

The Kelmscott Wall-Paintings

By JOHN EDWARDS

SUMMARY

The medieval wall-paintings in the north transept of St. George's church, Kelmscott, have not hitherto been considered in much detail nor as a whole. The present article seeks to remedy this and to draw attention to the uncommon emphasis placed by the Kelmscott artist on the provision (except where the Doom is concerned) of an elaborate but uniform setting for the individual paintings. Some new identifications are put forward for the sequence on the east wall, while paintings on the north and west walls, not previously identified, are now shown to give Oxfordshire its sole examples of purely Old Testament subjects in pre-Reformation wall-paintings.

A part from traces of a scroll-pattern on the arches of the nave, the wall-paintings at Kelmscott, uncovered at some time between 1883 and 1901,¹ are concentrated in the north transept. Most writers have dated them to the early 14th century, though Keyser thought they were late 13th.²

In its original state, the whole scheme for the painting of the north transept (with the exception of the Doom over the north window which would hardly have lent itself to this treatment and will therefore be excluded from this study) must have presented, in at least three tiers, perhaps as many as 40 different Biblical scenes, each in a compartment of mostly uniform size in a complicated setting of *trompe l'oeil* trefoil arches, repeated wavy lines, intricate scrolls, and, in the spandrel of each arch, surmounting a pilaster, the head of a young, crowned, personage. Although this sort of arcading can sometimes be found elsewhere among contemporary wall-paintings, it is rare for so much to have survived as is still to be seen at Kelmscott; West Chiltington (Sussex) is one of the few comparable examples, though it is on the whole simpler and substitutes the busts of angels for the royal heads. Its scenes are those of the Annunciation leading to the Passion.

It should be added that at Kelmscott the colouring is almost entirely in the usual dark red ochre; any other colours will be mentioned where appropriate.

The East Wall

The settings for the paintings here are as described above, and their complexity can best be appreciated from Pl. 1. A vertical line runs through the middle of the right-hand pilaster and goes up through the middle of the face of the young, crowned, man in the spandrel; this was presumably used by the artist in setting out the scheme as a whole, and he subsequently never troubled, or found it impossible, to erase it.

Keyser³ and Long⁴ agree that this wall has a sequence of paintings showing the

¹ C. E. Keyser does not mention the paintings in his *List* (1883), but refers to them in his 'On Recently Discovered Mural Paintings . . .', *Arch. Jnl.* lviii (1901), 46-61, at 53-54.

² Keyser loc. cit. note 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ E. T. Long, 'Medieval Wall Paintings in Oxon. Churches', *Oxonensia*, xxxvii (1972), 86-108, at 98.



Plate 1. North transept, east wall. The former 'Herod's Feast' cycle, now identified as (reading from left to right) the Massacre of the Innocents; a pattern of stylised flowers; and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

Photo: John Edwards, 1984.

martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, including Salome dancing and the executioner bringing in the head of the Baptist on a charger. Keyser also thought that Salome was turning a somersault. If any of the scenes in Plate 1 corresponds to this latter episode, it is the first on the left, with Salome's naked figure upside down between two persons in long black garments. A body appears to be lying on the ground, though only the face can still be made out with any certainty; presumably on this interpretation it is that of St. John. Elsewhere, however, as at Chalfont St. Giles, Bucks, and Idsworth, Hants, where this scene is shown, Salome is always fully-dressed, nor does she perform her dance hemmed in by others. The present writer thinks it more likely to represent a Massacre of Innocents, where naked children are commonly shown in contemporary wall-paintings as being held upside down when being slaughtered by Herod's soldiery, here represented by the two figures in black. The body on the ground would thus be that of a child who had been killed already.

The middle compartment in Pl. 1. is now filled with stylised six-petalled flowers arranged in a circle around a similar flower placed centrally. This presents something of a problem, since although Long expressly claims to have seen three incidents in the Herod cycle, and this compartment is between two of them, it is not only obviously nothing to do with them, but is also an exception to the scheme as a whole, no other surviving compartment being used for a non-figurative subject. Yet the arrangement of flowers is evidently designed to fit the compartment in question.

The third compartment from the left in Pl. 1. is somewhat reduced in size by the window-splay, which is itself covered with what is now indecipherable painting. This compartment shows, on the left, a bearded man in a long red robe and a flat cap who is standing and holding something in front of him which could, as Keyser and Long have indicated, be St. John's head on a charger. On the other hand, the 'head' cannot now be

identified as such, while the charger is not the 'long flat dish' of the dictionary definition, since the man is holding it in his left hand by a handle; it is indeed more like St. Zita's shopping-basket at Shorthampton. Nor has the supposed executioner the distorted features and bulbous nose usually characterising such persons.⁵ To the right of him are two other faces, the right-hand one being much smaller and lower down, as if of a child, than the other two, though a child would have had no place at Herod's Feast. All these discrepancies oblige one to look elsewhere for an interpretation of the painting, and the miniature in the bottom right-hand corner of the Beatus page of the roughly contemporary Gorleston Psalter⁶ supplies the answer. The striking similarity between this miniature and the remains of the wall-painting make it clear that the latter is a Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Luke 2: 22 et seq.). The figure on the left is Joseph, carrying the offerings in his basket, and in the middle are the Virgin with the Christ-Child in her arms. Vestigial remains of the figure of Simeon are on the extreme right.

The North Wall

The Doom over the north window in the transept is not part of the overall scheme of decoration and calls for no comment apart from noting its unusual, but not unprecedented, position.

Long refers to a Visitation⁷ and Caiger-Smith to an Annunciation⁸ on this wall. The former is on the east side where, under the usual trefoil arch, two women are embracing, their hands and arms clasped around each other, one of their arms in a dark sleeve, the other's in a pale one. Their faces, close together, can still be made out. Such a subject is in itself more consistent chronologically with the subject now identified on the north wall than would have been scenes from Herod's Feast. The site of Caiger-Smith's Annunciation is less certain, particularly as the north wall, as distinct from the north window-splay, is much darker than the three compartments on the east wall already dealt with, which may be due to the remains of some early 'restorer's' use of a fixative. The left-hand side of the north wall, in line with the middle tier of paintings on the west wall still to be described, seems the most likely place for the Annunciation. If so, the Archangel is in the normal position on the right in a pink robe, his hands resting on his knees as he bends forward. His dark hair is 'bobbed', and one eye can be made out. All the painted figure of the Virgin, opposite him, seems to have been scraped off the wall deliberately, leaving only the shape of where it had once been. The outline of her hair would thus accord with Paintin's statement that 'the hair is arranged in a trinity of horns, the emblem of celestial power.'⁹

In the left-hand north window splay, again under the usual trefoil arch (Pl. 2.) is a painting of a naked man and woman, the man being on the right. Nudes are not common in medieval wall-paintings, apart from the massacred innocents already dealt with, and resurrected souls. There is no reason to suppose that the present pair are either of these; if there were an Angel of the Expulsion there could be no doubt that they are Adam and Eve, but the inclusion of such a figure is not essential to this subject, and there is to-day, at least, not an Angel in the Expulsion at Hardham, in Sussex. Since the question 'If these are not

⁵ E. Clive Rouse, 'Wall Paintings in the Church of St. Pega, Peakirk', *Arch. Jnl.*, cx (1953), 135-149, at 139 and 144.

⁶ Reproduced in R. Marks & N. Morgan, *The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting 1200-1500* (1981), Pl. 19.

⁷ Long op. cit. note 4, 98.

⁸ A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, (1963), 166.

⁹ H. Paintin, *Three Village Churches* (1913), 20. There is a copy in the Local History Department of the Central Library, Westgate, Oxford.

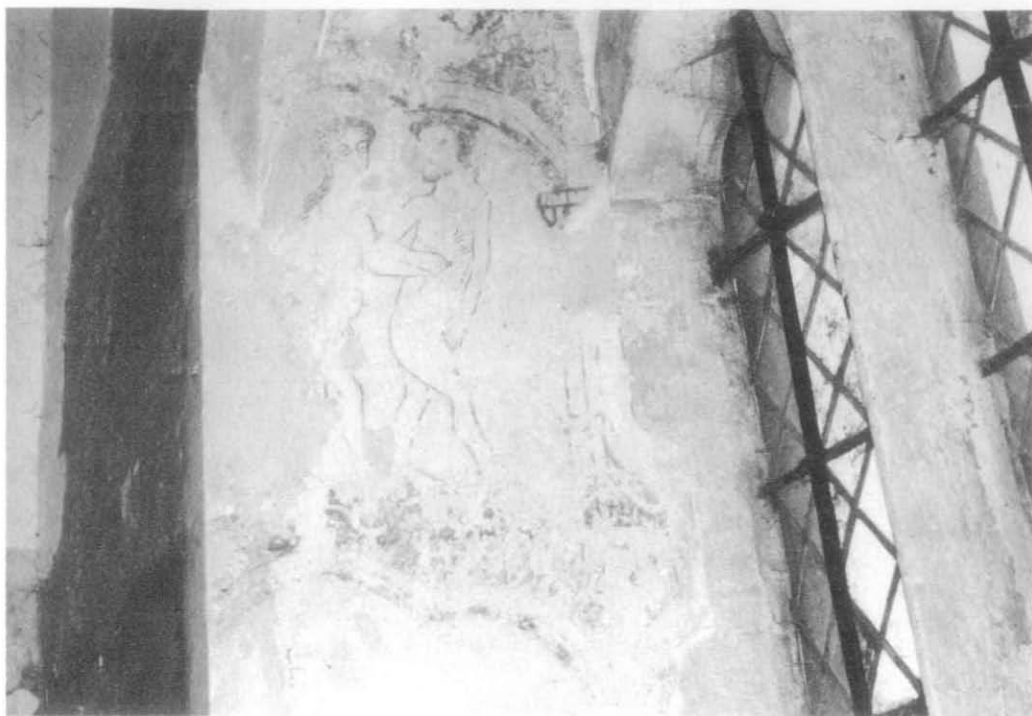


Plate 2. North transept, window-splay of north window. Adam and Eve.

Photo: John Edwards, 1984

Adam and Eve, who are they?" appears unanswerable, the present writer has no hesitation in so identifying them, walking off together arm in arm, so soon after the Expulsion that they have had no time to gather fig-leaves but are each using their disengaged hand to cover their genitals. The absence of the Angel of the Expulsion may be merely because the size of the artist's module was simply too small to get him in.

Above their trefoil arch is to be seen a vestigial face, while to the right is the usual pilaster leading down, exceptionally, to a face with a distinctly feminine look. Another trefoil arch is beneath Adam and Eve and under the top of its highest point are the vestiges of yet another face. In various other parts of the north wall and splay paintwork can still be seen, indecipherable apart from three more arches.

The West Wall

The complicated pattern above and below the three main paintings can best be appreciated from Pl. 3., together with the fragmentary remains of the tiers above and below the three compartments which are still complete in the middle tier.

The middle tier, apart from the first compartment from the southern end of the transept, which has been entirely obliterated by the wall-monument to the Rev. and Mrs. Stevens, is in a surprisingly good state of preservation. To the north of the monument the middle tier is divided into separate compartments, as on the east wall, five in this case, of which the four northerly ones are shown on Pl. 3.

The previous writers already mentioned, above, make no attempt at identification of



Plate 3. North transept, west wall: (reading from left to right) the sacrifice of Cain and Abel; the slaying of Abel; God condemns Cain.

Photo: John Edwards, 1984.

these scenes, nor does Tristram (who, surprisingly, makes no reference to Kelmscott at all in either his 13th- or 14th-century volumes,¹⁰ although entries appear in relation to it in the Notebooks of Mrs. Bardswell,¹¹ his collaborator); Hobart Bird;¹² Pevsner and Sherwood;¹³ nor the Church Guide;¹⁴ while the *V. C. H. Oxon.* has not yet published this part of the county. Interestingly, it is only the despised Arthur Mee who even ventures a description, saying 'we see a figure standing with a finger raised, one with outstretched hands, one falling to the ground',¹⁵ thereby indicating that these scenes were as clear in 1942 as they are now.

The present writer suggests that the scenes in Pl. 3. represent the story of Cain and Abel, notwithstanding that, as Kendon puts it, 'the medieval artist seems to miss innumerable opportunities; the rich mines of the Old Testament are almost untouched'.¹⁶ Of the other wall-paintings of Cain and Abel, the only examples known to the present writer, who has seen both, are at Capel (Kent) which shows the slaying of Abel in one scene and the condemnation of Cain by God in another, and at West Kingsdown (also Kent) which depicts the sacrifice of Cain and Abel and a second scene showing the slaying.

¹⁰ E. W. Tristram, *English Medieval Wall Painting: the 13th Century* (1950), and *English Wall Painting of the 14th Century* (1955).

¹¹ Victoria and Albert Museum Library, reference MSS English, c.1930-1964.

¹² W. Hobart Bird, *Old Oxon. Churches* (1932), 98-99.

¹³ N. Pevsner & J. Sherwood, *Buildings of England: Oxon.* (1974), 666.

¹⁴ Pamphlet KELM 283 in the Local History Department (see note 9). (Though having every appearance of being the sort of duplicated sheet left in churches for the information of visitors, this pamphlet bears no indication of its provenance.)

¹⁵ A. Mee, *The King's England: Oxon.* (1942), 142.

¹⁶ F. Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches during the Middle Ages* (1923), 10.

Tristram certainly refers to a third case, at East Hanningfield (Essex), which showed the same two scenes as at West Kingsdown. On the church becoming ruinous, some of its wall-paintings were removed to the Victoria and Albert Museum, but its catalogue shows that these did not include anything of the Cain and Abel paintings but one of Tristram's copies.¹⁷

Genesis 4: 2-16 explains that Cain was a 'tiller of the ground', while Abel was a 'keeper of sheep'. They made a joint sacrifice of their produce to God, which is what is happening in the left-hand compartment in Pl. 3. Reading the three compartments as a whole, it is clear that the figure on the left of the first one is Abel, dressed in a long red garment coming down to his feet; his brother's costume cannot now be made out except that, unlike Abel, he has a cowl hanging down behind his neck. Both have clean-shaven faces, the only indication that Cain is to become the first murderer being his wildly contorted hair standing up in spikes, and perhaps his blubber-lips, unlike those of his brother which are thin and pursed. In both cases the hair is yellow. The mound between them is shown in the marginal illustration to B. L. Stowe MS 17 f. 79 (c. 1300) to be an altar, on which are their respective offerings of a sheaf of corn and a sheep.¹⁸ For some reason not explained, God 'respected' Abel and his sacrifice, but did neither in the case of Cain. The Towneley mystery play of the *Killing of Abel*, however, taking as its starting point Genesis 4: 4, which credits Abel with sacrificing 'the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof', describes Cain as keeping all the best sheaves for himself.¹⁹

Cain thereupon slew Abel, which is the subject of the second scene from the left in Pl. 3. How he did so is something else not explained in Genesis, but the usual suggestion is that it was done by hitting Abel with a jawbone, as mentioned by Hamlet in Act V, Scene i, lines 84-86, probably of an ass, and it is a jawbone which is shown at Capel. Cain's hair is even more distorted in this scene at Kelmscott, and Abel is falling to the ground, as noted by Mee. The weapon is no longer visible, though the fingers of Cain's right hand are clearly clenched round something, while the whole of the space once filled by Cain's implement is now of a different hue to that of the rest of the background.

In the very next verse of Genesis after the killing of Abel, God appears and condemns Cain, which is the subject of the third scene from the left in Pl. 3. God, whose bearded face is to be seen on the left, is perhaps a somewhat slight figure, but it was not unusual for Him to be depicted in Genesis cycles as a youthful figure rather than the Ancient of Days. The point has been aptly made by Focillon, when describing the Romanesque ceiling-painting at St. Savin-sur-Gartempe of God condemning Cain, who says that it is 'the representation of God with the features of Jesus Christ.'²⁰ A fleck of paint at Kelmscott about 5 cms. to the right of the beard is possibly all that remains of the cruciferous nimbus which, as at Capel, He would be wearing, and which was reserved for members of the Trinity. Only the feet and hands can be made out of the rest of the figure. Cain's head, hands, and cowl can still be seen, but even so it can be gathered that Cain is adopting a markedly casual attitude to his Maker, if indeed he is not actually expostulating. At Capel he is even sitting down in God's presence.

Such an identification of these three scenes enables some conjecture to be made as to

¹⁷ Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th Century* (1955), 177 and 178. The relevant entries in the V. & A.'s Catalogue are the note in brackets to E. 3596-1931, and E. 3598-1931. As to the events leading to the ruination and demolition of the church, see W. & K. Rodwell, *Historic Churches - A Wasting Asset*, (1977), 16.

¹⁸ Reproduced in L. M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), Fig. 94; as to dating, see *ibid.* 37.

¹⁹ For a modern edition of this play, see P. Happé, *English Mystery Plays* (1975), 79-96.

²⁰ H. Focillon, *Peintures Romanes des Églises de France* (Paris, 1938), 27, in the present writer's rough translation.

the compartments, now indecipherable, at either end. Thus the one on the left of the sacrifice could, as at East Hanningfield, be Eve spinning and Adam delving, and indeed the left leg, bare to the knee, still to be seen in the bottom right-hand corner of this compartment is consistent with a man in a pinkish garment facing left and digging. The fragment of the fourth compartment on the right of this Plate, had it been a contemporary illuminated manuscript, would have contained the apocryphal and accidental death of Cain at the hands of Lamech.²¹

In addition to the unusually elaborate setting of the Kelmscott wall-paintings, the new identifications mean that the suggested Herod's Feast subjects must now be regarded as superseded by the Massacre of the Innocents and the Presentation in the Temple. In addition, those on the north and west walls not only provide Oxfordshire with its only examples in pre-Reformation wall-painting of subjects taken exclusively from the Old Testament, but also afford what is believed to be the sole example in the whole country of a Cain and Abel cycle in three, instead of only two, scenes.

Miss Jean M. Hamilton, Senior Research Assistant in the Department of Prints and Drawings and Photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, has been, as ever, most helpful regarding the relevant entries in the Mrs. Bardswell Notebooks, and also on the present position of the East Hanningfield paintings. Thanks are also given to Dr. E. Clive Rouse for his kindly reply to an inquiry. Particular gratitude and congratulations are due to Mr. David Park for having seen the parallel between the Presentation scene at Kelmscott and the Gorleston Psalter.

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²¹ See, for example, B. L. Add. MS 39810, f. 7, c. 1330, reproduced as Fig. 140 in Randall op. cit. note 18; as to dating, see *ibid.* 28.