

NOTES ON SOME RECENTLY - DISCOVERED MURAL PAINTINGS AT LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

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In Lipscomb's "History and Antiquities of the County of Buckingham" we find Hampden Parva described as a small parish, among and almost surrounded by woods. The situation is remarkably healthy, as shown by the great age to which members of the yeoman family of Ginger had attained, "it having been commonly reported that the head of each of four generations had arrived at the age of upwards of ninety years. The population is computed at eighty persons, with little increase or diminution during the last forty years." This description of the parish as it was sixty years ago seems fairly appropriate at the present time, its secluded position in the bosom of the Chiltern Hills having preserved it from the march of civilisation as accelerated by the influence of the Metropolitan Railway, which has induced so large an increase in the population of Great Missenden and other places in the Misbourne Valley.

The manorial history of Little Hampden is bound up with that of Hartwell, and we find that as early as the reign of Henry III. the two parishes were united together and in the possession of the Luton family, but circ. 1685 Sir Thomas Lee, the second baronet, parted with the Manor of Little Hampden to Samuel Dodd, who was afterwards knighted. It subsequently came into the hands of the Trevor family. Other lands in the parish were acquired by the family of Pye, of Faringdon, Berks, who alienated their property to the Hills and others, and are said to have followed the fortunes of the abdicated Stuarts into exile.

As regards the ecclesiastical history, although Little Hampden was from very early times a separate parish, the Church was appendant as a Chapel to the Parish Church of Hartwell, and the Rector of this parish held

seven acres of glebe in arable land and one and a half acres of woodland in Little Hampden as its incumbent. Lipscomb quaintly remarks: "In this Chapel, or Daughter Church, as in similar cases, it is observable that the pulpit is elevated only about two or three steps above the floor, to evince, as is presumed, its inferiority to the higher dignity of its Mother Church."

In 1891 a re-arrangement was made. Little Hampden ceased to be a Chapelry to Hartwell, which was united to Stone, and was attached to the neighbouring parish of Great Hampden, a far more convenient and sensible arrangement.

The Church or Chapel (Fig. 1) is described by Lipscomb as a very mean edifice, 38 feet in length and 15 feet wide. It consists of a nave, chancel, and north porch, with a later bell turret above it. The exact external dimensions are—Nave, 25 feet 6 inches in length by 18 feet 1 inch in breadth; chancel, 17 feet 11 inches in length by 18 feet 1 inch in breadth; porch (Fig. 2), 8 feet in breadth by 8 feet 11 inches in depth. It is composed of flint and rubble, and some of the old rough-cast remains on the exterior walls of the nave. The original date of the fabric appears to be early in the 13th century, and in the Early English style of architecture, but many later additions have been made, including a severe churchwardenizing in the 18th century. There are many interesting features, which may best be noted by a perambulation of the Church, before we proceed to describe the remarkable series of mural paintings recently discovered on the walls of the nave.

Commencing our survey in the interior of the Chancel, we notice that the east window and one on the south are new in the Decorated style; there is also a new trefoil-headed lancet on the north side, and farther west a very interesting low side window (Fig. 3). This is a very narrow lancet, with broad cross transom, leaving on the lower portion a very small and narrow oblong opening. The iron hinges for the shutter still remain. On the south side of the altar is a very remarkable piscina (Fig. 4a). It has an arch with plain hoodmould, and then a wreath of large trefoiled leaves carried round the arch and down the jambs. The

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

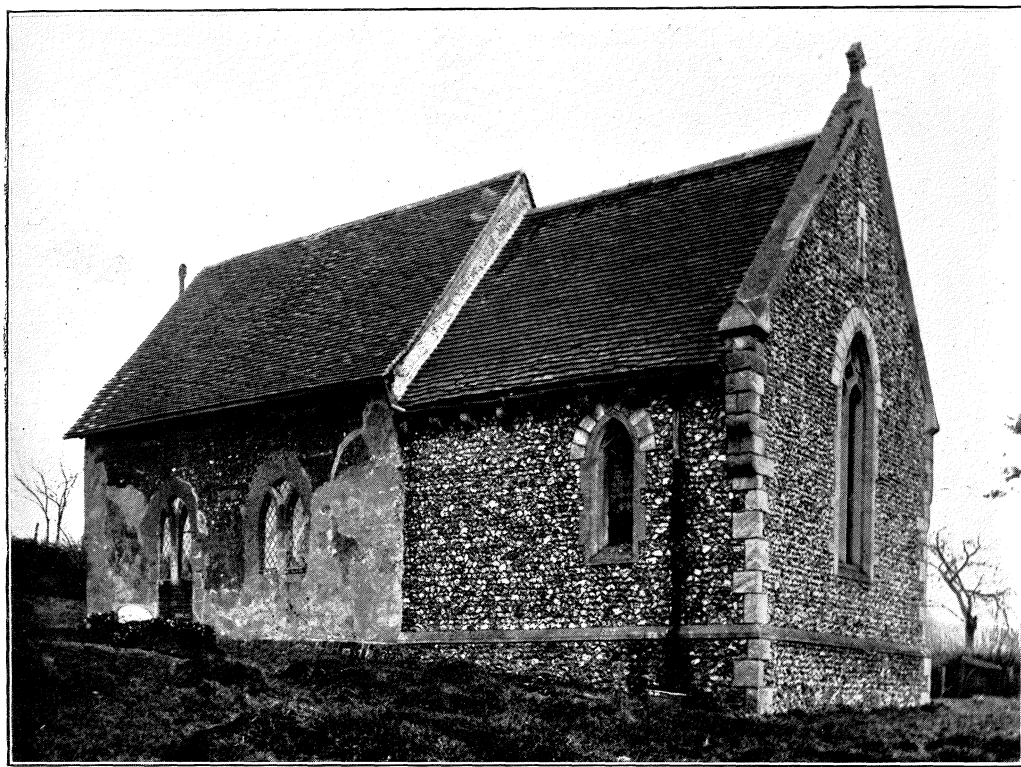


Fig. 1.

VIEW FROM SOUTH EAST.

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.



Fig. 2.

NORTH SIDE.

plain circular basin with drain still remains. Let into the south wall of the chancel is the figure (Fig. 4b) of an ecclesiastic vested in a chasuble, etc., and giving the Benediction with the right hand and holding a pastoral staff in the left. The figure is about 13 inches high, and is under a projecting canopy or ledge. Under the right arm are traces of an inscription, an N and T- I, and there may have been another inscription along the canopy. It is possibly a relic of a former church and as early as the Norman period.

Under the Communion table is preserved the old altar stone, $66 \times 30\frac{1}{2}$ inches, with the five crosses still clearly marked on it. The Communion table, rails, and some of the furniture seem to be of 18th century date. The chancel arch is plain pointed, with plain imposts; the upper part has been heightened and renewed in brick and stone. The nave has a two-light west window, and one of similar character on the south, all originally Early Decorated, but stuccoed over and altered in the eighteenth century. A second one on the south side, filling up the head of the former doorway, is also of this date. On the north wall of the chancel is a tablet to Martha Hill, died 1731, and there are some old ledger stones. The font is modern, with a small bowl on a baluster shaft. This cannot be the one mentioned by Lipscomb, and described as follows:—"The Font has a capacious basin, is octagonal, supported by a pedestal resting on a pyramidal base. On three of the pannels surrounding the basin are sculptured two quatrefoils and a shield."

The present font has recently taken the place of a very poor specimen in plaster or some sort of composition, which can hardly be that noticed by Lipscomb. The chancel roof is new, the nave roof, restored, is high-pitched with tie beams and king posts. The pulpit, open seats, lectern, etc., are of oak, but do not call for any special mention. Over the east window on south side is painted in black letter—

"Willi * * * *

"Churchwarden

"1762."

This William Wright was probably responsible for the repair and insertion of the nave windows and other mischief wrought in the old Church.

Of the exterior of the fabric not very much can be said. The eastern part of the chancel was rebuilt about 1859, in the time of the Rev. William Lowndes, then rector of Hartwell with Little Hampden, it being then in a ruinous condition. The low side window on north side has a chamfered edge to the arch, jambs, and transom.

The north doorway within the Porch has plain chamfered edge to the arch and jambs, and chamfer stops. There is one votive cross on the east jamb. The interior arch is loftier than the outer. This is part of the original structure. The porch is of timber and plaster, the outer doorway being composed of a massive single baulk of timber on each side, the head of the arch being cut out of the lintel supported by them. The low turret, with plain north window and containing one bell, is also of timber and plaster, and probably of later date. On the south side of the nave is a blocked doorway, the original jambs remaining. The lower part has been filled in with brick, the upper part with a two-light window, an imitation in stucco of those to the east of it, and in the west wall. Along the north and south walls of the chancel are a series of large stone corbels.

We now come to the description of the Mural Paintings, which were brought to light in 1907. Although somewhat obscure and fragmentary, sufficient remains to enable us to interpret some at least of the subjects which were here depicted. They are to be found on all the nave walls, and, as far as one can judge, belong to at least three, and possibly to four different periods. No doubt the fact of the one series being painted over the other made it an exceedingly difficult matter to prevent running from one layer into another while removing the various coats of whitewash and plaster, but sufficient has been discovered and preserved to justify the production of this paper from notes taken on April 1st, 1908, and January 22nd of the present year. The most remarkable and noticeable point with regard to these paintings is that

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

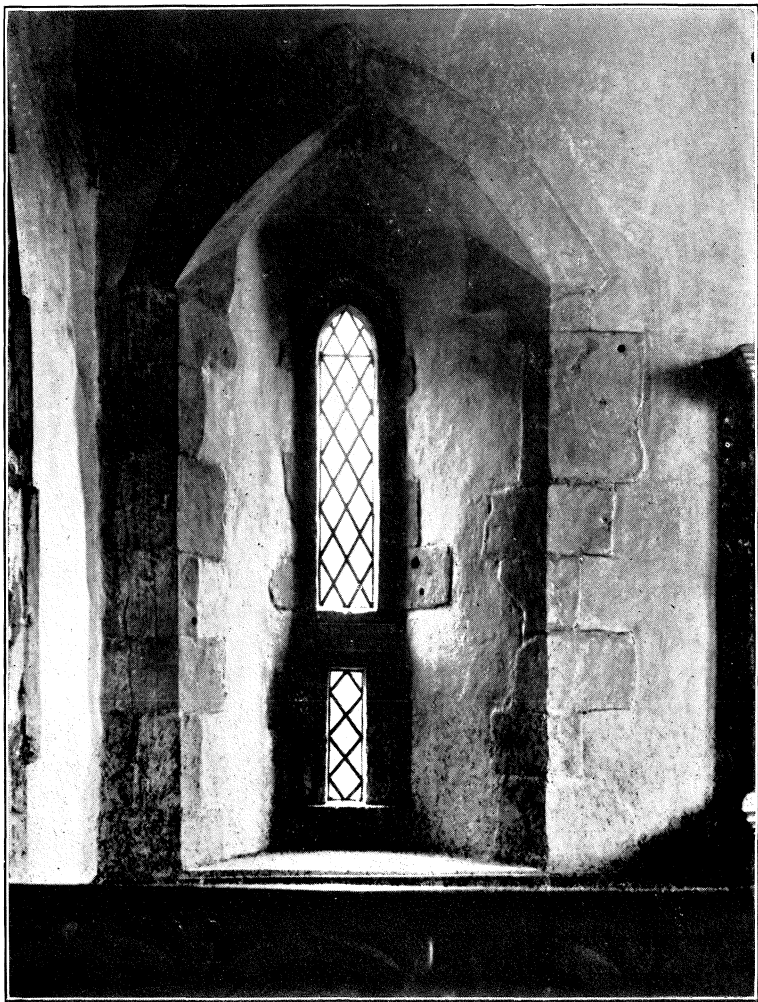


Fig. 3.

THE LOW-SIDE WINDOW.

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

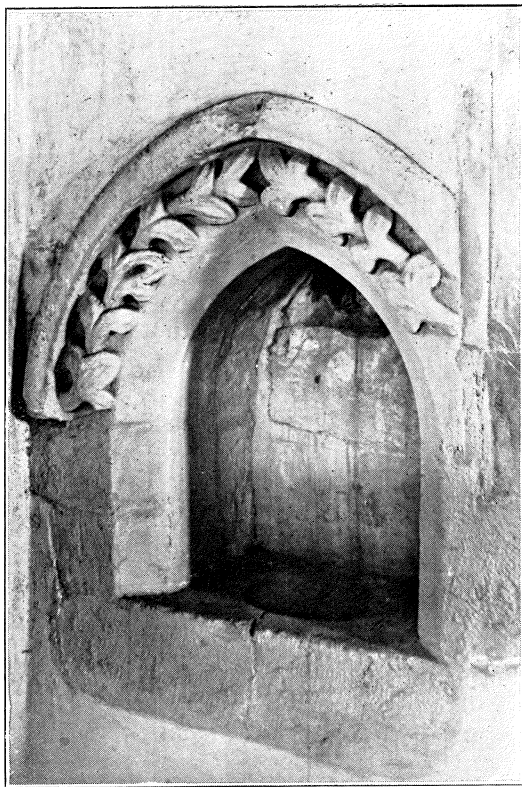


Fig. 4a.

THE PISCINA.



Fig. 4b.

EFFIGY OF AN ECCLESIASTIC.

the great legendary morality, St. Christopher, has been depicted no less than four times on various portions of the north and south walls. Various instances can be cited where two representations of this most popular saint have been found in the same Church—for instance, at Poughill, in Cornwall, where they still remain; but, as far as is known, there is no other example of such a persistency to have an effigy of St. Christopher always on the church walls, so that, according to the ancient superstition, the residents could have the opportunity of looking on the portrait of the saint, and thus be safe from a violent death on that day. It will be unnecessary to give the legend of St. Christopher on the present occasion, as it has been set out by the writer of this paper and many others. It is sufficient to say it was at first intended to demonstrate the lesson of pride and great strength and self-reliance being conquered by comparatively small means, and thus, in the person of the mighty and self-confident warrior, and, after his conversion, the meekest of martyrs, St. Christopher, became an object of veneration in the Middle Ages, especially among the civilian classes. It was therefore only natural that the portrait of this saint, generally of very large dimensions, should be depicted in some conspicuous situation in almost all our English Churches.

As has been stated, there are possibly four series of paintings at Little Hampden Church. The earliest are on the east wall of the nave, and are on a deep red ground. Next come a series on a paler red surface, and the latest series are depicted on white plaster. But both on north and south is an indistinct St. Christopher, which is certainly earlier than the last series, and may be distinct from those executed on the pale red surface. It was quite the ordinary custom in old times to paint one set of subjects over another, without any respect being shown for the earlier work, and several instances of this have been noted in the Buckinghamshire Churches. We will now start with the east wall, and work round the nave, as the most convenient method of describing the paintings.

On the east wall (Fig. 5) have been four Bishops, two on each side of the chancel arch, but the inner pair

were mainly destroyed when the chancel arch was raised. Only the head of the inner on south side now remains. The figures are not nimbed, and are in full episcopal vestments, with plain low mitres. The colour has unfortunately mainly perished, and the various details cannot now be made out. Each figure is under a rounded trefoiled arch on shafts with plain capitals. The Bishop on the south side is about 4 feet high, while the one on the north is about 3 feet 6 inches. Above and below are remains of a very nice scroll border in red. The general groundwork is a deep Indian red, and there is no doubt that here we have a portion of the original scheme of decoration of the early part of the 13th century. Above the chancel arch is some pale red colouring.

Turning now to the north wall, we notice the groundwork of the lower part, and the space at the upper north-east corner is pale red. On this latter portion can be made out outlines of pomegranates, or some similar ornaments. Below this are parts of two lions facing west. Only the tail and front paw of the eastern one remain, but the west one is more distinct, the head, front paw, and tail being clearly discernible. Between them and the doorway are two figures in a fair state of preservation (Fig. 6). Both are outlined in red, with tunic and cloak and deep red nimbus. St. Paul, on the east, holds a book in the left hand, and the point of a sword with the hilt upwards in his right. St. Peter, to the west, holds a book in the right hand, and two large keys held up in his left. The figures are about 3 feet high, and they date from about the middle of the 13th century. Painted over these figures, and covering a considerable portion of the north wall, has been a large picture of St. Christopher (Fig. 7). An irregular red line on each side forms a border to the picture. At the top is the head of St. Christopher. He wears a kind of orle or turban, has yellow hair and long beard outlined in red. His vestment is not clear, and the whole of the lower part is gone. It must have been nearly 10 feet high. He is facing eastwards, and on his left arm is seated the Infant Christ. He also has yellow hair outlined in red, is giving the Benediction with the right hand, and holding the orb in

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

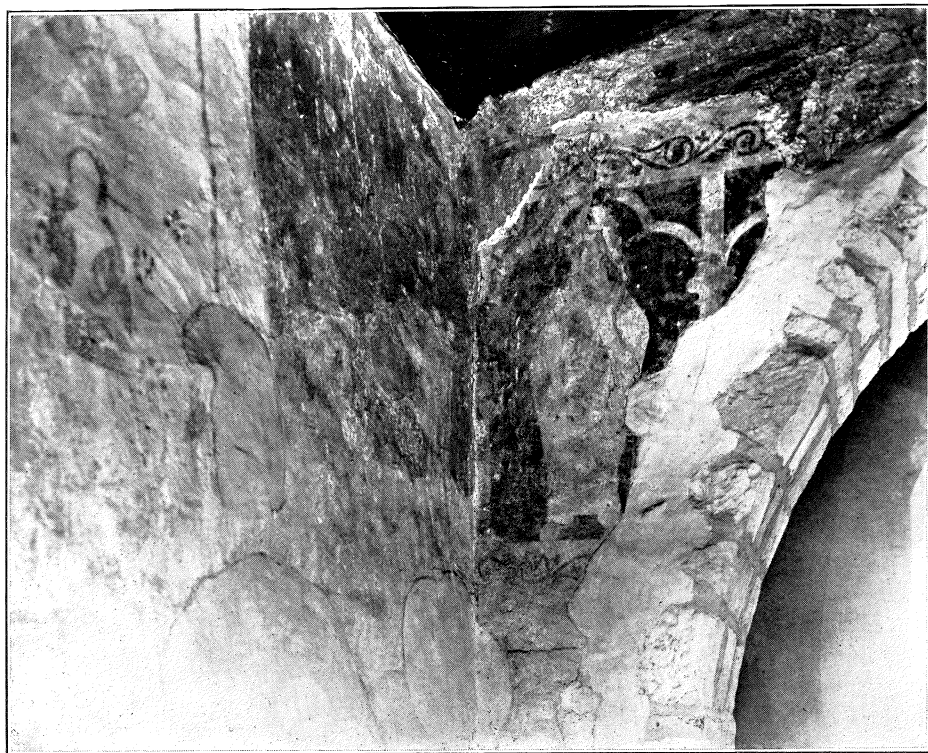


Fig. 5.

NORTH EAST WALL OF NAVE.

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.



Fig 6.

S.S. PETER AND PAUL.

the left. Neither He nor St. Christopher have the nimbus round the head. Below the figure of our Lord is a small figure of a lady, kneeling, and with white tunic, red hair, and long red cloak. Can this be a portrait of the donor of the picture, as we often find in similar representations? This subject belongs to the latest series, and is of 15th century date. All the wall in connection with this picture has been decorated with a diaper of small red roses.

To the west of St. Christopher is a large arm grasping a long yellow staff. This does not seem to belong to the last-mentioned subject, as it is too low and too far away from the main figure, and on a closer examination of the wall the faint outlines of another large head, bare and with yellow hair, below that with the turban, can be made out. This, no doubt, if connected with the arm and staff, was another representation of Saint Christopher, for some reason painted over to make way for the later portraiture. Over the north doorway has been another subject, but the only object discernible is the head and hands of a lady. She is sitting down, but her dress is only faintly visible. She is holding a small object in the left hand, and extends the right over it. The figure is of small size, and probably of the 15th century period.

On a lower level (Fig. 8), and to the west of the doorway, is another St. Christopher, painted on the pale red ground. He is portrayed as a tall, thin man about 7 feet high, bearded, with yellow nimbus outlined in red, red tunic and sleeves, and white cloak, with the folds round the waist and below the knees marked in red lines. The lower parts of his legs are bare, and in the water, in which are three fish. He holds a red wand or staff, with a ball and cross at the top, in his right hand. His left arm and the figure of our Lord are not now visible, but the right hand, in attitude of benediction, and the arm enclosed in a red sleeve of the Infant Christ, have been preserved. This is a very early example of a portraiture of St. Christopher, and probably dates from the latter part of the reign of Henry III. This monarch seems to have introduced the veneration for this Saint into this country, and

ordered a representation in glass to be inserted in his palace at Winchester. A very similar and equally early example was found some few years ago at Stanford Dingley Church, near Reading, but was considered grotesque, and ruthlessly destroyed. The Saint increased in popularity throughout the 14th, 15th, and early 16th centuries, and a large number of portraits of him, many of gigantic size, have been brought to light from beneath the whitewash, so bountifully applied by the custodians of our churches in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

On the west wall underneath the window is an indistinct subject with the pale red groundwork. The hind-quarters of an animal, and a human figure bending over towards the south, can perhaps be made out at the north end, and some diaper work in red, and possibly the ridge of a roof, in the centre of the picture. It is hazardous to do more than suggest that here may have been a representation of the Nativity.

The painting on the south wall (Fig. 9) is very fragmentary, though enough remains to prove that here was depicted the subject of the Doom, or Great Day of Judgment, painted over another representation of St. Christopher. At the east end is some of the pale red colouring, and probably the pomegranate ornament to match that on the north side. The St. Christopher is between the two windows, and is naturally much injured by the later layer of plaster and painting. Of the Saint himself, a large nimbed head is visible, part of his garment, and a large yellow staff, which has sprouted out with leaves at the top, grasped to the west of him in his left hand. There may be some fish in the water near his feet. The Infant Christ is seated on his right shoulder, almost behind his head, and no doubt in the usual attitude of Benediction, but the arms are not visible. The date of this painting seems to be late in the 14th century. It is singular that it should have been obliterated for the sake of another subject, as it is in the usual place, facing the main entrance to the Church, as the north doorway undoubtedly was. Whatever the motive, there can be no question that in the 15th century it had to make way for the more

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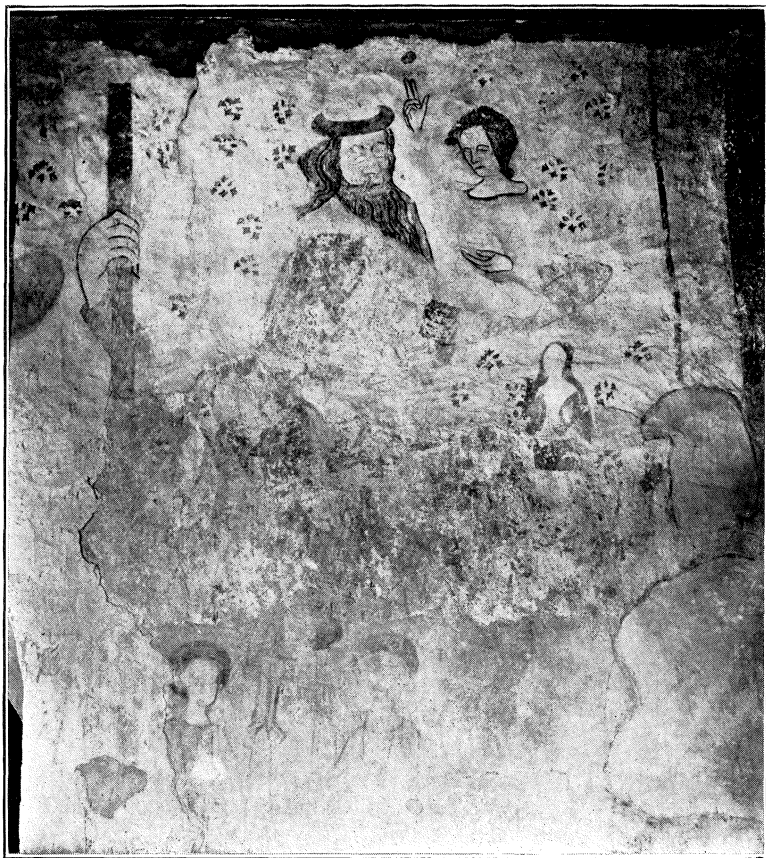


Fig. 7.

NORTH WALL OF NAVE.

LITTLE HAMPDEN CHURCH.

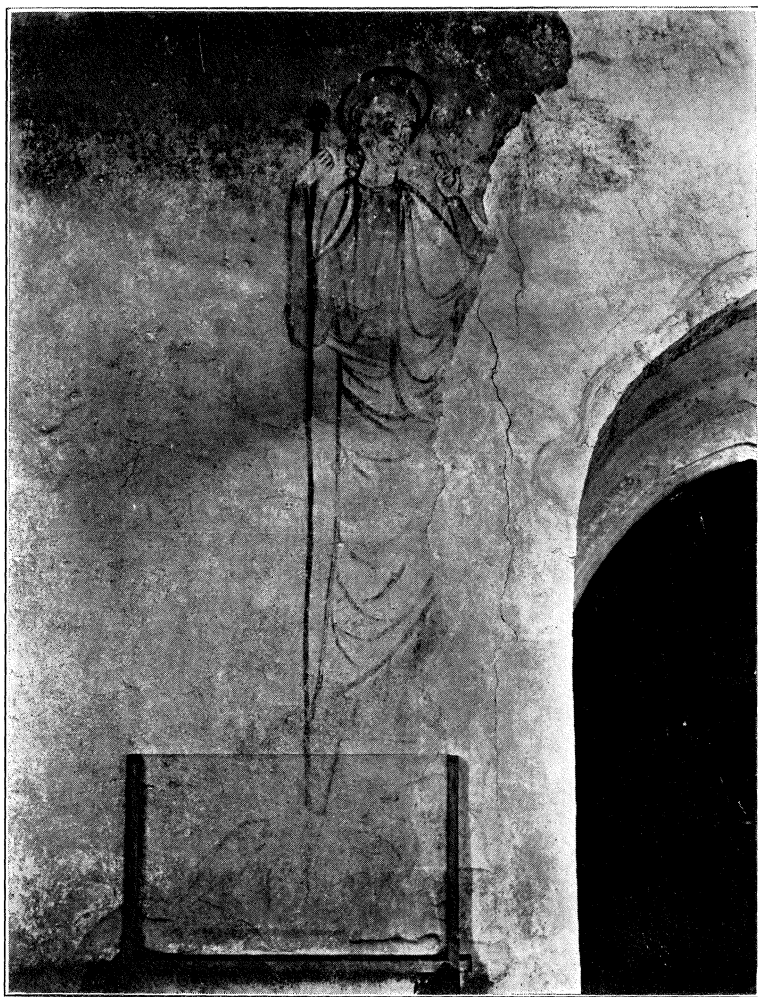


Fig. 8. THE EARLIEST ST. CHRISTOPHER.

dramatic subject of the Doom, and a new St. Christopher was painted on the opposite north wall. At this period the south doorway was in use, and may have been utilised as the principal entrance. Of the Doom picture only a few fragments remain, those portions between the windows being mixed up with the St. Christopher. At the east side are the heads of two ugly demons, and farther west a large naked bearded demon, squatting down and holding a dart in his right hand and a spear or rake in his left. Above the figure of St. Christopher is a female head, and it may be suggested that here was a figure of pride, and that the demon with dart and rake was forcing her into the jaws of hell, formerly represented below. To the west of the demon is a small figure of a female, apparently kneeling in a devotional attitude. Over the west window on the south side, formerly the doorway, is the representation of St. Michael weighing souls, usually introduced in connection with the subject of the Doom. It is not very clear, but the figure of the Archangel can be discerned in a red garment holding the balances in his left hand. These are painted yellow. On the west end of the beam is standing a demon, painted yellow, and with long tail, trying to press down the scale below, in which is another demon representing the evil deeds of the soul which is being weighed. The scale at the east end cannot be clearly seen, but close to where it was is a female figure in white dress and red cloak. This is no doubt intended for the Blessed Virgin Mary, interceding on behalf of the soul. She has apparently touched the beam with her hand or a rosary, with the result that the scale containing the good deeds has outweighed that containing the demon, and the soul is saved. The origin of the legend of the Virgin appearing to intercede on a soul's behalf is told in the 34th volume of the "Archæological Journal," by the late Mr. J. G. Waller, when describing a similar painting discovered at Slapton Church, Northamptonshire. It is by no means an uncommon subject, and there is an excellent example remaining at South Leigh, Oxfordshire. In the painting at Little Hampden the main figures are from one-third to one-half life size, and the sub-

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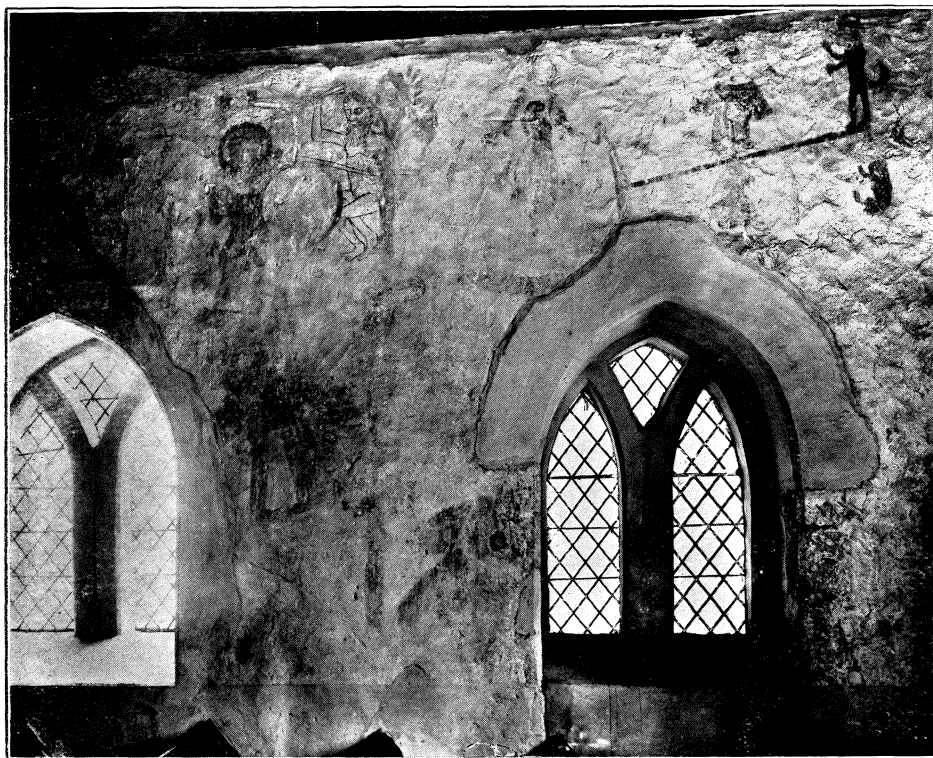


Fig. 9.

SOUTH WALL OF NAVE.

ject is painted on a layer of white plaster of the 15th century series. There is no trace of any figure of our Lord as the Great Judge, but this must have been somewhere near the east end of the picture.

The subject of the Doom is generally found over the chancel arch, sometimes extending along the north and south walls, and it is very unusual to find it wholly represented on a side wall. It is impossible to conjecture the motive which induced those who had control of the building to paint this subject in this situation, over that of St. Christopher, which, in accordance with the general rule, was so appropriately occupying the space facing the principal entrance. Another question may arise as to who were the artists who executed these paintings. A certain amount of ability was required, and, though somewhat rude, the pictures exhibit some merit, and were effective for the educational purposes for which they were designed. Mr. Waller suggests itinerant painters travelling the country, and obtaining orders to decorate the walls of churches with various subjects. Others think that the monks were sent out to do the work. This will hardly be likely in this case, as no monastery had any property in Little Hampden. A third and more probable conjecture is that the painting may have been executed by the resident Priest, a man of culture, and with plenty of leisure time to devote to this kind of work; and it is a fact that some of the most interesting series of mural paintings have been found in very small and out of the way Churches. Whoever, then, may have been the artists at Little Hampden, the results of their several labours will, it is hoped, be deemed of sufficient interest to justify the production of this somewhat superficial description.

It only remains to remark, in conclusion, that at the neighbouring Church of Great Hampden there are traces through the whitewash on the nave walls of a very extensive series of paintings, which, we trust, may be carefully explored before long.