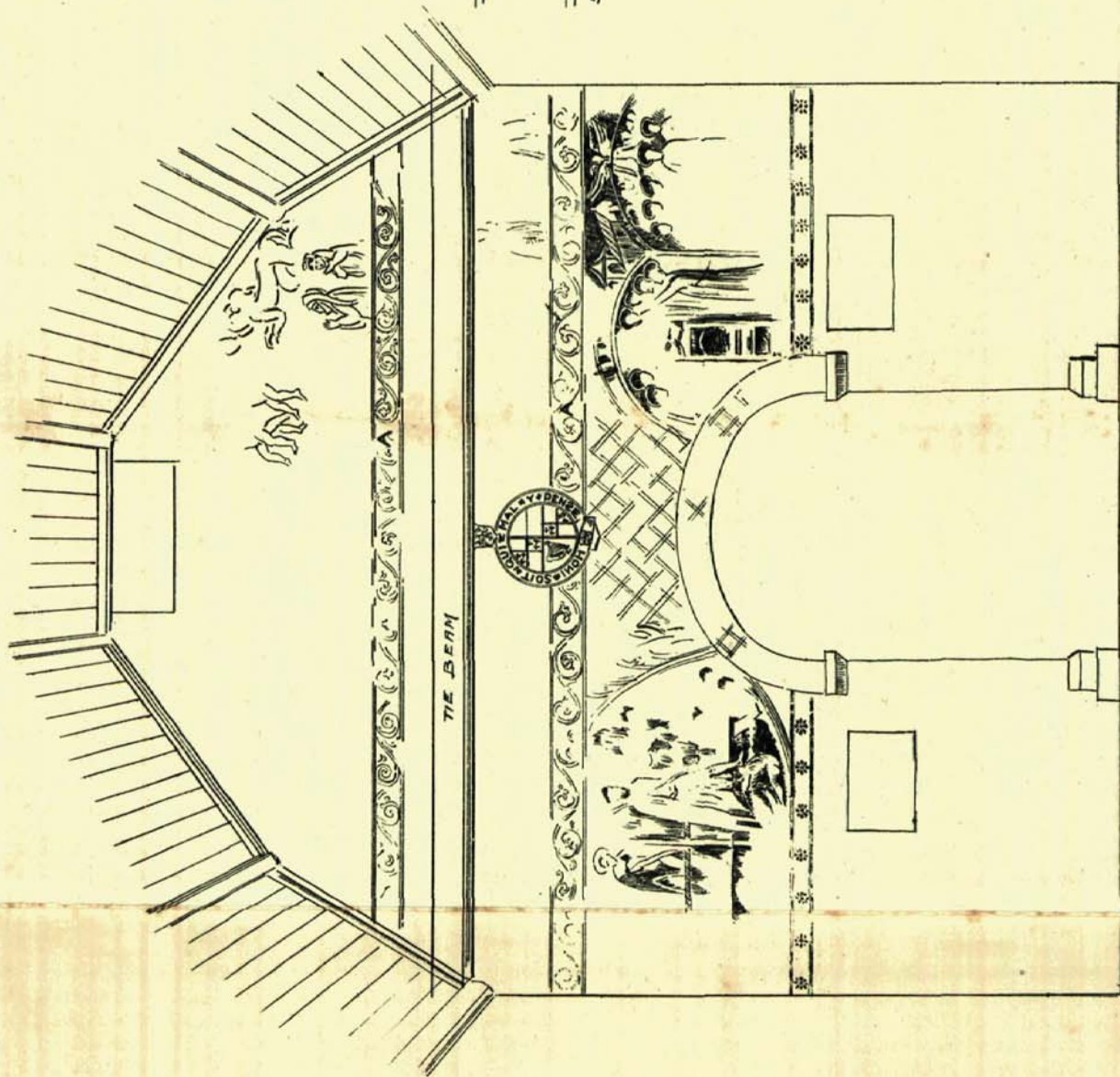




SCROLL PATTERNS
AT A.A.

MURAL PAINTING—EAST WALL OF NAVE—ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH.
MALCOLM WATSON, DELT.

ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH.

By WALTER MONEY, F.S.A.

With a description of the Mural Paintings, by CHARLES KEYSER, M.A., F.S.A.

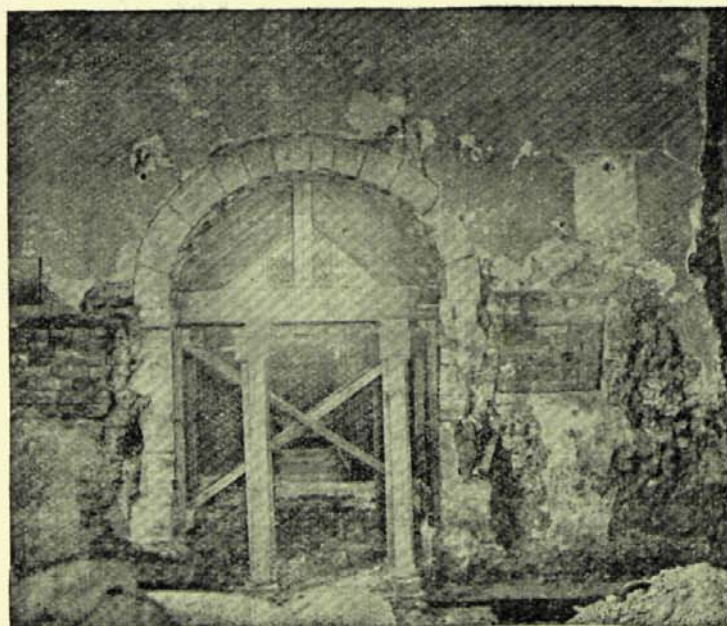
Ashmansworth or "Ashmersworth" as it is printed in the *Liber Regis* is a long scattered village, neglected and deserted in its aspect, with a rapidly decreasing population, and is one of the poorest parishes in proportion to its acreage in this part of the county. It was, until late years, a chapelry attached to the rich rectory of East Woodhay, and a "Peculiar" of the Bishops of Winchester, so called from being specially exempted from Archidiaconal jurisdiction, and remaining under the immediate and peculiar authority of the Bishops of the diocese.

The earliest historical allusion we can find relating to Ashmansworth is in a charter of King Athelstan the Victorious (925-940,) who gave the manor to the Cathedral Church of Winchester. It is included in the list of the bishops' manors in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica*, and the patronage of the church has remained in the possession of the See of Winton from that time to the present day.

As connecting the present Ashmansworth with the past, there is no more potent link than the ancient church, dedicated to St. James, but whether to St. James the Less; or St. James the Great is not specified in the records. Of the usual type of small parish churches of the Norman period, it consists of an aisleless nave and chancel. The original chancel walls remain on the South and North sides, but the East end was rebuilt (1746) in a manner which has done irreparable injury to the venerable structure. Owing probably to the subordinate position of the church to the parish of East Woodhay, and a non-resident curate, the old building was allowed to fall into a very ruinous condition, and its story until recently has been that so familiar to

archæological students of church architecture—misplaced zeal and fanatical iconoclasm. An effort is now being made to preserve it from further ruin and decay by timely repairs and general attention as distinguished from the usually unsatisfactory process of "restoration."

There may have been and probably was a still older church on the same site as the present one, which appears to have been built about the middle of the twelfth century. The chancel is entirely of that date, and the nave is of the same, or not a much later period, although the only feature of definite date is the window in the South wall, which is of the fourteenth century. This window is an addition made for the sake of giving more light to the two altars which stood right and left of the chancel arch. A like insertion at an earlier date was made in the south wall of the chancel to give light to the altar there. The narrow round headed



CHANCEL ARCH AND WALLS DURING THE RESTORATION, 1900

windows in the chancel are original, but unfortunately the stonework has been covered with cement on the outside. The other windows are of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as also are all the doorways and the porch, which latter acts as a buttress on the south side. The floors were at this time raised because the level of the churchyard had risen, and the old doorways thereby became too low and were altered. The north door, after the alteration, was blocked up, probably for the sake of warmth, and two plain windows were put in on this side for light. The chancel arch is very small as is usual in very early churches. In the middle ages an opening was made on each side of it, in an oblique direction, to enable persons sitting right and left to see the elevation of the Host of the high altar. In comparatively modern times, when the chancel was not used in connection with the nave these openings were stopped up with brick and plastered over; the heads of the apertures being supported by rough oak slabs.

In the opinion of Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, F.S.A., who has directed the repairs, in connection with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the roof of the nave is over six hundred years old, and the curious moulded beams with their carved bosses are said to have been brought from Winchester Cathedral, but the present Dean Stephens of high reputation as an archæologist, entirely discredits this long existing belief. The roof of the chancel is modern, and of deal, rather slight in construction. Before the present work was taken in hand there was a modern plaster ceiling in the nave, and the new light barrel panelling is only a temporary substitute until such times as a new oak open roof can be constructed, which we fear is in the dim and distant future. The font at first sight appears to be of the seventeenth century, but it is said it had been cut into its present form out of an older one within memory.

The almy or locker on the north side of the chancel was discovered and opened out by the writer in 1887, having been previously blocked up and plastered over, and the bason or head of a pillared piscina was at the same time found built into the wall.

At the foot of the quoin at the north-east angle of the nave, there is a piece of moulded stone which has every appearance of Roman work, and as suggested by Mr. Shore, was most probably brought from Silchester, which was used as a general quarry after the destruction of the city. The material employed in building many of the neighbouring churches evidently came from that place, and much is said to have been used in the building of Reading Abbey.

It may be added that the old Church of Ashmansworth has interesting associations from the circumstance that Bishops Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1685-1691; Hooper, Bishop of St. Asaph, 1763; and South, Bishop of London, 1766-1777, as Rectors of East Woodhay, often ministered within its ancient walls.

Remains of several wall paintings were brought to light during the recent repairs, and are here described by the distinguished archæologist and eminent authority, Mr. C. E. Keyser, F.S.A., of Aldermaston Court, to whom we are indebted for the accompanying illustrations.

THE MURAL PAINTINGS AT ASHMANSWORTH.

BY CHARLES E. KEYSER, M.A., F.S.A.

The church at Ashmansworth has been so much altered by various "churchwarden" restorations, that on the exterior very little of the early structure remains. Within, however, less damage has been done, and consequently during the recent repairs, much that is of interest has been brought to light. In the year 1887, some preliminary scraping was carried out by Mr. Walter Money on the walls of the chancel, and other paintings of early character were subsequently found beneath the whitewash. On the east splay of the easternmost window on the north side is a

scroll pattern in red, and on the next splay a saint kneeling in adoration before another male or female figure. Between this and the western Norman window on the north side are the faint traces of another figure, alleged to represent St. Anne.¹ These paintings are mentioned in the Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club, vol. iv., p. 192, and are assigned to the early part of the 12th century, but the scroll does not appear to be earlier than the 13th century.²

During the year 1899, when the Church was being more systematically repaired, under the able guidance of Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, F.S.A., more discoveries were made, the most interesting being on the east wall of the nave, on, at each side of, and above, the chancel arch. On the arch, which is of plain Norman character, and the wall above it, is a *trellis pattern* in red formed by intersecting lines, and traces of two tiers of subjects divided by a border enclosing a scroll pattern in red can still be made out as the remaining portion of the original scheme of decoration. There has been another border above, but this is now mixed up with the later subject. On the lower tier have been four scenes within medallions, two on each side of the arch. The ground-work between is coloured a deep red, but the various figures are simply portrayed in outline. The first subject on the north side has been obliterated, but was probably either the Last Supper or the Crucifixion. Within the next medallion is represented the *Harrowing of Hell*, or the Descent of Our Lord into Limbus. He is depicted on the north side as a tall figure with bare feet, trampling on the prostrate form of a large demon, while some small figures kneel both in front of and behind Him. The jaws of Hell are delineated by a semi-circular band of yellow lines on the south side. *Part of a border with roses* of a later period has been painted over the lower portion of this picture. Within the next medallion

¹ When first disclosed in 1887, says Mr. Money, this figure was very perfect, including the work in hand, and Mr. Blandford Fletcher, the well known artist who was with me, felt there could be no question as to the personage of the subject. This also applies to the Annunciation.

² A short notice of them also appears in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. liii., (2nd series, iii.), p. 172.

on the south side of the chancel arch, is in the centre what looks like the back of a large chair or bedstead, but is more probably intended for a tomb, and at least four figures standing by it with upraised hands. Can this be the subject of *the Resurrection*, as portrayed by the presence of the Marys at the Sepulchre? Between this and the next medallion is depicted a Church, with curious cupola or low spire, and red lines marking the pitch of the roof. Within the medallion under a semi-circular headed arch are several nimbed figures, only the upper portions visible, and a large white dove with outspread wings hovering above them. This no doubt represents the *descent of the Holy Spirit* on the day of Pentecost, a subject which it is believed is not elsewhere represented in Mural Painting in England. The various figures in this series are about three feet in height. In the tier above are several large figures, apparently all nimbed, those over the Chancel Arch very faint, and mainly covered by the Royal Arms within a garter; which have been printed on canvas and painted. It seems probable that here was the lower part of the subject of the Doom, or Christ in Majesty, the upper portion being now concealed beneath the later paintings. The date of this earlier series is probably late in the 12th century.

On the upper part of the wall are the fragmentary remains of a late 15th century *representation of the Doom*. Hurrying towards the north are the lower limbs of several nude figures, another in a shroud, two others rising from tombs, part of the wing of a demon, and several other fragments being discernible in the north and central portions of the picture. In the top corner on the south side is a very large demon with long tail, above several figures with clasped hands, and perhaps traces of flames. The upper central portion with the portraiture of Christ in Judgment has entirely disappeared. The colours used are grey and dark green, and the treatment seems very similar to that in a painting of the same subject recently discovered at Ford church, Sussex.

On the north wall of the nave are traces of a continuation of the earlier painting, and a 17th century version of the *Lords Prayer*. Between two debased windows on this side is

part of a large figure in olive green vestment and rich red under garment. The lower part of the subject is destroyed, but the right arm and hand are shown holding up the dress. The upper portion is somewhat confused, but traces of a small nimbed head, and the folds of the garment of the smaller figure can be made out. There is an inscription on a scroll above, and another small scroll close to the hand. Some remains of red colouring still further complicate the subject, which is however, undoubtedly the familiar portraiture of *St. Christopher*, executed at the same period, as the later painting of the Doom over the Chancel Arch. On the south nave wall are portions of 17th century texts, and traces of subjects, probably of the 15th century period. There are the outlines of *three* consecration crosses, two on the south, and one on the north wall. The *wall-plate* above the *St. Christopher* has been decorated with the barber pole pattern.

There can be no doubt that as we so often find in small out of the way churches, so at Ashmansworth, a very extensive scheme of mural decoration has been carried out at at least three different periods. It is unfortunate that it has been impossible to obtain more satisfactory results for the labour which has been expended in clearing off the whitewash, more especially with regard to the earliest series, which appear to have been of unusual interest, and different to any other examples of this period, which have yet been discovered.
