

A Newly-deciphered Wall-Painting of St. Martin at Widford

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SUMMARY

On the south side of the chancel of the church of St. Oswald, at Widford, is a fourteenth-century wall-painting which, unlike the well-known contemporary painting of the morality of the Three Living and the Three Dead on the opposite wall, has been regarded as indecipherable since they were both discovered in 1905. It is suggested in this article that the central subject on the south wall can be identified as St. Martin of Tours (c.315–397) dividing his cloak with the beggar. Reliance for this is placed not merely on what can be discerned of the present remains of the painting but also on its notable resemblances to the few other undoubted examples, also discussed, of this rare subject among surviving English medieval wall-paintings.

The 13th-century church of St. Oswald at Widford, two miles east of Burford, now stands isolated in the fields of the Windrush valley, all that is left, save for various humps and tumps, of a deserted village.¹ The church contains medieval wall-paintings which, like so many others, were covered with whitewash at the Reformation; they are sometimes described as having been uncovered in 1904. Their discovery was in fact rather later, since their existence was not even postulated until February, 1905, when William Weir, the architect in charge of the restoration of the church as a whole by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, reported that there was 'evidence of paintings existing . . . which there is hope of being able to expose by careful removal of limewash'.² By June, 1905, the Committee of the Society was able to report that 'the work of removing the limewash and exposing the paintings has been successfully carried out on portions of the north and south walls, by means of ivory paper-knives, etc., and a series of paintings brought to light of very great interest'.³

Notwithstanding some differences on dating between the writers mentioned below, the wall-painting the subject of this article can safely be assigned to the first half of the 14th-century.

Though it appears that the immediate lordship of Widford was held by local people at this period,⁴ there is no history of the village, so that the wall-paintings cannot be related to some contemporary person or event, a state of affairs which is unfortunately normal for English medieval wall-paintings. One of the few exceptions is South Newington, Oxon., where it was possible to identify the donors of the 14th-century wall-

¹ W.G. Hoskins, *One Man's England*, (1978), 67.

² *Oxon. Archaeol. Soc. Reports*, (1904), 17–18.

³ *Annual Reports of the Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, (1905), 67. There had been a reference to Widford in the Committee's Reports for 1904, but of a purely preliminary, fund-raising, nature, 68–9. A set of these Annual Reports is kept in the Main Library of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

⁴ *Feudal Aids*, ii. 252, 274; *Cat. Ancient Deeds*, i, no. A1100.

paintings by the fortunate inclusion of their coats-of-arms in the general scheme of the paintings.⁵

The usual technique in such paintings in medieval England was fresco a secco, in which, unlike true fresco, the plaster was allowed to dry out after being applied to the whole of the walls, leaving the painter to re-vivify it to some extent by applying lime-putty to the plaster surface when he was ready to start work. There is no reason to believe that any other method was used at Widford. Fresco a secco had the advantage of being cheaper than true fresco, since the plasterer could be paid off as soon as he had completed his work, instead of being kept in attendance to work in co-operation with the painter. The original colours had to be compatible with the lime in the plaster if they were not to fall off prematurely. They would most commonly be earth colours such as red and yellow ochres, for which Shotover hill to the east of Oxford was a well-known source,⁶ though several other colours were available, and the illusion of still more could be produced by the skilled painter.

The wall-paintings on the north side of the nave at Widford consist of a 15th-century St. Christopher with a 17th-century⁷ Royal Arms superimposed. On the north side of the chancel there are two tiers of paintings, both 14th-century, comprising in the upper tier a martyrdom of St. Lawrence and, to the left of it, a more fragmentary martyrdom the victim of which is being executed by arrows, which, in an English painting, is more likely to be the sainted King Edmund of East Anglia than St. Sebastian; the lower tier is devoted exclusively to the morality of the Three Living and the Three Dead.⁸

The position regarding the wall-paintings on the south side of the chancel is markedly different. It is not to be expected that they would be referred to in the first report which mentions wall-paintings, that of William Weir quoted above, since when that was written they were still awaiting discovery. Nor were they mentioned in the report of the Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings of June, 1905; indeed the only painting to which that specifically refers is the 17th-century Royal Arms. The next publications were those in the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Association* for 1911 and 1925, but they are also silent as to the paintings on the south wall of the chancel, though both mention wall-paintings in other parts of the church.⁹ Of those writers who do make specific reference to the paintings on the south wall of the chancel, Professor Tristram, in a work published posthumously in 1955, said 'little remains on the south wall, where the subjects are unidentifiable';¹⁰ in 1963 A. Caiger-Smith described them as 'two tiers of fragmentary painting';¹¹ while the most recent observations, from Miss J. Sherwood's contribution to *Oxfordshire*, in the Buildings of England series, published in 1974, are that 'on the S wall two more subjects'.¹² However, E.T. Long, in a report on the paintings published in 1933,¹³ stated that 'on the South wall between the

⁵ E.W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th century*, (1955), 71.

⁶ M.G. Hobson & K.L.H. Price, *Otmoor & its Seven Towns*, (c.1960), 4.

⁷ H.B. Tower & J. Mason-Pierce, *St. Oswald's Church, Widford*, (edition of 1968), 7, a copy of which was kindly lent by the Rector of Widford, the Rev. Timothy Hine. Copies of earlier, but not markedly dissimilar, editions of 1953 & 1958 are kept in the Local History Department of the Central Library, Westgate, Oxford.

⁸ This is the best documented wall-painting in the church, since it forms a leading subject of Miss E. Carleton Williams' article 'Mural Paintings of the Three Living and the Three Dead in England', *Jnl. British Archaeol. Assoc.*, 3rd series, vii, (1942) 31-40, and has been described by Dame Joan Evans in *English Art, 1307-1461*, (1949), 94, as one of the two best examples of this subject in the country.

⁹ *Trans. Bristol & Gloucs. Archaeol. Assoc.*, xxxiv, (1911), 28, and xlvii, (1925), 42.

¹⁰ E.W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th century*, (1955), 265.

¹¹ A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, (1963), 169.

¹² J. Sherwood & Sir N. Pevsner, *Oxfordshire*, (1974), 841.

¹³ Quoted in Tower & Mason-Pierce, *St. Oswald's Church*, 6 & 7.

windows are two more subjects rather difficult to decipher'; he went on to say 'in the lower picture we have a bearded figure flanked by two kneeling figures in an attitude of supplication. This may be intended for a Christ in Majesty, a popular subject in the fourteenth century.' It will be noted that his main reason for this attribution was that it was a 'popular subject', which is scarcely conclusive. Apart from the fact that the south chancel wall would be a highly unusual place for a wall-painting of a Majesty, Christ was invariably shown with a cruciferous nimbus, and the arms of the cross would be shown touching His head. There are no traces of this at Widford, although the head is the best preserved part of the painting. In any event, Long had himself abandoned this attribution by the time his 'Medieval Wall Paintings in Oxfordshire Churches' had been published in *Oxoniensia* in 1972, in the Catalogue of which he describes 'the remains' as 'too fragmentary to decipher',¹⁴ thereby joining the rest of the writers on the subject, quoted above.

The views of Tristram and those who have followed him are unduly pessimistic, since although much of the space between the two windows in the south wall of the chancel consists of baffling fragments of paintings, enough remains of the central subject to enable it to be identified with reasonable certainty.

To help in its identification, the line drawing (Fig. 1, p. 131) shows the central subject in isolation, free from the confused state of the south chancel wall as a whole. It represents, reading from the spectator's left, the head of a horse, of which the mane, ears, and eye, together with the angle formed where the underside of the jaw meets that of the neck can still be made out, as can the curve of a long bridle. In the place where a rider's head would be expected, there is indeed that of a young, bearded man, with an air of such nobility about him that Long originally took him to be Christ. He is not looking in the direction the horse is going, and it can therefore be assumed that the horse is either walking slowly or standing still. The head of the horseman is decidedly the best preserved part of the whole composition. His clothes and part of his left leg are indicated by a good deal of solid colour, though it is not possible to be precise about details, save that one of the rider's upper garments is streaming away from his left shoulder in a great semi-circle before finally falling downwards. A long thin object, with two slightly converging outer edges and a line down the middle, pointing to the right, is held in the horseman's right hand at an angle of 45° across and beyond this garment.

To the right of the horseman, facing the spectator, are outlines of the head and body of a standing man, of whose face both the eyes and nose can be seen. His left hand is on his hip, but his right hand and arm, apparently bare and bent at the elbow, are held out towards the horseman.

Plate 1 shows part of the south chancel wall as it now exists, with fragmentary paintings around, but probably having no relationship with, the central subject just described.

As to colours, the bridle and the long object are both yellow, but everything else is red. This limited range of the commonest colours in English medieval wall-paintings may mean that what is now seen is not the remains of the wall-painting itself, but of the preliminary drawing which would be painted over when the wall-painting was carried out in its final form; such a preliminary drawing is recorded by Tristram as having survived at South Newington.¹⁵ It all depends on how much was removed with those 'ivory paper-knives, etc'.

¹⁴ *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii, 105.

¹⁵ E.W. Tristram, 'Wall-Paintings at South Newington', *Burlington Mag.*, lxii, (1933), 123.



Plate 1. Wall-paintings on the south wall of the chancel at Widford Church, with St. Martin and the beggar in the middle (1981). What appears to be a second horse's head, to the left of that of the saint's horse, is an illusion caused partly by dust on the ridges in the plaster and partly by shadows thrown by the flash; only one of the 'lines' is actually painted.

Photo: Department of Museum Services, Oxfordshire County Council.

Of all the subjects to be expected in English medieval wall-paintings — episodes from the first and last periods of the life of Christ; His Mother; Dooms; saints, and Moralities — there is only one which the painting just described can have been intended to depict: the garment streaming away behind the horseman's shoulders is a cloak; the long thin object with the line along the middle held diagonally across the cloak is a sword; the man standing to the right of the horse and rider, with one bare arm stretched out towards them is a beggar; so that the horseman is St. Martin (who, unlike some of the saints more popular as subjects for English medieval wall-paintings, was a historical character who was later to become Bishop of Tours¹⁶) dividing his cloak with the beggar. The composition of the painting is moreover strikingly similar to those other examples of this subject in English medieval wall-painting, and in other media, which are still extant, and which are considered in more detail below.

The popularity of St. Martin as a saint is indicated by the fact that, apart from scriptural saints, only four saints outnumber him in church dedications; there are 173 pre-Reformation dedications to him.¹⁷ By contrast, however, even in 1883, when C.E.

¹⁶ An account of the saint's life will be found in any of the standard dictionaries of saints; see, for example, D.H. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, (1978), 265.

¹⁷ Miss F. Arnold-Forster, *Studies in Church Dedications*, (1899), i. 439-49.



Fig. 1. Drawing of St. Martin and the beggar wall-painting in Widford church.

Keyser published his *List of Churches having Mural Decorations*, there were only 8 surviving paintings of St. Martin, compared with 186 of St. Christopher.¹⁸ Though some more paintings of St. Martin may have been uncovered since 1883, there are likely on balance to be even fewer now than in Keyser's day, having regard to the regrettable wastage of medieval wall-paintings which has taken place in the ensuing century. There are indeed only three surviving wall-paintings of the saint included in Caiger-Smith's *Selective Catalogue*, and of these, in only two of them is the attribution certain. St. Martin is thus not a common subject in surviving English medieval wall-paintings, though there may originally have been a number of paintings of him proportionate to the number of church dedications mentioned above. If so, most of them must have succumbed to the many hazards to which the survival of medieval wall-paintings is subject in this country. As a matter of interest, it may be added that there are even fewer representations of the saint in misericords; the sole recorded example being a 'probably 15th-century' one at Fornham St. Martin, in Suffolk.¹⁹

Of the wall-paintings of St. Martin listed by Caiger-Smith, one is at Chalgrave, in Bedfordshire,²⁰ where the painting (Plate II) is also on the south wall, with the saint's horse looking to the left, or eastwards, as at Widford, while the saint's body is in the same contrapposto attitude as he turns to cut his cloak with his sword. He differs from the St.

¹⁸ Taken from the statistical analysis of Keyser's List which appears in App. III to F. Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches*, (1923), 230.

¹⁹ G.L. Remnant, *Catalogue of Misericords in Gt. Britain*, (1969), 145.

²⁰ Caiger-Smith, *Eng. Medieval Mural Paintings*, 130.



Plate II. St. Martin, Chalgrave, Bedfordshire (1976); wall-painting. Photo: John Edwards.

Martin at Widford in that, being beardless, he looks younger; he has a halo; and is holding his sword at a flatter angle. As to the beggar (who may possibly have a companion at Chalgrave) he too is standing to the right of the horse. Caiger-Smith dates this painting *c.* 1400. There is also a St. Martin still surviving at Nassington, in Northamptonshire, of which Caiger-Smith says '*c.* 1400. (Delapidated)'.²¹ Tristram amplifies this by saying²² 'the saint, depicted on horseback in the centre, . . . rides eastwards but turns back holding his fur-lined cloak extended towards the beggar who grasps it with his left hand and holds a staff in his right'. The composition at Nassington therefore closely resembles those already described; it may be of interest to add that so does the St. Martin in the early 14th-century Becket window in St. Lucy's Chapel at Oxford Cathedral,²³ as indeed does that of the misericord at Fornham mentioned above, save that in this case it is reversed, perhaps on account of some quirk of woodcarving technique.²⁴

A painting in the church at Martley, now in the county of Hereford and Worcester, the third example mentioned by Caiger-Smith,²⁵ but qualified by a 'perhaps', is also queried by Tristram.²⁶ The present writer suggests that this painting is equally likely to be an Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, since a horseman could scarcely be cutting his cloak into two with his sword, if, as at Martley, one of his hands is free.

The St. Martin at Widford, which, it is suggested, has now been identified after the abnormally long period of 78 years, thus makes a welcome addition to the few surviving representations of this saint in English medieval wall-paintings.

²¹ *Ibid.* 163.

²² E.W. Tristram, *Eng. Wall Painting of the 14th century*, (1955), 225.

²³ R.C.H.M. — *Oxford*, (1939), reproduced and dated in Plate 100.

²⁴ Sir N. Pevsner, *Suffolk*, (1961), reproduced in Plate 29.

²⁵ Caiger-Smith, *Eng. Medieval Mural Paintings*, 181.

²⁶ Tristram, *Eng Wall Painting of the 14th century*, (1955), 222.