¹ Reproduced in Plate 12, facing p. 116.

Painted Ceiling, St. Helen's, Abingdon.

APPENDIX.

Attempted re-construction of the original order of the Panels
by S. C. RATCLIFF, I.S.O., M.A.

The recent cleaning (March 1935) of the painted panels in the roof of the Lady Chapel in St. Helen's, Abingdon, has rendered possible an attempt not only to reconstitute on paper the original arrangement of the panels, but also to recognise their significance.

At present there exists a series of twenty-six painted panels on the North slope of the chapel roof, but on the South slope only twelve remain.

Three factors assist in the task of reconstruction, *viz* :—

- (1) The quotations on the scrolls.
- (2) The names on the name plates.
- (3) The continuity of the vine-stem.

The position of the seven westernmost panels on the North side can be recognised with certainty as original by the concurrence of these three features. The name plate or fascia (containing eight names) has been slightly shortened at the West end where possibly it was worn, but the first, third, fifth and seventh names on it are those of the writers of the books in the Bible, from which the passages on the scrolls above them are taken. And lastly the undulations of the vine-stem fit perfectly.

From this portion of the design, then, we must try to build up the rest.

In the first place I think it can be shown that we are justified in assuming that the genealogy of the first chapter of St. Matthew is that used by the artist. In it there are fourteen names from

Jesse to the Captivity and a similar number from the Captivity to Joseph. Of the latter group Josias, Jeconias, Salathiel and Zorobabel, the first four in the list, occur in that order on the name-plate at the West end of the Northern side, and Mathan can be deciphered on the second piece of name-plate further to the East. Similarly on the name-plates on the Southern side there occur David, Solomon and Roboas in correct order, and a little further along Joatham, Ezechias and perhaps Amon. The problem before us is to discover the order in which the panels in the eighth to twenty-sixth places on the North side and those which survive on the South side ought to be arranged.

NORTH SIDE.

Even if the prophets with inscribed scrolls and the kings or crowned figures had alternated throughout the whole composition there would have been room for but thirteen kings each side instead of the fourteen in each division of the genealogy. But on the North side the three easternmost panels are occupied by a representation of the Annunciation, the preceding panel being probably intended for St. Joseph, the last name in the genealogy. This use of three panels for the Annunciation group (judged to be in correct position), left room for but twelve of the fourteen post-Captivity 'kings,' and eleven prophets on the North side: but there may have been room for thirteen of each on the South.

We have seen that on the North side the first four kings after the Captivity occur on the name-plate in correct order. The only other 'king' whose name can be deciphered with certainty is Mathan. At present the piece of name-plate containing his name is so erected that 'Mathan' occupies the space below the sixteenth panel, i.e. the eighth king from the West. In the genealogy on the other hand Mathan is twelfth in the series beginning with Josias. The second piece of name-plate is therefore too far to the West and should not have been erected in close continuity with the first piece. This contention is supported by the lack of correspondence between the prophets whose names

can be deciphered to the West and East of 'Mathan' (*scil.* Zacharias and Malachias) and the scrolls on the panels above them. The quotations from Zachariah and Malachi are on the eleventh and thirteenth panels respectively, while the fifteenth and seventeenth panels contain passages from Habakkuk and Jonah respectively. In addition to these considerations the undulations of the vine-stem do not fit. The main stem should undulate in such a way that it reaches its highest point in the first panel and should reach the same position in each succeeding fourth panel from the West, *scil.* in the fifth, ninth, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-first and twenty-fifth.

The corrected position of the second piece of name-plate is as follows.

Move in imagination the name-plate as far to the East as is possible without interfering with the four last panels. This means that 'Mathan' would appear below the twentieth panel, and if the twenty-third panel is intended for St. Joseph, the King on the previous panel would be Jacob.

The consequential re-arrangement of the panels is embodied in the annotated List of Panels, *ante* pp. 126-135.

This re-arrangement would give the vine-stem the necessary undulations save in the eighth panel, which may possibly have been transferred from the South side.

Between Zorobabel and Mathan in the genealogy there are seven names, and in the panels, if the position assigned to Mathan is correct, there are only five places to fill. We must assume therefore that two of the names were omitted.

The name at present under panel 12 (in the proposed re-arrangement 16) consists of five letters and might be Eliud or Achim.

SOUTH SIDE.

The Southern side is less satisfactory. Of the six inscribed scrolls, two of the quotations have not been identified, but the name-plate affords some help.

Assuming that the two series of prophets and kings are maintained and that the kings begin with Jesse, the following is suggested as a conjectural arrangement :—

- 1 (panel 5) [Jacob] Quotation on scroll from Genesis
- 2 (panel 6) [Jesse]
- 3 (panel 7) [? prophet] Quotation undeciphered
- 4 (panel 8) DAVID
- 5 (panel 9) NATHAN Quotation from II Kings
- 6 (panel 10) SALOMON
- 7 (panel 11) AYAS Quotation from III Kings
- 8 (panel 12) ROBOAS

Subsequent positions have to be found for the panels now in positions 1-4, but this seems not improbable because the quotation on panel 3 is from Elijah and therefore later in date than those to which positions 1-8 have been assigned. It is of course possible that they were not contiguous.

S. C. R.

July, 1935.