

224 is the newsletter of the Deddington & District History Society. During our season we meet at 7.30 on the second Wednesday of the month, normally at Deddington's Windmill Centre. Membership is £10/18 p singles/couples or £2.50 at the door for visitors, who are equally welcome. The editor actively encourages contributions to be sent to 1 South Newington Road, Barford St Michael OX15 0RJ. Email history@deddington.net

From the Chair

Our journal 224 has proved to be a useful vehicle for disseminating the researches of our members and getting their work into print. In this the latest edition we are pleased to make available Penny Carey's article on the superb wall paintings in the church of St Peter in their village of South Newington. Many of us will happily recall the glorious sunny evening in June 2005 (was that the last good summer we had?) when we were given a tour of the village that included climbing the church tower before listening to a talk on the paintings as we sat before them, looking with fascination at the originals.

Normally, as you know, we produce 224 in black and white because of the cost of colour printing. On this occasion, however, the photographs are so impressive that we have decided to push the boat out and reproduce them in colour. This edition will become a collector's item.

Of direct relevance to this issue of 224 and its contents, please note that the second South Newington Festival will take place from 4-6 June. The programme will include music, poetry, a symposium, and a variety of activities. The symposium, with leading experts, will focus on aspects of the wall paintings. Details can be obtained from Anthony Fletcher on 01295 720598 or by email at afletcher1@btinternet.com.

I expect that many of our members will want to make sure of attending.

Chris Day

The wall paintings in South Newington Church

The medieval church of St Peter ad Vincula (St Peter in Chains) stands on rising ground above the A361 as it winds its way through the village of South Newington, quite close to the road bridge over the river Swere. The earliest parts of the church date from the Norman period. It developed and grew gradually till the fifteenth century when the clerestory windows were created and the porch with its battlemented parapet and crocketed pinnacles was built. It is in many ways a fairly typical north Oxfordshire parish church; what makes it famous are its exceptional wall paintings.

The North Oxfordshire Archaeological Society Booklet published in 1875, in an article about South Newington, describes the church in great detail and records texts painted on the walls – short biblical quotations. These quotations were on the chancel arch and over the north and south arcades. There is little evidence of them today. At that time there was no evidence of wall paintings. It is in a latter publication of the Oxfordshire Archaeological Society published in 1907 in an article about the church written by the then Vicar, the Reverend C J Whitehead, that one learns how the paintings were discovered. He wrote: 'In the year 1891-2 the north and south aisles were re-roofed, and about that time the very interesting frescoes were discovered in the north aisle'. There is no mention of other paint-

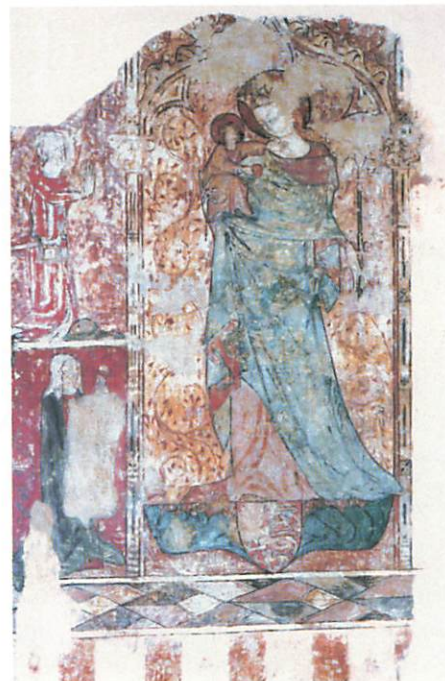
ings, but since then others have been discovered.

There are three main groups of paintings. The first, earliest and most remarkable, which were painted in circa 1340, are in the north aisle. They were first properly restored in 1930/31 by Professor E.W. Tristram. There are two martyrdoms, Thomas Becket and Thomas of Lancaster, an Annunciation, a Virgin and Child and a painting of St Margaret of Antioch slaying a dragon. These paintings are of an extraordinary quality and not as described by the Rev Whitehead frescoes (watercolour on fresh plaster) but in the unusual medium of oil on plaster. They were made by an artist who, as Tristram said, was 'a craftsman conversant with the most advanced mannerisms of the day and skilled in the highest degree of his craft, one working in an atelier under patronage of wealthy donors'. Simon Jenkins says they are 'front ranking in English Medieval art'. The second groups of paintings is a passion sequence in the nave painted in the fifteenth century in a more rustic and naive style. The third, discovered on the chancel arch in 1897, is the very damaged and un-restored remnants of a Doom.

The paintings in the north aisle starting at the west end:

The slaying of Thomas Becket in 1175

Professor Tristram describes removing fragmentary remains of a paint-



ing of St George and the Dragon in order to conserve the Becket painting, parts of which have not survived. In his 1907 article Rev Whitehead described 'parts of this 16th century fresco, the draughtsmanship of which contrasts badly with that of the earlier one, are still evident, particularly a large horse's head'. Today we can see the Saint depicted on his knees in front of an altar, facing east, clad in a red richly edged garment, his hands in the prayer position and his mitre falling to the floor, the priest, Grim, stands behind the richly dressed altar and the four knights, his assassins, approach from the left. They are all wearing chain mail, sword belts and other small pieces of protective armour. The blow of the first assailant Reginald

Fitzurse, the only assailant whose head survives in the painting, is warded off by Grim. The second assailant De Tracy is cleaving the skull, the third Hugh de Morville has his sword drawn and the fourth Richard le Bret is unsheathing his sword. The poses of the figures are very similar to representations of Becket's martyrdom in thirteenth-century Psalters. The colour of this painting is vibrant with rich reds and greens. It has a strong sense of dynamic movement

Thomas of Lancaster

Only a small part of the adjacent painting, depicting the slaying of Thomas of Lancaster survives, but even in its fragmentary state it too has a strong sense of movement. It

Left and above

1 Details from the north side of the doom painting over the Chancel. (Courtesy of the Perry Lithgow Partnership)

2 The Virgin and Child with the Donor and his wife. (Courtesy of Laurence Carey)

3 Thomas Becket at the moment of his murder. (Courtesy of Ann Ballantyne)

Facing page

4 Thomas of Lancaster at the moment of his execution (Ann Ballantyne)

5 Full view of the Passion Sequence on the North Arcade with the Entry into Jerusalem and Gethsemane nearest (The Perry Lithgow Partnership)

6 Weighing of the Souls with St Michael holding the scales and the Virgin dropping the rosary into the balance (The Perry Lithgow Partnership)

7 St Margaret of Antioch (Laurence Carey)

uses the same range of colours. Thomas Plantagenet, second Earl of Lancaster was executed on March 22nd 1322. The painting shows him kneeling, his executioner behind him, he has several sword gashes in his neck with the blood spurting out; according to historians it took several blows to decapitate him. After his death Thomas was venerated as a martyr and the King petitioned the Pope for his canonisation. One wonders why this village church of South Newington has a painting of Lancaster's execution? Professor Tristram asserted that there may have been a



close association between local families and Thomas of Lancaster; he wrote 'The closest link that I can find between South Newington and Thomas of Lancaster is the fact that [Piers] Gaveston, the King's favourite was confined at Doddington Castle [*sic*, actually Castle House, Deddington], which is quite near,

before being taken to Warwick and thence to Blacklow Hill where he was beheaded, Thomas of Lancaster making himself responsible for the deed. Families in the neighbourhood may, therefore, have been drawn into the course of events and supported Thomas, even to the extent of revering his memory in this way'. We

shall never really know.

Annunciation with St James and donors

On the eastern splay of the most easterly window of the north wall is a painting of the Annunciation with St James and Donor. Again the colours are strong reds and greens. The

top part of the painting shows the Virgin with the Angel Gabriel with a pot of 'tulip like' flowers between them, the figures bear a strong resemblance to Annunciations in illuminated books of the time. Below is a painting of St James with his staff, his pilgrims hat and wearing the scallop shell. Kneeling at the feet of St James is one of the donors identified from the heraldry as John Giffard. The Giffard family had manorial connections in South Newington. This painting still has richness and considerable beauty although there has been some pigment loss.

The Virgin and Child

On the east side of the north-east window and highlighted by Simon Jenkins as 'the church's most outstanding work' is a painting of the Virgin and Child. Looking towards the west the Virgin stands in a relaxed pose surrounded by a painted niche. The Christ Child, who holds a red apple in his hand, is held in her right arm and in her left hand she holds a lily symbolising the Rod of Jesse. The Virgin is clad in a pink tunic with a deep green mantle lined in red draped across her figure, the folds of the fabric giving her figure a sense of movement. On the left hand side kneel the figures of the donors apparently man and wife in attitudes of supplication. (John Giffard and his wife Lucy Mortayne)

St Margaret of Antioch

The painting on the south splay of the east window is well preserved. It depicts

St Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of women in childbirth, slaying the dragon. St Margaret wears a green mantle edged in vermillion, she has a book in her left hand.

In her right she holds the spear with which she impales the dragon. There is no plaster on the north splay of this window but it is thought that it may have once had a companion painting possibly of Saint Catherine. It is thought that this eastern end of the north aisle would once have served as the Lady Chapel. It must have been visually very rich with its

beautiful paintings, the surrounding fictive drapery and other painted decoration, of which only fragments remain. In the north aisle windows there remain fragments of painted glass of the early fourteenth century described in the North Oxfordshire Archaeological Society booklet of 1875 as 'choice'.

The Passion sequence

In the nave are the remains of a Passion sequence painted above the north arcade. These fifteenth century paintings do not have the courtly elegance of the north aisle paintings. Painted by a 'country' artist they are primitive and rustic in style but compelling and very charming. They represent the Entry into Jerusalem, Gethsemane, The Flagellation, Christ Carrying the Cross, the Crucifixion and Resurrection. In the spandrels are trees representing the Trinity and shields with the Instruments of the Passion and traces of the Badge of the Five Wounds of Christ.

High on this wall at the east end is a painting of the Weighing of the Souls. It shows St Michael with the scales weighing the souls and the Virgin dropping her rosary into the scale pan. This painting is quite well preserved though rather pale in colour; it relates to the remnants of Doom above the Chancel arch.

The Doom

The Doom has never been fully restored/conserved and it is in a poor state. It was coated with wax by Professor Tristram in the 1930s. It is very dirty, and the paint is flaking in places, the surface is chipped and the plaster has been patched at various times. There is a very worrying and deep crack on the north side. There is evidence of several layers of paint from several painting schemes. It was thought that, possibly, with careful conservation, as much as 75% of the painting might be revealed but a recent in-depth survey into the condition of the Doom by professional painting conservators was more pessimistic. Clearly more of the painting could be revealed and its condition improved by careful clean-

ing and conservation. Both an initial and more superficial preliminary survey and the recent in-depth survey revealed, in photographs, details in the painting that cannot currently be seen from ground level. Some faces of the saved, a beautifully painted angel's wing, clothing, hands and feet. There is a wide range of colours used with strong blues, greens, yellows, reds and purples. Hopefully one day we will be able to have the necessary conservation work done to reveal and conserve as much as possible of this painting which must have been a truly remarkable Doom.

Penny Carey

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