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## **Turkdean Church Wall-Paintings, a Cautionary Tale**

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## Turkdean Church Wall-Paintings: A Cautionary Tale

By JOHN EDWARDS

All Saints Church, Turkdean, was originally Norman, but was considerably altered in the 15th century. Portions of Norman work are still to be seen; for example, on the southern exterior wall of the chancel there is 'the upper portion of a small Norman doorway with diapered tympanum, abaci, and hood-mould'<sup>1</sup> embedded in the fabric. The present writer's visit took place in autumn, 1993.

In his 'Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings' (1967), W.I. Croome<sup>2</sup> dealt, among others, with Turkdean church. His account of the discovery of its wall-paintings mentioned that the principal one was on the easternmost pier of the arcade of the south nave wall. It consisted of a large standing figure with a staff, against a white background 'powdered with stars', the whole enclosed within a border of foliage. It may be added that the staff is yellow, but that, save for the background, everything else is the usual red ochre colour. The rest of his account may be summarised by saying that, on the discovery taking place in the course of re-decoration, some incidental damage was done to the painting of the large figure before the architect had time to stop the work. Croome inspected it the following day, at the architect's request, and decided it could not be much later than early 14th century. He then arranged for the late Mrs. Eve Baker, who was, with Dr. E. Clive Rouse, one of the two leading conservators of wall-paintings of their day, to inspect the paintings, which she did as soon as she could, namely, the following week.

The Secretary of the Council for the Care of Churches (Dr. T. Cocke) has kindly referred the present writer to Mr. J.P. MacKechnie-Jarvis, the Assistant Diocesan Secretary, as being particularly knowledgeable about Croome. Mr. MacKechnie-Jarvis has supplied a copy extract<sup>3</sup> from a letter of 2 March, 1967, from Croome to the then Secretary to the Diocesan Advisory Committee, from which it appears that Croome cannot have accompanied Mrs. Baker on her visit to the church, since he wrote: 'Alas! Mrs. Baker writes that she found the men in washing down the walls had not stopped in time, and they have washed away the whole of a very fine late 13th century Madonna, except her crown and the star-powdered background. [Mrs. Baker] could only now rescue the "frame, and some of the stars; but no figure" . . .' It is of great interest that, by the time Croome came to write his article, no reference to the Virgin Mary is made in it, since it merely says that 'there remains some sort of staff, but whether what remained above the obliterated face was part of a crown or of a mitre [Mrs. Baker] could not tell.' Though the reference to a crown suggests to the modern reader that it must have been a kingly one, in fact it becomes clear from the letter of 2 March, 1967, that Mrs. Baker must have been referring to the highly special case of the crown often included in paintings of the Virgin. For the sake of completeness it may be mentioned at this juncture that the letter also refers to Mrs. Baker identifying 'a huge Royal Arms [later adopted by Verey]<sup>4</sup> of early 17th century date', to which Croome adds in the article 'post-Reformation cartouches holding texts'.

It is somewhat surprising that Croome, who was the person called in by the architect; who wrote his article about the paintings; and who is mentioned in his obituary<sup>5</sup> as 'Chairman . . . of the Wall Paintings Committee'<sup>6</sup> should not have expressed his own opinion about the identity of the large figure, particularly as he had had the advantage of seeing it before it was vandalised.

His report, however, merely concluded by saying that 'all that could be done was to record the [paintings] photographically'. Presumably the photographs would not have been for purely personal use, but, as a wall-painting enthusiast, he could be expected to regard them as taken for archival purposes. Unfortunately, the County and Diocesan Archivist (Mr. D.J.H. Smith) states that though Croome deposited many deeds and other records at the Record Office, no photographs are among them; he adds that the County Library has no photographs of the Turkdean wall-paintings, while the Archaeological Society and the Victoria County History do not collect photographs. Enquiries have also been made of the Cheltenham Museum, the Council for the Care of Churches, the County Sites and Monuments Record, the National Buildings Record, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings which are also unable to trace any photographs. While the present writer is grateful to all these bodies, the photographs would in any event only have been of real help if they had been taken on Croome's first visit to the church, before the large figure had been 'washed away'.

Mr. MacKechnie-Jarvis says that, bearing in mind that 'the incident occurred less than two months before Will Croome died, and at a time when he was deeply involved in a number of very major controversies . . . I would not be altogether surprised if the photographs were never in fact taken, if the damage had already been done . . . whilst Croome was in earlier years a very keen photographer, I do not think he was still doing serious photography at that late stage. I wonder if the intention was to arrange for photography, but no one ever got round to it?'<sup>7</sup> Having regard to all the considerations put forward by Mr. MacKechnie-Jarvis, together with the failure to trace any photographs to any of the likely sources, his suggestion seems very convincing.

Today all that remains is the shadowy large figure, of which all that can be positively identified are the stars on their white background, the staff, which is held diagonally, and the vestiges of what appeared to Mrs. Baker to be the Virgin's crown, but could equally well be a halo which is not the usual circular one, but takes the form of rays of light proceeding like radii from where the head used to be. Thus it is not a cruciferous nimbus, so that at any rate the possibility that the figure might be one of the Trinity can be ruled out.

It is not clear on what grounds Mrs. Baker based her original identification of the Virgin Mary as being the subject of the large figure, since, according to the article, even her headgear could be either a crown or a mitre. The latter would of course be quite incompatible with the Virgin's wear. Croome, in the letter of 2 March, 1967, refers to Mrs. Baker's reference to stars. These are certainly relevant to portrayals of the Virgin, but they should either be a single star worn on her shoulder in her capacity as 'Stella Maris',<sup>8</sup> or, by analogy with Revelation 12: 1, a circle of twelve stars round her head.<sup>9</sup> The mere powdering of the background with stars is not enough. Moreover, this ignores the importance of the staff, which can still be seen. There is the usual difficulty about proving a negative, but in the long and comprehensive article in Hall dealing with all her capacities, attributes, and emblems, a staff is not mentioned.<sup>10</sup> Nor can the present writer remember having seen any portrait of the Virgin Mary in which she was shown holding a staff. It may be that, with all these considerations in mind, and when it came to going on record in the *Transactions*, Mrs. Baker came to the conclusion that her initial identification of the Virgin should be dropped, and that only the crown or mitre could be mentioned.

To deal with the first possibility, Kings sufficiently saintly to have a halo are not common in medieval wall-painting, being usually shown as presiding with fiendish glee and crossed legs<sup>11</sup> over the trial of a martyr, including the preliminary tortures before his or her execution. This is not to say that sainted kings are unknown; Edmund, king of the East Angles, who in 869 was shot full of arrows by the invading Danes for refusing to abjure Christianity, is one, and Edward the Confessor, who reigned from 1042 to 1066, was another. They both figure in the Wilton

Diptych. In neither case is their emblem a staff, Edmund's being an arrow, and Edward's being the ring he gave to a presumed beggar, who later turned out to be St. John the Divine.<sup>12</sup> There are several wall-paintings of St. Edmund,<sup>13</sup> but, so far as the present writer is aware, only one of St. Edward, in St. Alban's Cathedral, and even there the attribution is disputed.<sup>14</sup> On the whole it would seem unlikely that the figure at Turkdean was a king.

Sainted bishops are not uncommon, so that if the headgear was indeed a mitre, wall-paintings of SS. Eligius, Erasmus, Gregory, Martin, Nicholas, and Thomas of Canterbury come to mind, but they are all depicted, so to speak, in action. Thus SS. Erasmus and Thomas are shown undergoing martyrdom, St. Martin is dividing his cloak, while SS. Eligius, Gregory, and Nicholas are performing the various miracles associated with them. The wall-paintings of a simple portrait of a standing, sainted, bishop, as, for example, St. William of York at St. Alban's Cathedral, and St. Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral, are in a minority. Since the standing bishop in the wall-painting to the south of the east window at Kempsey is so well known, it should be pointed out that, having no halo, he cannot have been a saint. If a bishop is depicted as standing and with a staff, it will be his crozier, its upper end surmounted by a crook, to emphasise his pastoral care. No crook can be discerned at Turkdean. Consideration has been given to whether any special significance can be attached to the staff being held diagonally, as at Turkdean, or vertically, but the present writer has not been able to find any.

On the whole, it is suggested that a bishop is also not the immediate interpretation which would spring to mind where a sainted figure with a staff is concerned.

There is, however, one saint who is invariably shown carrying a staff, namely, St. Christopher. His full story, in William Caxton's 1483 translation of the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voraigne, written in about 1275<sup>15</sup> is set out in Whaite's book on this saint.<sup>16</sup> It may be summarised by saying that Christopher, whose original name was Reprobus, was by way of being a giant who wanted to put his great strength at the disposal of 'the grettest prynce that was in the world'. Having found that service with a king and then with the Devil did not come up to his expectations, he began to consider taking service with Christ. His spiritual advisor was a Christian hermit, who suggested that if he used his great strength to carry travellers across a dangerously turbulent river, Christ would find means of letting him know whether this service was acceptable. Reprobus followed the hermit's advice, and eventually one night he found himself carrying a boy, who proved to be the Christ-Child, across the river, and strictly it is only from this stage that he should be referred to by his usual name, meaning the Christ-bearer. He is usually shown carrying the Child on his left shoulder, but other positions are not unknown. In all cases he is shown carrying a staff, sometimes vertically and sometimes diagonally. It is usually a massive one<sup>17</sup> but at Little Hampden, Bucks., it is extremely slender.<sup>18</sup> His staff has a special significance, in that the Christ-Child told him that, as evidence of his having found favour, the staff would in the next morning 'bere floures and fruyte', as indeed it did. This suggests that the figure at Turkdean might well be that of St. Christopher.

An additional point in favour of this interpretation is that the stars, identified by both Mrs. Baker and Croome, and still visible, are not the usual form of diapering, which would most frequently be a stylised flower made by stencilling with the sort of lead stencil found at Meaux Abbey, Yorks.<sup>19</sup> The importance of the stars at Turkdean is that they indicate that it is night-time, which is when, as already mentioned, the carrying of the Christ-Child took place; as Caxton's version of the *Golden Legend* puts it: 'And in a tyme as he [Christopher] slepte in his lodge he herd the voys of a childe which called hym . . . Thenne he awoke . . .'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, some of the more detailed wall-paintings of the saint show the hermit standing on the bank holding a

lighted lantern.<sup>21</sup> So far as the present writer is aware, he cannot recollect any other wall-painting subjects which involve night scenes except those relating to the betrayal of Christ, and also to the Nativity, such as the annunciation to the shepherds and the journey of the Magi, and the painting at Turkdean is palpably not any of these.

It is a usual feature of wall-paintings of St. Christopher that they should be on the wall opposite to the main entrance of the church;<sup>22</sup> at Turkdean this latter is, rather unusually, on the north, and the painting is indeed on the south wall, though not immediately opposite the door.

It may be noted that some of Whaite's illustrations reveal that those of St. Christopher at Stoke Dry, Leics., Fritton, Norfolk, and Slapton, Northants.,<sup>23</sup> all have headgear which might be either crowns or rayed haloes.

Identifications cannot of course be settled on a merely statistical basis, but, coupled with the other factors mentioned above, it is relevant that Kendon's statistical analysis<sup>24</sup> of the cases in Keyser's List of 1883<sup>25</sup> shows that the number of wall-paintings of St. Christopher was then 186, far exceeding those of any other saint, St. George being the runner-up, with 72, less than half.

While readily admitting that the present ravaged state of the wall-painting of the large figure at Turkdean means that the identity of its subject can never be established with certainty, it is suggested that, for the foregoing reasons, it is most likely to have been a St. Christopher.

It will have been noted that, apart from Kendon, it has not been possible to pray in aid any of the very few standard text-books on English medieval wall-paintings, since Wall, Tristram, and Caiger-Smith all appeared before the discovery was made in 1967. The latest edition of Rouse's *Discovering Wall Paintings* (1980) did indeed appear after that event, but is a 48-page booklet designed as an introduction to wall-paintings for the layman who knows nothing about them, a function it performs excellently. The pre-1967 work which mentions wall-paintings at Turkdean is that of Hobart Bird, but it refers only to a post-Reformation painting of the Ten Commandments and the remains of a consecration cross which were then on the north wall of the nave.<sup>26</sup>

Of the other wall-paintings mentioned by Croome and Mrs. Baker, the present writer was unable to identify the royal arms on the chancel arch, but could imagine that there was an outline of Christ in Majesty in the middle of it. This is not impossible; the royal arms would have been post-Reformation, and would not have been painted in true fresco and perhaps because of some incompatibility of its paint with the plaster it might conceivably have flaked off since 1967. If so, there could still be traces of the medieval Doom, which could be expected to have been on the chancel arch, underneath the arms. Remains of a post-Reformation inscription, though not of the cartouches referred to in 1967, can now only be made out on the south wall of the nave opposite the north door, and a few of its letters, possibly an 'o' and a 'u' can still be seen.

The regrettable feature of the story of the Turkdean paintings is that it demonstrates that, whereas the discovery of any other antiquity in a church would nowadays be treated with the greatest respect (on his last visit to Romsey Abbey the present writer saw that even the medieval onion found by Mrs. Baker in a puthole had been preserved in its own glass case) so often nothing seems to have been learnt about the proper treatment of newly-discovered medieval wall-paintings, which still seem to be singled out for the same philistinism as would have been directed against them 150 years ago during the height of the 19th-century church 'restoration', which, as Baigent says, could more properly have been called church 'desecration'.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the events at Turkdean were an unhappy repetition of, for example, those at another Gloucestershire village, Hill, where Hobart Bird records that in 1871, when considerable

'restoration' was in progress in the church, the lord of the manor saw that wall-paintings had been revealed, but in his absence the plaster on which they had been painted had been 'hacked off and removed with other debris'.<sup>28</sup> Keyser, writing of a similar occurrence at Black Bourton, Oxon., in 1866, refers to it being paralleled by 'so many other instances'.<sup>29</sup> In modern times, when wall-paintings were discovered at Brightlingsea, Essex, it was later found that 'the parishioners had taken matters into their own hands and had attacked the wall with electric sanding machines'.<sup>30</sup>

### *Acknowledgements*

For an insight into the remarkable character of W.I. Croome, I am indebted to Mr. J. MacKechnie-Jarvis, whose familiarity with the work and archives of the Gloucester Diocesan Advisory Committee is manifested in his book referred to in footnote 6. Thanks are due to Mr. D.J.H. Smith, County and Diocesan Archivist, for special help in trying to trace the photographs.

### *Notes & References*

1. D. Verey, *Buildings of England: Gloucs., the Cotswolds* (1970), 458–9 for full details.
2. W.I. Croome, 'Recent Discoveries of Wall-Paintings', *TBGAS* 86 (1967), 203–4.
3. Letter to the author, 14.12.1993.
4. Verey, *op.cit.*, 458, note 1.
5. Obituary of W.I. Croome, *op.cit.*, 212, note 2.
6. This was no merely local body, but the Wall Paintings Sub-Committee of the Council for the Care of Churches – *op.cit.*, note 3, and as to Croome generally, see J. MacKechnie-Jarvis, *History of the Gloucester Diocesan Advisory Committee* (1992), 29–49.
7. *Op.cit.*, note 3.
8. J. Hall, *Hall's Dict. of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (1985), 289.
9. *Ibid.*, 327.
10. *Ibid.*, 323–335.
11. E. Clive Rouse, *Discovering Wall Paintings* (1980), 6. A symbol of evil.
12. J.C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings* (not dated, but *c.* 1914), 175.
13. At Stoke Dry, Leics., Belchamp Walter, Essex, Oaksey, Wilts, and Pickering, Yorks. See J. Edwards, 'The Wall-Painting of the Unknown Saint at Padbury', *Recs. Bucks.* 27 (1985), 101–106, at 101.
14. W. Page, 'The St. Alban's School of Painting . . . Part I, Mural', *Archaeologia* 58 (1902), 275–292, at 288.
15. A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (1963), 59–60.
16. H.C. Whaite, *St. Christopher in English Medieval Wall Painting* (1929), 1–7. This book contains 36 plates which reproduce Whaite's copies of some of the St. Christophers referred to in the text. As the book is now over 60 years old, it cannot be assumed that all the originals of these copies still exist.
17. *Ibid.*, Plates 12, 15, 17, 26, 29, 30, 33, and 36.
18. *Ibid.*, Plate 1.
19. P. Binski, *British Museum, Medieval Craftsmen: Painters* (1991), Plates 61, 62.
20. Whaite, *op.cit.*, 3, note 16.
21. *Ibid.*, Plates 21, 33.
22. *Ibid.*, 8.
23. *Ibid.*, Plates 9, 10, and 12 (right-hand subject).
24. F. Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches during the Middle Ages* (1923), Appendix III.
25. C.E. Keyser, *List of Buildings having Mural Decoration* (3rd edition, 1883).

26. W. Hobart Bird, *The Ancient Mural Paintings in the Churches of Gloucs.* (1927), 31.
27. F. Baigent, 'On the Martyrdom of St. Thomas of Canterbury . . . at St. John's Church, Winchester'. *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assn.* 10 (1855), 53–87, at 53.
28. Hobart Bird, *op.cit.*, 20, note 26.
29. C.E. Keyser, 'Notes on the [church] of . . . Black Bourton . . . Oxon.', *Jnl. Brit. Archaeol. Assn.* 21 (1915), 89–96, at 93, and, generally, see J. Edwards, 'English Medieval Wall-Paintings: Some 19th-Century Hazards', *Archaeol. Jnl.* 146 (1989), 465–475.
30. W. and K. Rodwell, *Historic Churches: A Wasting Asset* (1977), 70.

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