

# Widford Wall-paintings: More new Decipherments

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## SUMMARY

*Among the 14th-century wall-paintings at St. Oswald's Church, Widford, that of the Three Living and the Three Dead is the best known and most fully documented. It was usual for wall-paintings of this Morality originally to include scrolls on which were inscribed what was being said by the protagonists, but it has hitherto been accepted the inscriptions at Widford were indecipherable, though there was some authority for thinking that they had been in Norman French. The present paper establishes, thanks to Dr. Pierre Chaplais, that the words of the Widford inscriptions are in fact in English, interspersed with Latin, and offers suggestions of what some of the words might be. On the basis of these suggestions, one of the inscriptions is what might be expected, but the others are completely without precedent where other wall-paintings of this subject are concerned, though not entirely without independent supporting evidence.*

The general background to the 14th-century wall-paintings at St. Oswald's Church, Widford, has recently been discussed in *Oxoniensia*,<sup>1</sup> and need not be repeated.

On the north wall of the chancel is a wall-painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead, a Morality of which the essence is that three men, usually Kings, to point the moral, who are out hunting meet three spectres, or skeletons, or, since the medieval artist seemed to find the latter a difficult subject, more usually what look like mummified corpses. A dialogue ensues between them, which in the original paintings would have been summarised by inscriptions on scrolls, which would emphasise the inevitability of death and the transitory nature of all human pleasures.

There are two monographs on the subject, by Dr. Willy F. Storck, published in 1912,<sup>2</sup> and the other by Miss E. Carleton Williams, published in 1942,<sup>3</sup> to which reference may be made as to the origins of the Morality, though since both were primarily concerned to produce *catalogues raisonnés* neither are very helpful on the question of its meaning; for this one must turn to Professor E.W. Tristram, who thought that the association of the Morality with the Black Death was 'almost too obvious', and that what it was really concerned with was to warn against Pride, which was itself the root cause of the other Deadly Sins. He therefore concluded that what the Morality was advocating was the virtue of Humility, Pride's opposite and remedy.<sup>4</sup>

The painting of this subject at Widford is nine feet in length and six in height (Plate 1),<sup>5</sup> and was painted in the first half of the 14th century, Miss Williams putting it at c. 1325,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Edwards, 'A Newly-Deciphered Wall-painting of St. Martin at Widford', *Oxoniensia*, xlvii (1982), 127-132.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Willy F. Storck, 'Aspects of Death in English Art and Poetry', *Burlington Mag.*, (1912), 249-256, 314-319.

<sup>3</sup> E. Carleton Williams, 'Mural Paintings of the Three Living and the Three Dead in England', *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assn.*, 3rd series, vii, (1942), 31-40.

<sup>4</sup> Professor E.W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century*, (1955), 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 265.

<sup>6</sup> Williams *op. cit.* note 3, 33.



Plate 1. Widford Church – General view of the wall-painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead.  
Ph. John Edwards (1984).

though Tristram suggests *c.* 1340.<sup>7</sup> As is not uncommon in paintings of this Morality the three Kings are young, middle-aged, and elderly respectively. E. Clive Rouse says that this is '... to reinforce the grim warning that death may overtake one ... at any time of life'.<sup>8</sup> Reading from the spectator's left, the first figure is that of the young King. There is a scroll between the right-hand side of his head and the hawk held in his left hand. The next, middle-aged King is less easy to make out, though he seems to be turning to the young King 'trying to draw his attention to the horrible skeletons'.<sup>9</sup> A vestigial scroll curves outwards and downwards from alongside the right of his head. The next, and oldest, King's age is confirmed by his white hair and flowing white beard. In his right hand he holds what appears to be a sceptre topped by a fleur-de-lys, which would seem rather unexpected in the hunting-field were it not for the fact that a similar sceptre is to be seen in a number of other representations of this subject.<sup>10</sup> His left hand is thrown up in what may be the traditional gesture of astonishment or 'to shield his eyes from the unwelcome apparition'.<sup>11</sup> From alongside his left hand a third scroll curves downward, partially obscuring the stylised tree in the background. The three Kings occupy about three-quarters of the length

<sup>7</sup> Tristram *op. cit.* note 4, 265.

<sup>8</sup> E. Clive Rouse, 'Wall-Paintings in the Church of St. Pega, Peakirk,' *Archaeol. Jnl.*, cx (1953), 135–149, at 145.

<sup>9</sup> Williams *op. cit.* note 3, 33.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Storek *op. cit.* note 2, Plates IIJ and IIJ.

<sup>11</sup> Williams *op. cit.* note 3, 33.

of the painting, leaving little room for the three Dead, though only one of the latter is any more than a shadow nowadays, while the third may even have been painted over or destroyed. The remaining dead King is probably, reading from the left, the first of the dead Kings, and is thus nearest to the living ones. He is shown in profile, looking towards the living Kings, and is thumbing his nose at them. It is made quite clear that he too is wearing a crown, whereas in most cases it is by no means certain that the Dead are intended to have been Kings in their own lifetimes. At Widford, the Dead are not given separate scrolls like those of the living Kings, but share a common panel running parallel to the ground at the height of the first one's head, starting at the left of it, passing behind it, and re-appearing to its right. The panel then continues across a second stylised tree, and is in this section cut into two by a vertical line.

The few earlier writers who even mention the scrolls are all agreed that any lettering they may once have included is now indecipherable. This is Miss Williams' view, though she also says that E.T. Long thought that originally they were written in Norman French.<sup>12</sup> The sort of speeches known to have been made by the Three Living and the Three Dead elsewhere have been summed up by Tristram as follows: 'the normal inscription, in paraphrase, above the Kings, runs "I am afeard at what I see methinketh these be devils three" – and over the Corpses: "I was once fair, but as I am so shalt thou be; for God's love be warned by me."<sup>13</sup> The paraphrase to which Tristram refers was no doubt from the de Lisle Psalter,<sup>14</sup> but reproductions of two of the wall-paintings of this subject which once had visible inscriptions are in Wall's *Medieval Wall Paintings*,<sup>15</sup> and several more in the plates illustrating Storck's article.<sup>16</sup> Miss Williams quotes several speeches from wall-paintings which no longer exist; thus at Ampney Crucis, in Gloucestershire, one of the Living said: 'Ye men ye be / This that you see';<sup>17</sup> at Belton, in Suffolk, the various living Kings said 'I wyl fle'; 'O marvellous syte ys that I see'; and 'O benedicite, what want ye?'<sup>18</sup> and at Bovey Tracey, in Devon, one of the Living said 'Byhold and see [... What we must be]'.<sup>19</sup>

Another variation was for the Morality to be inscribed with a general maxim rather than individual speeches; thus Lucan's epigram, 'Mors sceptris ligonibus equat' over the wall-painting formerly at Battle, in Sussex.<sup>20</sup>

Since it was apparent that traces of lettering still exist at Widford, the advice of Dr. Pierre Chaplais, Reader in Diplomatic in the University of Oxford, has been sought on them. He has no doubt that the language used in the inscriptions at Widford is English, interspersed with a few Latin words. He finds, however, that the inscriptions are so faint that he cannot be sure of his readings of them, so that the latter can only be regarded as suggestions. They are as follows:—

The young King: 'Holi water [abbreviated] ?ri[se] ...' (Plate 2)

The middle-aged King: Indecipherable.

The old King: '... ?[b]e[n]ed[ici]te ψh[at] ...' (Plate 3)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 33n.

<sup>13</sup> Tristram op. cit. note 4, 114.

<sup>14</sup> J.C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings*, (?1914), 205.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Figs. 88, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Storck op. cit. note 2, Pls. I & II and opposite 314.

<sup>17</sup> Williams op. cit. note 3, 38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Wall op. cit. note 14, 207, translated as 'Death levels sceptres with mattocks', and see Fig. 89.



Plate 2. The young King's inscription. Ph. John Edwards (1984).



Plate 3. The old King's inscription. Ph. John Edwards (1984).



Plate 4. The Dead Kings' inscriptions. Ph. John Edwards (1984).

The two panels to the right of the Dead King:—

'Mortail  
[a]re oure sones'

'Semper [abbreviated] . . .  
of our ?[an]  
cester [or cestor]' (Plate 4)

Dr. Chaplais comments that a word like 'remember' is needed after 'semper', but that there is nothing visible. He concludes by mentioning that, at least so far as the lettering is concerned, a later dating in the 14th century than the *c.* 1325 put forward by Miss Williams would be safer; Tristram also preferred a later dating.

The striking result of Dr. Chaplais's suggested readings is that whereas the words spoken by the old living King are completely within the canon, those of the young King, together with those of the Dead, are quite unprecedented in wall-paintings.

Dealing first with the old King's speech, the words suggested for him echo those from the wall-painting at Belton already mentioned, 'O benedicite, what want ye'. Moreover, reference to the photograph in Storck's article of the Belton painting as it once was,<sup>21</sup> shows that, as at Widford, the King who says this at Belton is also the oldest, is bearded, and is the king nearest to the Three Dead.

As to the words of the young King, though these are without precedent, there is nevertheless a certain propriety in his call for holy water on first sight of the Dead, since if his reaction to them is the usual one, already quoted from Tristram, of 'Methinketh these

<sup>21</sup> Storck *op. cit.* note 2, Plate IE.

be devils three', he might well have in mind its use for the purpose of exorcism.<sup>22</sup> A miniature showing holy water being thus used is included in *Pontifical Cod.* 32, carta 28; the priest in it is shown using an aspergillum and a very large bowlful.<sup>23</sup>

It has not been suggested in any wall-painting of which the present writer is aware that the Three Dead were the fathers of the Three Living, as the words 'Mortail are oure sones' would imply. If this is in fact the case, however, is it likely that the leader of the Dead Kings would be thumbing his nose at the Living ones, either in his capacity as a father or as one come from the grave with a message of literally deadly gravity? Here one is confronted with the usual difficulty facing a commentator on medieval wall-paintings, namely, that there is no certainty that what is now to be seen has any necessary connection with what was originally painted. The Widford paintings were whitewashed over at the Reformation: equally plausible theories can be suggested for a last-minute alteration of the painting so as to convert the leading Dead King's posture into a gesture of contempt for all that medieval wall-paintings stood for, carried out by one of the iconoclasts; or the embodiment by a supporter of the old religion of his opinion of the monarchy; in either case safely disappearing under the whitewash until it began to be uncovered in 1905.<sup>24</sup> It is also possible, during the early part of the 80 years which have elapsed since then, that some 'restorer' might have thought that some fortuitous arrangement of the Dead King's arms suggested the insulting gesture, which, with no realisation that this might be a painting of fathers and sons, he would assume to be merely another aspect of the macabre in medieval art. One is encouraged in the belief that the nose-thumbing might not have been in the original wall-painting by reason of the fact that of the 15 illustrations of examples of this Morality in Storck, Miss Williams, and both the Rouse articles,<sup>25</sup> in 12 cases are all three Dead visible in their entirety and none are doing so; in two cases so little remains of them for it to be impossible to come to any opinion; while in only one, at Tarrant Crawford,<sup>26</sup> is there a possibility, but no more, of a similar gesture.

It has to be conceded that there is in any event no hint of the Dead being fathers of the Living in the version of the Morality on an English basis in the de Lisle Psalter quoted in Storck,<sup>27</sup> nor in his article generally, nor in the Rouse articles nor that of Miss Williams, nor in the volume of Tristram which deals with the 14th century.

It will, however, be remembered that the Widford painting shows the only remaining representative of the Dead to be wearing a crown (so that it is a reasonable assumption that the other two Dead were crowned also) thus indicating the necessary rank to have had Kings for sons. This was moreover exceptional; in the 11 illustrations to Storck's article, only two show the Dead as crowned.<sup>28</sup>

In what may be the earliest English poem on the subject of this Morality to survive,<sup>29</sup> there are lines in which the first of the Dead speakers says in reply to the usual reaction by the Three Living to himself and his dead companions (with the lettering modernised):

<sup>22</sup> *Encyc. Brit.*, (15th edn.), v (Chicago, 1973-74), 100, 101.

<sup>23</sup> M. Bishop, *Penguin Book of the Middle Ages*, (1971), 170, 392n.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards op. cit. note 1, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Rouse op. cit. note 8, and Rouse and Dr. A. Baker, 'The Wall-Paintings at Longthorpe Tower...', *Archaeologia*, xcvi (1955), 1-57.

<sup>26</sup> See Rouse op. cit. note 8, Plate xxxviiD for an illustration of the Tarrant Crawford version of the Three Living and the Three Dead.

<sup>27</sup> Storck op. cit. note 2, 255.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Pls. I, II, and opposite 314.

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary E. Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, (1968), 346.



Nay, are we no fyndus [fiends], quoth furst, that ye before you fynden,  
We were your faders of fold [old] that fayre you have fondon<sup>30</sup>

This poem is usually attributed to John Audelay, but the only date known in relation to him is that he was writing in 1426,<sup>31</sup> at least three-quarters of a century after the latest date assigned to the Widford painting. Miss Woolf, though doubting the authorship of the poem, does not question that it is a work of the 15th century; indeed, she regrets that this is so, saying that 'the early fourteenth century style would have been yet better suited to the subject, and it is a pity that either no poem on this theme was then written or at least that none survives'.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the Widford inscription suggests that there was in fact a 14th-century version, of which a fragment survives at Widford.

Tentative though much of the foregoing must necessarily be, the position now reached can be summarised as a tangible advance on the previous state of knowledge about the inscriptions on the wall-painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead at Widford, since it is now clear that the language is English, with Latin words interspersed. As to the words, it has been emphasised that they are only suggestions, but those attributed to the old King are so much in conformity with the general canon, and in particular with the similar words and iconography formerly at Belton, that there is every likelihood that the suggested interpretation is correct. A plausible explanation can be put forward for the words suggested for the young King, even though it means that, so far as is known, such a speech from him would be unique. Of the two groups of words suggested for the Dead, the possibility, in relation to the first group of words, namely, that the Dead were the fathers of the Living, is at least paralleled by the later poem attributed to Audelay, but the second group of words, as to the 'ancestor', remain enigmatic.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Not for the first time has Dr. Chaplais come to the assistance of a contributor to *Oxoniensia*,<sup>33</sup> but on the present occasion it is more a question of coming to the rescue, since it will be obvious that this article could not have been written without him. The writer of it would like to express his profound admiration for the skill and patience Dr. Chaplais has shown in arriving at these readings, his only regret being that he was unable to persuade Dr. Chaplais to undertake its authorship.

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<sup>30</sup> Ella K. Whiting, ed., *The Poems of John Audelay*, E.E.T.S., 184, (1931), 221, lines 92, 93. In a note to line 93 on 258, it is explained that the use of 'fold' for 'old' is purely for the sake of alliteration.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Introduction, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf op. cit. note 29, 346 n. 5, 347.

<sup>33</sup> M.R. Airs & J. Rhodes, 'Wall-Paintings from a House in Upper High Street, Thame.', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1980), 247, 257.