

## Some Murals in North-East Oxfordshire

By JOHN EDWARDS

### SUMMARY

*This paper deals with mural paintings having points of interest not already published, in churches in the area between the City and Bicester; those omitted are already adequately documented, as at Islip, Kidlington<sup>1</sup> and Woodeaton.<sup>2</sup> A roughly geographical sequence has been adopted: Old Marston; Elsfield; Beckley; Charlton-on-Otmoor; Weston-on-the-Green; and Ambrosden. At the first four, new findings have resulted from recent conservations, while the last two present rare examples of large 18th-century paintings. Weston's altarpiece, sometimes regarded as being by Pompeo Batoni, is now thought to be probably not even Italian.*

### 1. ST. NICHOLAS, OLD MARSTON

Recent conservation has revealed remains of a wall-painting over the chancel arch, as foretold by E.T. Long.<sup>3</sup> To the right-hand side is a diaper-pattern; in the middle is the upper portion of a royal arms, with two diapers visible in it; and on the left are fragments of painting, of which the largest might be the trunk and branches of a stylised tree, without diapers, though the standard subject for a chancel-arch is a Doom, in which trees do not figure.

After the Reformation royal arms began to appear in churches, as if to emphasise that the monarch was now the Head of the Church; they could be wall-paintings, as here, or on separate hatchments. In the present case, the arms extend to the chancel-arch but their lower part is missing; since the arch is 12th- or 13th-century and appears not to have been heightened subsequently<sup>4</sup> the arms must originally have been painted partly in the space above it, and partly on boarding inserted below. There are, however, no marks on the arch to indicate where any such boarding would have been secured. The supporters are clearly a unicorn on the spectator's right, and almost certainly a lion on the left, from which it can be deduced that the arms cannot be earlier than 1603.<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to take the identification further in view of the faintness of the paintwork and the fact that the loss of the lower part has left only a minimal amount of the shield.

<sup>1</sup> J. Edwards, 'Some Lost Medieval Wall-Paintings', *Oxoniensia*, lv (1990), 87-9.

<sup>2</sup> E.W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th century* (1955), 115, 268; E.T. Long, 'Wall Paintings in Oxfordshire Churches', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Long, *op. cit.* note 2, 99.

<sup>4</sup> G.N. Clark, 'Marston Church, near Oxford', *Oxon. Archaeol. Soc. Reports*, lxxv (1930), 265; J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (1974), 699.

<sup>5</sup> Letter 19.8.92 to the author from David Park, Head of the Conservation of Wall Painting Dept., the Courtauld Institute.

## 2. ST. THOMAS OF CANTERBURY, ELSFIELD

Conservation in 1976 led to various discoveries. Masonry lines were found on the west wall of the chancel with, at the top, a scroll based on fine trails of foliage. Masonry lines are also present in the splays of the two easternmost windows on the north side of the chancel and on the wall between them, but do not cover enough of the wall to include scrolls.

On the south side of the east window in the chancel is a diaper pattern; on its north side are the remains of what the *Church Guide*<sup>6</sup> calls a brocade. Since there is a bracket on the chancel's north wall immediately adjoining, it can be presumed that the painting originally formed the background to a statue standing on the bracket. Down the middle of the painting is a blank space, the left-hand side of which consists of five regular curves, which may be accidental, since they could hardly be caused by the outline of the statue which (judging by the small size of the bracket) could not have been the same height as the paintwork. Wall-paintings and statuary sometimes complemented each other, as at Combe, where at right-angles to an empty niche is the upper part of a wall-painting of the Annunciation; a statue of the Virgin can be assumed to have been originally in the niche.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. THE CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION OF ST. MARY, BECKLEY

Before the conservation of 1978 by a team headed by David Perry,<sup>8</sup> E. T. Long was aware of a Doom on the chancel-arch, which he dated to the 15th century, though the details were hard to decipher owing to whitewash and the imposition of an '18th-century Royal Arms'. He was also aware of paintings of St. Peter and St. Paul respectively north and south of the chancel-arch (but below the Doom), while at eye level on the northern respond was the upper part of a human figure. Long also referred to the paintings on the north wall of the south aisle, notably the Virgin Mary suckling the Child; what he thought was an Annunciation; 'a curious scene which would seem to depict the tortures of the damned', though he only saw one of the victims; and above this 'portions of an indecipherable inscription'.<sup>9</sup>

The conservation has greatly added to knowledge of the contents of the wall-paintings and has involved some corrections.

The Doom contains the usual basic elements, being presided over by Christ the Judge, who is flanked by the usual intercedors, the Virgin Mary and St. John. On the right is a very distinct Hell-mouth, which is much more obviously also the mouth of Leviathan than is usually the case. A red devil is near it. There are only the shadowy remains of the resurrecting nude figures (the standard medieval representation of a soul),<sup>10</sup> and their division into the blessed and the damned. The former are shown trooping into the portal of the Heavenly City, while the damned can even now scarcely be made out. The small figure on the north respond is suggested by the present writer to be the donor. It is unfortunate that there is still *in situ* the royal arms of George III, painted on what is possibly a blocked-up doorway which was once the entrance to a now vanished rood loft. They are in the middle of the chancel-arch immediately below the Christ, where they afford an unfortunate distraction, particularly as their colours are so much brighter.

The paintings on the north wall of the south aisle (Fig. 1) have an overall diaper pattern,

<sup>6</sup> A. de Vere, *The Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfeld* (1981), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Long, *op. cit.* note 2, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Turner, 'Pictures of Magic', *Oxford Times*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Long, *op. cit.* note 2, 91.

<sup>10</sup> A.W. Pollard, *Italian Book Illustration* (1894), 41.



Fig. 1. Details from the S. aisle, Beckley (Photo 1983, by courtesy of M.N. Meyjes, A.B.I.P., and of Rev. A. de Vere, vicar.)

and near them is kept an excellent summary of the results of the conservation where this part of the church is concerned, so that it is only necessary to supplement it here. The summary makes the intriguing suggestion that the tiny figure outlined in the bottom right-hand corner is what it calls the 'modello' for the central figure of the Virgin Mary. Not only is she suckling the Child, but He can now be seen to be raising His right hand in blessing. This part of the painting has always been fairly clear, but the angel above and to the left of the Virgin and Child (originally thought by Long and others<sup>11</sup> to be an Annunciation) has now been shown to be a Soul-Weighing by the archangel Michael. The Virgin Mary stands to the right of the scales, miraculously saving the soul of the person being weighed, despite all that a devil looking like a dog standing on its hind legs can do on the other side of the scales. Her rosary is held so as to touch the scales, this being an essential part of the miracle.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the fact that Soul-Weighing was a feature of Judgement Day was the reason for the inclusion above it of the 'tortures of the damned' referred to by Long. These are now much clearer and more extensive, and are even more gruesome than those shown in the Doom at Oddington (Gloucs.). At Beckley the central figure is a naked man impaled on a spit, with his hands tied behind him and his ankles tied together above the spit. This has Y-shaped supports at either end and its right-hand end terminates in a handle. The scene is presided over by a devil with three-toed feet and a bushy tail who is basting the victim; drops of oil can be seen descending upon him and may indeed, judging from the flecks of paint, be all over his body. Below the spit and on the right is a large pair of bellows to fan the flames. Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols* says that in Hell torture on the spit was reserved for sodomites,<sup>13</sup> and there are several other examples, among them the early 16th-century misericord in Manchester Cathedral showing a hunter being roasted on a spit;<sup>14</sup> since this is a case of *monde renversé* the cooks are hares or rabbits, and Canon Purvis has indeed christened it 'the Rabbits' Revenge'.<sup>15</sup>

Completely new is the discovery to the left of the spit of another naked man, also tied at wrists and ankles, hanging upside down on a meat hook; the legs of another naked man, the rest of whom has disappeared, can be made out on his left. The summary says that another devil, sitting on a three-legged stool, is nearby, but though the present writer had no difficulty in making out the stool, the devil eluded him. Though Kendon had in mind the various tortures undergone by the martyrs, the foregoing bears out his comment that the outstanding feature of medieval 'interest in torture is the thoroughness with which these people gratify their curiosity . . . they enter into every detail of the tortures undergone. . .',<sup>16</sup>

Above these scenes is a horizontal row of rosettes, no doubt done by the same stencil as was used for the diaper pattern already mentioned.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately the lettering above it has a blank space about one foot wide running vertically about a quarter of the way from the left. Both Long<sup>18</sup> and the summary are agreed that the lettering is indecipherable and the present writer is unable to offer any interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Long, op. cit. note 2, 91; A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (1963), 164.

<sup>12</sup> Caiger-Smith, op. cit. note 11, 61, 62.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hall, *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols* (paperback edn., 1985), 147.

<sup>14</sup> G.L. Remnant, *A Catalogue of Misericords in Great Britain* (1969) 82, 83.

<sup>15</sup> J.S. Purvis, 'The Use of Continental Woodcuts and Prints . . . by Woodcarvers', *Archaeologia*, lxxxv (1935), 122.

<sup>16</sup> F. Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches during the Middle Ages* (1923), 184.

<sup>17</sup> One such stencil, made in lead, from Meaux Abbey, Yorks., is illustrated in P. Binski, British Museum's Medieval Craftsmen series: *Painters* (1991), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Long, op. cit. note 2, 91.

<sup>19</sup> This view was reached after consultation with Miss Janet Backhouse, Curator of Illuminated Manuscripts, the British Library, to whom the author is, as always, most grateful for her advice.

It is generally agreed that this part of the south aisle was completely covered by another Soul-Weighing of the 15th century, which was removed at some stage to enable the present paintings to be revealed. The right-hand pan of the scales can still be seen on the left-hand side of this wall, the possible remains of a soul in the pan, and part of its yellow frame.

Vestiges of post-Reformation paintings cover the west wall, including two sets of Prince-of-Wales feathers, each base encircled by a crown, but a feature which never seems to be mentioned is the large painting of the ace of hearts south of the west door; it may not even be medieval. It is on a red circle with a rope-like pattern round its edge and the vestiges of a black frame. A 15th-century six of diamonds can be seen in a wall-painting at Hesselst (Suffolk), but there it is surmounted by the Tree of the Seven Deadly Sins.<sup>20</sup>

It will be apparent from the foregoing that Beckley church has a wide range of wall-paintings varying from the charm of the Virgin and Child to the sadism of the spitted man. This is not generally to be expected in a small country church, and it is good to know that there is a proper appreciation of the importance of conservation. One can only regret the continued existence in its present position of the George III coat of arms.

#### 4. ST. MARY, CHARLTON-ON-OTMOOR

Conservation has brought to light the confused remains of a wall-painting on the north wall of the nave. It is understood that it is thought locally to have been a painting of St. Christopher, and a location on a north wall would be usual for this subject. However, such paintings were ideally placed immediately opposite the south door, so as to enable passing travellers to see them without having to enter the church, whereupon the saint would work his miracle, namely that anyone looking on his picture would not die that day, or would at least be given time before death to confess and be absolved.<sup>21</sup> As is written in French on the 14th-century St. Christopher at Woodeaton: 'Ki cest image verra ce jur de male mort ne murra'.<sup>22</sup> At Charlton-on-Otmoor, however, the painting could not be seen from the street by a passer-by, and even from inside the church the first glimpse of the painting is partially obscured by one of the pillars of the north nave aisle. While this is not an absolute objection to the painting being of St. Christopher, it may argue against it.

To the present writer, the wall-painting suggests a seated figure with his legs crossed, of which Dr. E. Clive Rouse says: 'the crossing of the legs is important. It was held to be an interruption of the normal flow of life . . . and became the attribute of wicked emperors – the only ones who could do it with impunity'.<sup>23</sup> There are plenty of men in medieval wall-paintings who could come within the category of 'wicked emperor', beginning with Pilate and including all the numerous kings who ordered the martyrdom of a saint.

No dating can be attempted in view of the present state of the painting.

#### 5. ST. MARY, WESTON-ON-THE-GREEN

The principal object of interest is the 18th-century altarpiece (Fig. 2), which quite apart from its large size (approximately 16 feet high and wide) is a surprising feature to find in a

<sup>20</sup> W. Cook, 'Materials for a History of Hesselst, Part II', *Proc. Inst. Suffolk Archaeol.* v (1886), 30–34.

<sup>21</sup> H.C. Whaite, *St. Christopher in English Medieval Wallpainting* (1929), 8, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Long, *op. cit.* note 2, 106.

<sup>23</sup> E. Clive Rouse, *Discovering Wall Paintings* (1980 edn.), 6.



Fig. 2. The altarpiece, Weston-on-the-Green. (Photo 1992, by courtesy of the Centre for Oxon. Studies and of Rev. D. Wilcox, vicar.)

country parish church. It is badly in need of cleaning, and is on canvas, so that, strictly speaking, it is not a wall-painting. Its upper portion is semi-circular, which bears no relation to the church's architecture. The central feature is a crucifix (without Christ), surmounted by the 'I.N.R.I.', while its base shows Satan as the Serpent of Eden twined around it, having in his mouth a twig with an apple on the end of it. On either side of the crucifix are two large Tablets of the Law, shown as resting on a table, rather than an altar. The authenticity of the Commandments is confirmed by the left-hand Tablet being headed 'Exodus' and the other by 'Chap XX'. The 'hornbook' says that this part of the painting is 'probably not original'.<sup>24</sup> The whole of the arched portion of the top of the painting is occupied by cherubs on either side of a small representation of the crucified Christ surrounded by an aureole, intended (according to the 'hornbook') to signify the victory of Christ the King.

To take the many other subjects in chronological order, and starting at the bottom right-hand corner, there is both growing and harvested corn to symbolise Christ's 'I am the bread of life' (*John* 6: 35), and grapes, symbolising 'I am the true vine' (*John* 15: 1), the bread and the grapes representing the Eucharist. Further up the right-hand side of the painting is a

<sup>24</sup> Anon., Church 'hornbook' (undated). Owing to the present state of the painting, the author is indebted to this for much of the information.



cock, symbolising Christ's betrayal by Peter (*John*: 18: 38 and 18: 27). Then there are roses, symbolic of the Virgin Mary. Down the left-hand side is a single cherub (possibly a later addition) with lilies, also representing the Virgin, and a fully-grown vine growing up the left-hand Tablet. At the bottom left-hand side and spread across the painting, below the Tablets, are a number of the Instruments of the Passion: the lantern of the Betrayal; the scourge; the crown of thorns; St. Veronica's cloth showing the imprint of the face of Christ; the centurion's mailed glove and sword; the nails and the hammer; the dice with which the soldiers cast lots for Christ's clothing; the cup of suffering; the sponge on a reed; the spear which pierced Christ's side; and the pincers used for the Deposition. Not mentioned in the 'hornbook' is the bulrush put into Christ's hand during the mocking, in travesty of a sceptre. Not all the Instruments mentioned are specified in all the Gospels; as Chaucer remarks of the Evangelists, 'ne seith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth'.<sup>25</sup>

A photograph in the church reveals that at the (unknown) time it was taken there was at the bottom left-hand side of the painting a large urn, the main purpose of which must have been to 'balance' the cock on the other side, but which has now been painted out. As to its significance, Hall states that all such vessels can be presumed to contain wine, and consequently to symbolise Christ's Blood,<sup>26</sup> which would certainly accord with its position under the left-hand vine.

The present darkened condition of the painting, which suggests the misguided use of bitumen as well as the need for cleaning, results in its subjects being difficult to make out, though the crucified Christ, St. Veronica's cloth, and some of the cherubs are still tolerably evident.<sup>27</sup> More problematic, however, is the question of the painting's provenance.

The most positive answer to the question was provided by Jennifer Sherwood in *Buildings of England*, namely, 'PAINTINGS. Altarpiece of the Ten Commandments by *Pompeo Batoni*'.<sup>28</sup> Miss Sherwood has told the present writer that information about this painting was passed to the late Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in 1970 and filed with her notes on Weston-on-the-Green. However, the research notes for the *Buildings of England* series have since been deposited with the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments and no written record of this attribution can now be traced.<sup>29</sup>

Batoni (1708–1787),<sup>30</sup> who worked in Rome<sup>31</sup> and never visited England,<sup>32</sup> specialised in portraits of visiting gentry (including many Englishmen)<sup>33</sup> and did indeed paint altarpieces,<sup>34</sup> though other sources do not support Pevsner's identification. Thus, the authors of the anonymous pamphlet in the church<sup>35</sup> and of the *New Shell Guide to Oxon. and Berks.*<sup>36</sup> content themselves with saying that the painting 'is reputed [or said] to be by' Batoni. Dunkin's *Bullingdon and Ploughley* (1823) merely says that over the altar 'are the two tablets of the law, surmounted by a glory, the emblem of the Trinity, angels, etc., the whole worked with much

<sup>25</sup> *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. A.W. Pollard, (1926), 92, line 2135.

<sup>26</sup> Hall, op. cit. note 13, 330.

<sup>27</sup> Photograph available in the church.

<sup>28</sup> Sherwood and Pevsner, op. cit. note 4, 833.

<sup>29</sup> Miss Sherwood's letter to the author of 23.9.1992.

<sup>30</sup> A.M. Clark, *Pompeo Batoni: A Complete Catalogue* (1985), 15, 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction, *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 29–34, and section of the Introduction entitled 'The British Portraits and the Grand Tour', 42–8. It is entirely appropriate that Batoni should be included in the exhibition entitled 'The Swagger Portrait' at the Tate Gallery (1992/3).

<sup>34</sup> Clark, op. cit. note 30.

<sup>35</sup> Anon., *The Norreys-Bertie of Weston Manor* (undated pamphlet available in ch.), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> R. Lethbridge, *New Shell Guide to Oxon and Berks.* (1988), 120, s.n. Middleton Stoney.

taste into an elegant altarpiece.<sup>37</sup> The *Victoria County History* states that 'above the altar is a large 18th-century canvas of the Ten Commandments surrounded by cherubs and symbols of the Crucifixion,' which does at least date it to the century in which Batoni lived.<sup>38</sup>

As to the donor, what little there is points to the possibility that this was Norreys Bertie,<sup>39</sup> about whom useful information may be gleaned from his tombstone immediately south of the altar at Weston. This states that he was 'Lord of this Manor, sometime knight of the shire . . . who at his own expence [*sic*] caused this church to be beautified A.D. 1743',<sup>40</sup> and that 'he died unmarried A.D. 1766, AEtat 49', from which it can be gathered that he was born in 1717 and carried out the 'beautification' at the surprisingly youthful age of 26. Dunkin adds that 'several of the latter years of his life were spent on the Continent',<sup>41</sup> while the church leaflet comments that he died a bankrupt in Ghent and asserts that it was 'he who commissioned the altar painting reputed to be by Pompeo Batoni'.<sup>42</sup> So far as dating is concerned, it is thus not impossible that, if Bertie had visited Rome on the Grand Tour while he was still young and wealthy, the Weston altarpiece could in theory have been the work of Batoni.

However, the catalogue of the Kenwood exhibition 'Pompeo Batoni and his British Patrons' (1982) contains no reference to this painting; nor does the definitive work on Batoni, A.M. Clark's *Pompeo Batoni: a Complete Catalogue* (1985), which does not overlook parish churches and alludes to the Annunciation at Marsh Baldon,<sup>43</sup> sometimes described as a copy by Batoni of a Guido Reni.<sup>44</sup> Plates of 430 paintings by Batoni reproduced in Clark's book do not include anything resembling the Weston altarpiece, though many altarpieces are illustrated: no other Batoni has such a plethora of subjects as Weston and none include the Ten Commandments. This is confirmed by Clark's index of works<sup>45</sup> by subject, together with the fact that Batoni never depicted the Instruments of the Passion. His index of works by location does not include Weston,<sup>46</sup> while his index of persons and places has no reference to either 'Bertie' or 'Weston'.<sup>47</sup>

As the altarpiece has probably never before been considered by an art historian, the present writer arranged for its inspection by Dr. Catherine Whistler, Assistant Keeper, Department of Western Art, at the Ashmolean Museum. Her opinion after seeing the painting is that it could well have been painted *c.* 1740, and that its special shape is not inconsistent with it having been commissioned for this church. The cherubs are rather different in features, colour, and handling from what one would expect from an Italian artist, while the head of Christ on St. Veronica's cloth would have been idealised in an Italian work rather than being naturalistic, as at Weston; the painting as a whole has a style and subject-matter not to be found in Italian paintings. In these circumstances it can be conjectured that the young Bertie became fired, for whatever reason, with enthusiasm to provide a grand altarpiece for his parish church, and engaged an English artist, perhaps a disciple of Verrio

<sup>37</sup> J. Dunkin, *History and Antiquities of the Hundreds of Bullington and Ploughley* (2 vols., 1823), ii. 200.

<sup>38</sup> *EC.H. Oxon.* vi. 352.

<sup>39</sup> Dr. Malcolm Graham, Head of the Centre for Oxon. Studies, reports that he has been unable to trace a useful Bertie family history.

<sup>40</sup> The undated leaflet (op. cit. note 35) points out (p. 2) that Norreys Bertie's initials and the date, 1743, 'can still be seen on the lead waterheads on the outside of the building'.

<sup>41</sup> Dunkin, op. cit. note 37, ii. 214.

<sup>42</sup> Leaflet, op. cit. note 35, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Clark, op. cit. note 30, 373.

<sup>44</sup> Sherwood and Pevsner, op. cit. 698.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, op. cit. note 30, 396.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 409.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 411, 416.



or Laguerre or one of the other foreign artists who came to England in search of work, but who had all died by 1743.<sup>48</sup> Certainly it was no provincial artist who painted the altarpiece: the beams of light are particularly painterly. Having given his instructions, Bertie must have realised – since, although his benefactions to (and burial in) the church imply that he was orthodox Church of England, there was an element of Catholicism in the family<sup>49</sup> – that the quite Catholic number of references to the Virgin Mary in the painting (as pointed out by Dr. Whistler) might try the patience of even the current Latitudinarianism,<sup>50</sup> notwithstanding that the church was dedicated to the Virgin. The Ten Commandments, which had been a 'safe' subject even during the intolerant aftermath of the Reformation, were accordingly given special prominence. If this were so they would have been contemporary rather than 'probably not original'.

In conclusion, while there is no evidence that the altarpiece was painted by Batoni, there are several strong reasons for presuming that it was not, and indeed that it may not be Italian at all.

#### 6. ST. MARY THE VIRGIN, AMBROSDEN

Dunkin records that, to accommodate the choir, a gallery was built at the west end of this church in 1764<sup>51</sup> (and removed in 1867),<sup>52</sup> and adds that 'on the wall, at the back of the gallery, is a good painting of the resurrection'; one of his illustrations is an engraving of it (Fig. 3).<sup>53</sup> Of considerable size (20 feet wide and 12 feet high), the painting has been described as 'a competent piece of work, well above the average standard of a local craftsman, and possibly done by a painter from Oxford or London employed by Sir Edward Turner at Ambrosden Park'.<sup>54</sup> Some doubts had evidently arisen about the future of the painting by 1950, since in that year it was the subject of a report (dated 10 February) by Dr. E. Clive Rouse (one of the two leading conservators of wall-paintings of his day), which had been commissioned by the Oxford Diocesan Advisory Committee.<sup>55</sup>

From this report, a photograph taken in 1950,<sup>56</sup> and Dunkin's engraving, it is evident that the painting showed souls resurrecting while two angels above them blew trumpets against a background of clouds. Each was holding a large book, the one on the left being inscribed 'AWAKE YE THAT SLEEP' and the other 'AND COME TO JUDGMENT'. According to Rouse, 'at the top was the Hebrew symbol of Jehovah in rayed clouds. Arches on the left may represent the Heavenly Jerusalem'.<sup>57</sup> Visible on Dunkin's engraving is a small devil sitting on the lid of a tomb in the bottom right-hand corner, which would be the appropriate

<sup>48</sup> Verrio (d. 1707); Laguerre (d. 1701); Ricci (d. 1734); Pellegrini (d. 1741). See P. and L. Murray, *Penguin Dict. of Art and Artists* (1972), 231, 316, 362, 442.

<sup>49</sup> Mrs. B. Stapleton, *History of the Post-Reformation Catholic Missions in Oxon.* (1906), 25, records that Willoughby Bertie (who the present writer deduces was Norreys Bertie's uncle) married a Roman Catholic in 1727 and brought up all his daughters as Catholics at Thame Park. The author is indebted to Dr. Malcolm Graham, Head of the Centre for Oxon. Studies, for this reference.

<sup>50</sup> G. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1942), 356.

<sup>51</sup> Dunkin, *op. cit.* note 37, i. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Anon., *The Parish Church of St. Mary the Virgin Ambrosden: A Guide* (undated), 4.

<sup>53</sup> Dunkin, *op. cit.* note 37, i (opposite p. 6).

<sup>54</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* v. 27.

<sup>55</sup> A copy is available at the Centre for Oxon. Studies, Westgate Library, Oxford, and the present writer is obliged to Dr. Malcolm Graham for drawing his attention to this.

<sup>56</sup> One of the National Buildings Record's collection, negative no. BB92/25076.

<sup>57</sup> Rouse's report, *op. cit.* note 55.



Fig. 3. Engraving of the Ambrosden wall-painting from Dunkin (1823). (Photo by courtesy of Centre for Oxon. Studies.)

place for Hell-mouth in a medieval Doom, so that what were possibly Hell's flames could be seen behind him. As to the medium employed, it was the unusual one, according to Rouse, of 'oil colour'. The modern photograph makes it clear that the painting had deteriorated to a considerable extent (the details of which were given by Rouse), and it was no doubt this which prompted the parochial church council's application for a faculty to destroy it, and which in turn led to the commissioning of Rouse's report. His detailed recommendations are prefixed by the following:<sup>58</sup>

The painting is a great rarity. Parish Church Mural Decoration of the 18th century on a large scale is almost unknown, and the portrayal of such a subject as the Resurrection at this period must be almost unique. I consider that the painting should most certainly not be destroyed, and that efforts should be made to preserve it and improve its appearance.

After detailing the work required, Rouse estimated that '£150 or so' would cover the 'immediate necessities'. Notwithstanding these recommendations, the end of the report has a hand-written endorsement bearing the initials 'P.S.S.' (the late Mr. Peter Spokes, a distinguished local antiquary) to the effect that the painting was destroyed by the parochial church council in 1951, after due compliance with ecclesiastical law, and under the terms of a faculty. The *Victoria County History*, recording the destruction, described the painting as

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

'curious rather than beautiful'.<sup>59</sup> When the present writer visited the church in 1991 he found that the site of the painting had been covered in tasteful beige paint.

He ventures entirely to agree with the views of Rouse quoted above. As to the rarity of religious wall-paintings of the 18th century in parish churches – as distinct from those in the private chapels of some of the grander mansions, such as Castle Howard, Yorks. – the present writer is aware of only one example, St. Lawrence at Stanmore (formerly Middlesex), and even that was more of an appendage to Canons, seat of the dukes of Chandos until that house was destroyed in 1747, though it is believed to be the original of Alexander Pope's 'Timon's villa' in one of his *Epistles*.<sup>60</sup> The Ambrosden painting would be especially unusual for the 18th century in depicting a devil, given Pope's reference (in the same poem) to the usual subjects of their religious wall-painting as saints, gilded clouds, and Paradise, while 'to rest, the cushion and soft dean invite / Who never mentions hell to ears polite'.<sup>61</sup> A minor point is that medieval Dooms were usually painted over the chancel-arch, so as to be in full view of the congregation, and thus be a constant reminder of Judgement Day, whereas the congregation at Ambrosden would have their backs to it – a confirmation of Pope's view that congregations did not wish to be reminded of such matters.

For all these reasons the destruction of the Ambrosden wall-painting was regrettable. It can only be hoped that some day the money may become available to enable tests to be made to see if it still exists under the beige paint.

The present writer is glad to have this opportunity of bringing together the cases of Weston-on-the-Green and Ambrosden, since this makes it possible to draw to attention an aspect of them which seems to have escaped previous notice. This is the curious fact that, in a century when religious mural paintings (never mind very large ones) were a great rarity in parish churches, there should have been two examples of exactly that, both situated in the depths of the country, and in churches only four-and-a-half miles apart.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are due to the Rev. Anthony de Vere, vicar of Beckley and Elsfield, whose enthusiasm for wall-paintings put me in mind of writing this article; while the unfailing helpfulness of Dr. Malcolm Graham, head of the Centre for Oxfordshire studies, and his staff has been much appreciated. It would have been impossible to have dealt comprehensively with the Batoni question without the advice of Dr. Whistler, to whom great gratitude is expressed.

*The Society is grateful to the Greening Lamborn Trust for a grant towards publication of this paper.*

<sup>59</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* v. 27.

<sup>60</sup> A. Pope, 'Epistle to the Earl of Buckingham on the Use of Riches', in E. Rhys (ed.), *Poems, Epistles and Satires by A. Pope* (1935), 249, line 99 and note 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 250–1, lines 141–50.