

The Other Wall-Paintings at South Newington

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SUMMARY

South Newington church includes some of the most outstanding medieval wall-paintings in the country, and these are already well documented. There are, however, other wall-paintings in the church which have an interest of their own, and it is with these that the present paper deals.

The wall-paintings in the church of St. Peter ad Vincula, South Newington, which have hitherto attracted attention are those painted c. 1330, comprising a Virgin and Child and a St. James the Great, both with donors, an Annunciation, a St. Margaret of Antioch with dragon, and, apparently unique in this medium, a painting linking the martyrdom of St. Thomas of Canterbury in 1170 with what is almost certainly the execution of Thomas, earl of Lancaster in 1322 – a 'remarkable piece of pious propaganda'¹ in support of ultimately unsuccessful attempts to secure the latter's canonisation as a political saint. All these paintings, highly unusual in that they were carried out in an oil medium instead of the usual *fresco secco*, and in their depiction of donors, have been dealt with most adequately by the late Professor E.W. Tristram and others,² and nothing need be added save that conclusive proof of the identification with Lancaster is lacking, despite the modern tendency to take it for granted.

The fame of these paintings has tended to obscure the interest of the others in the church, to which the rest of this paper will be devoted. It is proposed to deal with them in the following groups: (i) a largely lost Doom and adjoining paintings, including what is probably an Annunciation; (ii) three Trinity Trees with shields; and (iii) a Passion cycle.

(i) Some of the paintings were described by Tristram as including a Doom over the chancel arch, with all the usual details, to the north of which was part of a St. John the Baptist and traces of what was probably another Virgin and Child, while 'on the upper part of the [north nave] wall, adjacent to the arch, are the remains of two unidentifiable figures, and of two shields, one charged with three cups or chalices, the other apparently with a chevron. All these works are much damaged . . .'.³

¹ A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (1963), 94.

² E.W. Tristram, 'The Wall Paintings at South Newington', *Burlington Mag.* lxii (1933), 114–129; Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th Century* (1955), 70–73, 226–29; Caiger-Smith, op. cit. note 1, 93–4; E.T. Long, 'Medieval Wall Paintings in Oxon. Churches', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 100–1; J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Oxon.* (1974), 771–3; *V.C.H. Oxon.* xi, 157; P. Binski, 'Style and Date', in C. Norton et al., *Dominican Painting in East Anglia* (1987), 74–6.

³ Tristram (1955), op. cit. note 2, 226–27.

These paintings have now (1990) deteriorated to such an extent as to make most of their subjects indecipherable, save for the 'remains of two unidentifiable figures', the two shields, and a fragment of a third painting. Of the two figures, that on the left has a halo and is facing east, with its face in profile. The right-hand figure is seen three-quarter face, looking at the other, its head also haloed, but somewhat lower than that of the first. Behind and on either side of the second figure are the substantial remains of grey-coloured wings, raising the presumption that it is an angel. Round its head is a circlet, with a cross rising above the portion over the middle of the forehead; this is far from a common form of headgear, though one of the few depictions of it in roughly contemporary art known to the present writer occurs on the heads of four out of the seven angels in one of the early 16th-century exhibits at the Museum of Tapestry at Angers (France).⁴ The only other contemporary case known to him is in the 15th-century stained glass in the church of St. Peter and St. Paul at East Harling (Norfolk), where in the panel depicting the Annunciation the Archangel Gabriel is shown wearing a circlet with a central cross.⁵ Among modern examples, it is again Gabriel, the angel of the Annunciation, who wears such a circlet in the stained glass of 1875 by Burlison and Grylls at Edlesborough church (Bucks.);⁶ the present writer has been assured by the Victorian Society that its makers 'would certainly have studied the style and subject matter of stained glass and painted decoration dating from the late 14th and 15th centuries . . .'.⁷ In the case of the wall-painting at South Newington, all the foregoing factors, coupled with the positions of the two figures which are consistent with the one on the right kneeling to the other, suggest that it is another Annunciation. It should be added that if this were so, then the Virgin Mary would be on the left, with the Archangel on the right, whereas usually these positions are reversed, although at Martley (Worcs.) the two figures are on the same sides as here.⁸ If the South Newington painting were 'the Coronation of Our Lady', as suggested by E.T. Long,⁹ the wings would not appear and the heads would be on a level, but the present writer is gratified to find himself in agreement with Long in identifying one of the figures as the Virgin.

Tristram's *Catalogue* does not attempt an attribution of the two shields mentioned in the above quotation, but Long suggests the following: 'one charged gules with three chalices, probably for Pershore Abbey and the other with a chevron ? for Wykeham. The shields are certainly 15th century'.¹⁰ There is no reason to doubt Long's competence on heraldic matters (unlike the present writer, whose ignorance of them is total), but what is not obvious is the relevance his admittedly tentative attributions have to South Newington. Pershore Abbey seems to have had no known connection with that village.¹¹ As to Wykeham, the arms in the wall-painting (Argent, a chevron sable between three similar objects of now indeterminate colour, which might originally have been roses) bear some resemblance to the arms of William of Wykeham¹² and to the second and third quarters of those of the Lords Saye and Sele.¹³ Neither can be those which Long

⁴ Illustrated in P. Verlet et al., *Le Grand Livre de la Tapisserie* (Paris, 1965), 72-3.

⁵ Sarah Crewe, *Stained Glass in England, 1180-1540* (1987), Plate 44.

⁶ Illustrated in P. Cowen, *A Guide to Stained Glass in Britain* (1985), 78.

⁷ Letter 4 March 1991, from the Secretary of the Victorian Society to the present writer.

⁸ J. Edwards, 'Some Wall-Paintings at St. Peter's Church, Martley', *Trans. Worcs. Archaeol. Soc.* 3rd ser. x (1986), 60.

⁹ Long, *op. cit.* note 2, 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ No mention of it is made, for example, in *V.C.H. Oxon.* xi, 155-8.

¹² J. Buxton and P. Williams, *New College, Oxford, 1379-1979* (1979), 10.

¹³ C. Kidd and D. Williamson (eds.), *Debrett's Peerage, etc.* (1985), P1070.

had in mind, however, since the former has two chevrons¹⁴ instead of one chevron, and the latter are attributed by *Debrett* to the Twistleton, rather than the Wykeham, branch of the family.¹⁵ If, however, the three objects on the shield at South Newington were indeed originally roses, then the arms would be those of William Smyth, Bishop of Lincoln from 1496 to 1514, who was one of the founders of Brasenose College, Oxford, and which were 'argent, a chevron sable between three roses gules seeded or barbed vert'.¹⁶ There would, after all, have been some relevance, in that at that time South Newington would have been within Bishop Smyth's diocese.

Below the shields, recognisable fragments include two crowns with a slight indication of the tops of the heads beneath them. They are in the wrong part of the nave wall for Long's Coronation of the Virgin, already mentioned, but might be the remains of Tristram's Virgin and Child, also referred to above.

(ii) Wall-paintings not mentioned in Tristram's volume on the 14th century, doubtless because they are probably of the succeeding one, include a series of three trees, each with shields hung from them, which start at the first full spandrel at the east end of the arcading which forms the north wall of the nave, the other two being on the two spandrels to the west of it. The branches of the trees are in three well-rounded groups, each in full leaf, so that the *Church Guide* calls them 'Trinity Trees',¹⁷ doubtless by analogy with the shamrock with which St. Patrick is supposed to have explained the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinity Trees, quite apart from the shields, are not known by the present writer to exist in wall-paintings elsewhere, and may well be unique in any medium since they are mentioned neither in *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*¹⁸ nor in Ferguson's *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*.¹⁹ At South Newington, however, attention is drawn to the Trinity Trees by the shields hanging from them; elsewhere, if the shields were absent, their significance might be overlooked and they could be assumed to be merely decorative.

The contents of the three shields is made clear by the one (Fig. 2, bottom) on the middle spandrel, the main feature of which is the cross itself, with the crown of thorns hanging behind it. At each end and on top of the horizontal arm of the cross is a nail standing upright, while below this arm are, on the right, the hammer used to drive the nails in, and on the left the pincers used to pull them out at the Deposition. This shield therefore portrays some of the Instruments of the Passion, and it is reasonable to expect that the remaining shields depicted others.

Since they are the 'emblems of Redemption'²⁰ Instruments of the Passion are not unusual subjects of medieval wall-paintings, but are normally shown, not on shields, but being held by angels on either side of Christ the Judge in a Doom; thus, at St. Thomas's church, Salisbury, the Instruments so held comprise a tau cross, the crown of thorns, the pillar of the Flagellation, the spear, the sponge, and the nails.²¹ However, the Instruments are to be found on shields at Willingham (Cambs.), where they show

¹⁴ Anon., *University Calendar 1990-91*, 237.

¹⁵ Kidd and Williamson, *op. cit.* note 13, P1070.

¹⁶ F. Madan, 'The Name and Arms of the College', in *Brasenose College Quatercentenary Monographs* (1909), ed. F. Madan, 6.

¹⁷ Anon., *A Guide to St. Peter ad Vincula South Newington* (1983), 2.

¹⁸ J. Hall, *Dict. of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (1985).

¹⁹ G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (1972).

²⁰ Caiger-Smith, *op. cit.* note 1, 6.

²¹ A. Hollaender, 'The Doom Painting of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Salisbury', *Wilts. Archaeol. Mag.* 1 (1942-4), 257.

another tau cross, the crown of thorns, objects which could be either scourges or nails, and rather curiously, the wounds of Christ.²² One of the most notable such cases is in the 15th-century stained glass at Westwood (Wilts.), where the shields are each being held by an angel, and, though some have been lost, there are still eleven such shields, most charged with more than one Instrument.²³

Of the other two shields at South Newington, the more westerly (Fig. 1, top) has in the middle the column or pillar which, in this context, must have been the column to which Christ is usually represented as having been bound while undergoing the Flagellation. The other features of this shield are less easy to identify, but in view of its central subject, and by analogy with the contents of the top shield on the left of the east window at Westwood,²⁴ they may be supposed to be the scourges. The most easterly shield at South Newington (Fig. 2, top) has all but disappeared by now, only its top left-hand corner being still visible. What remains of its Instrument is not readily identifiable, but if this shield originally included several Instruments, then this one might have been the lantern used at the Betrayal, with beams of light radiating from it. Though not an Instrument usually depicted, the lantern is shown in the top right-hand shield in the east window at Westwood.²⁵

(iii) On the north side of the nave, above the spandrels already described with their Instruments of the Passion, is a Passion cycle, though it can never be known whether this juxtaposition was intentional. These scenes are described in the *Church Guide* as 'not the paintings for which South Newington is renowned but . . . nevertheless interesting as an example of rustic work from the late 15th century'.²⁶ On the face of it, they are indeed among the few examples which justify Dame Joan Evans' description of all wall-paintings in parish churches as the work of 'rustic daubers',²⁷ but it ought not to be taken for granted that in the 15th century these paintings would necessarily be regarded as of less merit than those of the previous century; our own time demonstrates that there are periods when perfection of figurative painting may not be regarded as the highest form of art.

The Passion cycle takes the form of a long strip of paintings with, nowadays, some unfortunate gaps. Each scene is enclosed in its own frame by red lines. Tristram mentioned the cycle in 1933, but did not discuss it, considering it of inferior workmanship, though it is of interest that he mentioned that there were 18 subjects,²⁸ since today only nine can be made out with any certainty. They mostly have trellis-work backgrounds. Reading from west to east, they begin with Christ's entry into Jerusalem (Fig. 1, top). Mounted on an ass, He has but one follower, while three persons stand behind the battlements over the gate in the city wall, waving palm branches. As in all the following scenes, the small size of each frame reduces the elements of the composition to the bare minimum. It is followed by the Agony in the garden of Gethsemane, which shows Christ kneeling in prayer between two sleeping disciples; a cup floats against a background of blue sky, to illustrate Matthew 26:39, 'O my Father, if it be possible, let

²² A. Fawcitt, *The Wallpaintings of Willingham* (1990), 20-1.

²³ J. Edwards, 'The Lily-Crucifixion . . . at the Church of St. Mary, Westwood, Wilts.', *Jnl. of Stained Glass*, xviii (1988), 244-58.

²⁴ *Ibid.* Plate 1 at 246.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Anon., *op. cit.* note 17, 2.

²⁷ Joan Evans, *English Art, 1307-1461* (1949), 212.

²⁸ Tristram (1933), *op. cit.* note 2, 114.

this cup pass from me'. The next scene is indistinct, but two persons are discernible in positions suggesting Christ before Pilate; Long, however, regards it as showing the Betrayal,²⁹ which one would certainly expect to be the next scene after the Agony in the garden. The next part of the cycle has disappeared, but could originally have contained as many as three more such scenes, with only a fragment of the last one, in which only the lower part of a leg, which might be in armour, is still to be seen. This is followed by a perfectly clear portrayal of the Flagellation (Fig. 1, bottom), and in few Passion cycles can there have been space for so many episodes between the Betrayal and that subject, in some of which Christ could have been shown before Pilate, as at Chalgrove;³⁰ other possibilities include the Crowning with Thorns and the Mocking, both of which figure at this juncture at Fairstead (Essex).³¹ In the Flagellation at South Newington, Christ, wearing only a loincloth, is shown bound with His back to a column with a castellated top; He is being scourged by two men, one on either side, and His body is covered with the wounds they have inflicted. The next two scenes are much fainter, but their subjects are clear enough, the first being Christ carrying the cross; He is normally depicted as fully dressed at this stage, but here is shown still wearing only the loincloth of the Flagellation. There is a small crowd in the background, including on the right an old man with a long white pointed beard, wagging his head, who is obviously one of the mockers. The next scene is of Christ crucified, with figures on either side, doubtless including the Virgin Mary and St. John the Divine; there is, however, no room in the frame to show the two thieves crucified with Him. The next two scenes are somewhat confused, but the first could hardly be anything but the Deposition from the cross, the left-hand side of its horizontal arm, no longer with Christ's hand nailed to it, being clearly visible. The strong lateral elements in the next scene (Fig. 2, top) suggest the Entombment, rather than the apocryphal Harrowing of Hell, either of which would be customary at this stage of the cycle; indeed both of them occur in the wall-paintings of the 12th and 13th centuries in the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre at Winchester Cathedral.³² The next scene is perfectly distinct and shows Christ, supporting Himself with the vexillum, the staff with the small pennon bearing a cross which is characteristic of Christ of the Resurrection, stepping out of the open tomb and over one of the sleeping guards. Two other guards are sleeping in front of the tomb, both carrying different forms of axe, while the helmet of a fourth guard can be seen on the far side of it. Though poles apart in all other respects, this Resurrection is iconographically identical with that of Piero della Francesca, painted c. 1460, and now in the Municipal Art Gallery at Sansepolcro.³³ Though it is no longer clear enough to identify positively, Long thought the next scene showed the appearance of Christ to St. Mary Magdalene in the garden³⁴ (the *Noli Me Tangere*), but the remaining scenes of the cycle, of which there is space for at least three, are now missing. They could have included the Ascension, as at Chalgrove,³⁵ and the first Pentecost, as at Ashmansworth (Hants.).³⁶

²⁹ Long, op. cit. note 2, 101.

³⁰ J.C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings* [1914], 137.

³¹ Caiger-Smith, op. cit. note 1, 65.

³² D. Park, 'The Wall Paintings of the Holy Sepulchre Chapel', in *Medieval Art and Architecture at Winchester* (1983), 39.

³³ Illustrated, for example, in P. Murray and P. de Vecchi, *The Complete Paintings of Piero della Francesca* (1967), 99, and Plate LIX.

³⁴ Long, op. cit. note 2, 101.

³⁵ Wall, op. cit. note 30, 141.

³⁶ *V.C.H. Hants.* iv, 275.



Fig. 1. Parts of the Passion cycle, including (top) Christ's entry into Jerusalem (with the westernmost Trinity Tree visible beneath), and (bottom) the Flagellation. (Ph. J. Edwards).

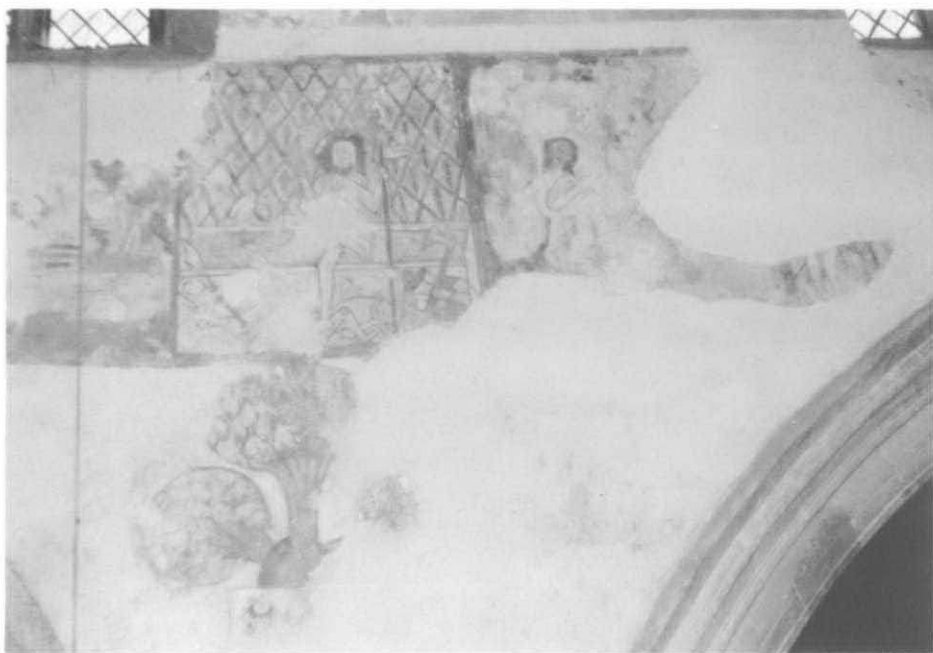


Fig. 2. *Top*: Concluding part of the Passion cycle, including (probably) the Entombment, and the Resurrection. *Bottom*: the central Trinity Tree, with shield showing Instruments of the Passion. (Ph. J. Edwards).

In addition to the wall-paintings, 'renowned' or otherwise, a visit to this church has an additional interest for students of English medieval wall-paintings, in that, until the last year of her life, this was the parish church of the late Mrs Eve Baker (1906–1990), one of the two outstanding conservators of her day of such paintings. Mrs Baker was responsible for the conservation of most of the country's finest wall-paintings, including ones at Canterbury and Winchester cathedrals, and, among very many parish churches, those at Clayton, Hardham, and Kempley.

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