

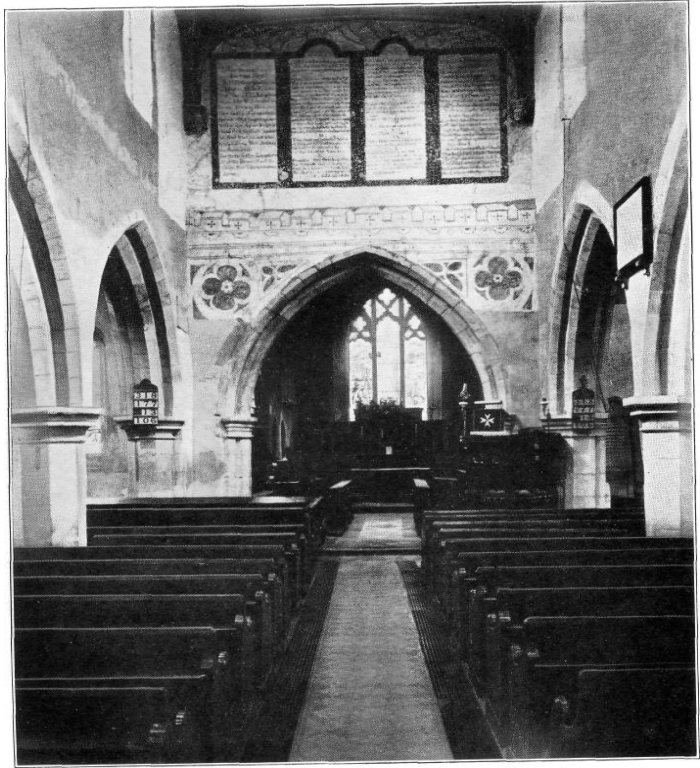
MURAL PAINTINGS IN CHALFONT ST. GILES
CHURCH

BY E. CLIVE ROUSE

Some apology is, perhaps, needed for bringing the subject of the Chalfont St. Giles paintings before readers of the RECORDS, for some of these particular examples are comparatively well known. But my excuse is threefold, namely, that they have not previously been very carefully studied or recorded; that several of the subjects have hitherto been imperfectly understood and wrongly explained; and that, in any event, the recent work of preservation, and the fact that other paintings have been uncovered, should receive proper notice.

In February of this year the much-needed work of cleaning and preserving the existing frescoes was carried out under the direction of Professor E. W. Tristram, of the Royal College of Art, South Kensington, the well-known authority on ancient wall paintings. At the same time, a small additional area of other walls, all ruthlessly covered with a hideous dull-grey cement plaster by Street in the 1861-7 "restoration" was tested, revealing extensive traces of further decoration in colour. The plaster in these areas was removed, and the sadly mutilated fresco subjects uncovered and treated with a fixative. The discoveries as a result of all this work have placed Chalfont St. Giles in the front rank of Churches in Buckinghamshire possessing mural paintings, and several of the subjects are of especial interest on account of their rarity, or excellence of workmanship.

The Rev. P. W. Phipps, a former Rector of St. Giles, makes brief, and incidentally inaccurate, reference to the paintings in a paper read to our Society on the occasion of their visit to Chalfont on



CHALFONT ST. GILES. PLATE I.

the annual excursion in 1887.¹ In the *Royal Commission on Historical Monument*², the paintings then existing (1912) are listed, but several were unidentified at that time. The frescoes are mentioned in several works of a more popular nature,³ but beyond these references these, valuable specimens of mediæval art do not seem to have been seriously considered. The work lately done on them, in addition to preserving them and bringing further examples to light, has enabled many points to be cleared up, since, when the plaster is wet and one is close to it, much detail is apparent which, in the ordinary way, is quite invisible. I am much indebted to Professor Tristram for his valuable opinion and information on several points. Those subjects which are adequately recorded elsewhere it is unnecessary to describe in detail in the present paper; but for the sake of completeness some notes are included. The examples now to be seen in the Church are as follows:—

At the extreme East end of both clerestory walls a small area of plaster was removed, disclosing traces of colouring against the wall-brackets of the roof. Patches of a very good red are to be seen, but the composition has perished beyond hope of recognition. The clerestory was added in c. 1410, and the paintings are likely to have been of about this date. Above the Chancel arch are painted the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed, in four panels with dark red frames and styles, the two middle divisions having semi-circular arches in the apex. The characters are Roman, painted in black, and above the Commandments the text, Exodus, ch. xx., appears in red. The surround is painted to represent green-veined marble. This work is of the 17th century. The whole was covered with the Victorian plaster until February, and has been ruthlessly keyed. For this and the following painting, see Plate I. Below this there is an offset, marking the height of the nave before the addition of the clerestory, and on this older

¹ Records of Bucks, VI., 86 et seq. ² R.C. Hist. Mon., Bucks, I., 81. ³ The Bucks Vols. in Cambridge County Geographies, and Methuen's Little Guides.

wall, above and flanking the Chancel arch, is a most unusual and interesting architectural painting in black and white. The Rev. P. W. Phipps, in the RECORDS OF BUCKS, vi., p. 86, dismisses this by saying that " the battlemented drawing over the Chancel arch is curious." As a full description is given in the *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments*, I do not need to repeat it here. The execution of this design is probably contemporary with the period of the re-building of the Chancel arch (c. 1410), though it is interesting to note that the architectural details are more essentially Decorated in character than Perpendicular—evidence of a considerable overlapping of styles in the late Decorated and early Perpendicular period. The attempt at perspective in the drawing of the battlements is particularly interesting at this date. Traces of the palimpsest inscription in Black-letter, mentioned in several works, are still visible on this painting. An Elizabethan date (1564) has been suggested for this,⁴ when the "Popish Images" were ordered to be replaced by pious tests, the Commandments, etc. This lettering is also to be seen on almost all the subjects in the South aisle, but is nowhere sufficiently clear to be made out in detail.

The South aisle contains the most notable paintings. The aisle was re-built about the second quarter of the 14th century, and all the paintings are evidently contemporary with this work, as the wall-posts of the later (15th century) roof brackets obscure parts of the subjects. The whole makes a most interesting architectural and artistic sequence. I am particularly grateful to Professor Tristram for the use of his notes on the group of paintings at the East end of the aisle. This group is of especial interest, and has not previously been satisfactorily explained. The uncovering of other subjects has made a comprehensive view possible. On the North side of the East window (now opening into the organ chamber built in the 19th century) is a badly-faded subject representing St. Anne teaching the Virgin. The two nimbed figures, St. Anne on the left holding

⁴ Records of Bucks, VI., 86-7.

down a book to the Virgin, a small figure on the right in a red gown, are dimly discernible. This subject can just be seen in Plate I., through the arch on the right. S. Anne's nimbus is quite clear a little more than half-way up on the left. The figure of the Virgin, lower down on the right, can be seen just in front of the light arch-moulding. On the South of the window the subjects are very fragmentary, and represent scenes in the life of St. Catherine. They are thus explained by Professor Tristram: "Upper: St. Catherine and the Learned Man. St. Catherine is partly visible; but only the hands of the Learned Man can be seen. Lower: An angel in the upper part of the composition suggests that here, was represented the breaking of the wheel." (The Learned Man was possibly Athanasius, one of St. Catherine's masters as a child, who was afterwards converted "by her preaching and the marvellous work of our Lord."⁵ Since only one figure appears to have been represented, the scene does not seem to refer to her meeting with the Emperor Maxentius and his retinue, nor with the numerous sages sent by the Emperor to convert Catherine in prison, who were themselves converted to Christianity by the teaching of the saintly Queen.) On the South wall of the aisle are two subjects "portraying virtues of St. Catherine as patroness of learning: (1) Intercedes with the Virgin for children, possibly cripples. (2) Intercedes for a clerk. The clerk kneels before an altar on which is an image of the Virgin and Child. St. Catherine sponsors him, holding a letter or scroll with seal. No doubt the altar here was dedicated to St. Catherine; her virtues as patroness of learning are brought out in this subject, and the value of learning indicated by the subject of St. Anne teaching the Virgin." It is interesting that the Grove, and subsequently the Gardyner Chantries, were in this aisle, and it is possible that St. Catherine, and particularly in her capacity as patroness of learning, was selected for special remembrance by the mediæval Groves, in the same way that other Saints are found associated

⁵ The Golden Legend, Caxton's English trans., (Dent), VII., 2.

with certain mediæval families. St. Anne and the Virgin and some parts of the St. Catherine subjects were not visible when the Rev. P. W. Phipps suggested that one was the Virgin releasing a soul from Purgatory, and that the figure with the document and seal referred to a deed in connection with the transference of the advowson of the Church from Bradwell Abbey to the Bishop of Lincoln. The explanation was ingenious at the time, when only a part of the subjects was visible and imperfectly understood. It was, however, crude on the one hand, and extremely unlikely on the other, that a contemporary business transaction should have been perpetuated in fresco. The recent work, of course, puts an entirely different complexion on the whole question. The "black brickwork of the oven of Purgatory" is nothing more than a conventional treatment of a house, with a child looking out of the window, (See subject of the execution of St. John, below.) The figure of St. Catherine is, of course, crowned (she was a Queen, according to legend), and this should have given the clue to her identity, but since the crown is not shown in the drawing opposite p. 86 in Vol. VI. of the RECORDS, it may not have been seen at the time. The whole of this subject is particularly finely drawn, and the composition is remarkable.

Had not the central figure of this group been positively identified as St. Catherine, it might have been supposed, from the fact that the Virgin is represented three times, that the Altar was actually dedicated to the Virgin. Though, on the other hand, it is unusual to find the Lady Altar in a private Chantry Chapel.

A frieze of wavy lines in ochre extends along the entire length of the South aisle, between the wall plate and the top of the paintings, and the spaces between the top of the panels and the window arches are filled with graceful arabesques in red. A very fine fragment, in good condition, has been uncovered on the left of the middle window. (See Plate II.). It is probable that figure subjects, or at any rate



CHALFONT ST. GILES. PLATE II.

polychrome ornament, extended right round the internal window splays; but only the faintest traces of this remain here and there. Where more than one subject appears on a length of wall, division into panels is made by wavy ochre bands or lines; in fact, the paintings appear to have been framed in this way. (See particularly Plate III.).

Passing Westwards along the South aisle, there is a most interesting group of paintings, recently uncovered, on the middle section of wall between two windows. (Plate II.). Unfortunately three mural tablets and one of the wall brackets of the roof interfere seriously with the subjects, which are taken from Genesis. The centre memorial, to members of the Parker family, is of the 18th century, and was erected before the walls were damaged by Street for his disfiguring plaster, and it is hoped that the subject beneath may be in fairly good order. As soon as funds permit, a faculty will be obtained for moving this tablet to another position, and the other tablets will be lowered. The two subjects now visible are not commonly met with in wall paintings. They represent the Temptation in the Garden of Eden (left), and the Expulsion of Adam and Eve (right). In the former the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is clearly seen, with the serpent twined in its branches, offering the apple to Eve on the right. Adam stands on the left. In the latter subject the Angel with flaming sword at the top is discernible, while Adam, covering himself with a fig leaf, follows Eve out of the Garden. All but the lower part of Eve's figure is obscured by the roof timber. Just above the Parker tablet, to the left (East) of these two, a bird is visible, painted in black, suggesting that the pictures preceding those just described represent scenes in the Creation. It will be most interesting if this one panel at any rate can be recovered, so that the treatment of this rare subject may be seen. It is probably the fifth day's creation "fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven," and fishes. The preceding panels to the left of the Parker tablet have perished too far to be

made out, but no doubt once showed earlier days in the Creation.

Further Westwards occurs the best-known group of subjects in the Church, and these are comparatively well preserved. (See Plate III.). The recent work has made them even more complete and impressive. (1) At the top left occurs a most notable representation of the Crucifixion, with figures of St. Mary (left) and St. John (right). In Professor Tristram's opinion this is one of the finest paintings of its type in the country, both drawing and composition being admirable. It should be noted that the position of this painting is unusual. It is generally found over the chancel arch, or behind, or in close proximity to an altar. (2) Beneath this, and evidently connected, is a rare subject only recently identified. It represents the Resurrection. The central figure is Christ emerging from the tomb, holding the Vexillum, while the figure at the right-hand side, finely drawn, appears to be one of the Mary's. The background to the Crucifixion is powdered with crosslets, in red, and the lower subject has six-point stars. (3) On a level with the Resurrection panel, and on the right, is another subject also only recently recognised in full. It shows the beheading of John the Baptist. The background is alternated with the others, and is powdered with crosslets, the picture immediately above having stars again, all in red. The prison, in ochre, with round-headed door and windows of very conventional design, like the house in the first St. Catherine subject on the South wall, appears in the left background. The executioner's head is very clear. He is drawn in the usual way with long nose and demon-like features. His right hand, grasping a sword, is upraised ready to strike. Only faint portions of the kneeling figure of St. John can be seen. Salome, meanwhile, stands by on the right side with the dish, ready for the head. (4, 5) The subjects above, treated in one panel without division, showing her presenting the head to Herod (who puts his hand before his eyes in horror), and Herodias, and the performance of her dance in front of the table laid



CHALFONT ST. GILES. PLATE III.

for the feast, are sufficiently described elsewhere. Additional portions have, however, been recently brought out, thus making the scenes extraordinarily complete.

The paintings still continue Westwards. Above the South door a badly-faded fragment was uncovered, but was in too poor condition to be positively identified. The large space between the South door and the West window of the aisle was found to have contained a further remarkable subject, a Tree of Jesse. This was too indefinite to photograph satisfactorily. When complete, this painting must have measured not less than about 12ft. x 8ft. Professor Tristram declared that, had it been in better condition, it would undoubtedly have been one of the finest examples in the kingdom. It is tragic when one reads in the Rev. P. W. Phipps' account, already quoted, that this end of the aisle was walled off and used as a vestry before the present one was built in 1861, and that "the walls in this part of the aisle were covered with frescoes, *which it was found impossible to preserve.*" (the italics are mine). The greater part of the left-hand side of the composition has been destroyed by the wall mentioned above, and Street has done his worst to wreck the remainder. The Jesse Tree is often met with in mediæval glass, and not infrequently in the stonework of windows (we have a glorious example of the latter quite near at Dorchester), but in wall painting it is rare. The figure of Jesse at the base has faded, but the Virgin and Child at the apex of the Tree, many of its branches, its foliage and a few bright flowers, and fragmentary figures of Prophets and others holding scrolls may dimly be made out.

When Street came to "restore" the Church the paintings must have been in quite good order, and the old plaster must have been of the same exquisite tone and texture of old ivory that it still is today, in spite of time and man's destroying hand. It is incredible, first, that he should have disregarded the paintings, and, second, that he should have preferred a dull grey cement plaster to the splendid

surface and warm tone of the ancient plaster, even if the paintings had perished. Yet he hacked and scraped and plastered all indiscriminately. The Victorians regarded mediaeval wall paintings as mere curiosities, unworthy a place in the decoration, of God's House. The best preserved were sometimes allowed to remain as quaint memorials to the "primitive" craftsmen, and to excite the superior amusement of an "enlightened" age. Their crudeness of line and colour (and sometimes subject!) offended the decorous dullness and precision of the Victorian tradition in painting and Church decoration. Their archæological value, and their supreme value as specimens of native English mediæval art, were quite lost sight of, or rather never grasped. In how much better condition these specimens might have come down to us is instanced by another remark in Mr. Phipps' paper. He says that as long ago as 1887, "Unfortunately the frescoes are fading," and yet nothing was done about it for forty-two years. However, enough of these gloomy thoughts. The paintings are now well cared for, and a general appreciation of such things is everywhere increasingly apparent.

A few observations on these paintings as a whole may not be out of place. It is clear, from the evidence, that the whole Church was once covered with a complete series of paintings, as had been the case at Little Kimble, Little Horwood, Broughton and elsewhere. Since the finest subjects occur in the South aisle in the neighbourhood of a Chantry altar, it is probable that the 14th century lords of the Grove Manor employed, at their own expense, skilled artists to execute this decoration, selecting, in all probability, the family's patron saint for special reverence. Judging from the treatment of these subjects, and of some others in the aisle, it seems probable that the matter was derived from, the Golden Legend, the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, written in Latin about the year 1275. This work (reference to Caxton's English translation of it has already been made) is a delightful, though highly apocryphal,

account of the lives of Saints, and other matters, and the subjects and incidents contained in it, are frequently used in mediæval decoration of all kinds: in glass and fresco, stone and alabaster and wood carving. It is, in fact, one of the principal sources of inspiration in mediæval art.

The general allusion to learning and knowledge as shown in the group of subjects at the East end of the South aisle is most interesting.

The whole of the work is of a high order, and suggests a group or Guild of artists, established possibly in London, and working from thence, rather than the ordinary itinerant artist or monk. The work is certainly not local. That a similar Guild or school, painting series of subjects derived from the Golden Legend, was still in existence a century or so later is suggested by the occurrence at Eton College Chapel of a remarkable series of paintings of late 15th century date, the references to the sources in Vincent de Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, and the *Legenda Aurea* being given below the various subjects.

Especially noteworthy at Chalfont St. Giles are: the hands of the Learned Man in the upper St. Catherine subject on the East wall of the aisle. They are finely drawn, and convey at once an attitude of argument, explanation or entreaty: The figure of St. Catherine herself interceding for the clerk, admirable as to drapery and other details: The Crucifixion, the finest painting in the Church: and the Jesse Tree, for rarity and the size of the composition is of great importance. The fact that two trees—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which might be called the tree of death, or mortality, and the Tree of Jesse, which might be called the Tree of Life, since it led to the Saviour who, by His own death, ensured our everlasting life—occur in the same series of paintings, is perhaps worth noticing, as a further example of the thought and symbolism with which the mediæval craftsman set out his scheme of decoration. My attention was first called to this circumstance by the present Rector, the Rev. H. O. F Whittingstall.

It is now being realised that English wall painting of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries are, in their way, as valuable as the "primitives" (oil paintings on wood or copper) of other countries to be seen in the Churches, Museums and Art Galleries of Europe, and that they take an important place in the artistic development of this country. With the notable exceptions of the masterpieces of Italy, and some fine examples in Spain and France, no other country can exhibit the wonderful series of fresco subjects that are to be found in the Churches up and down England. As specimens of the mediæval Schools of native English art, these wall paintings are invaluable, quite apart from their archæological interest.

It is hoped eventually to purchase the cartoons made by Professor Tristram, and to place these, with descriptions, beneath each subject. Moreover, whenever money becomes available, further areas of plaster will be removed in the hope of finding more paintings, and in any event this will improve the appearance of the Church, even if the paintings themselves have perished. The removal of the Parker tablet is another hoped-for step. Meanwhile one has to be thankful for the successful preservation and revelation of a most notable set of paintings in the best manner of our 14th century artists.