

PAINTED LID OF A RELIQUARY CHEST OR ALTAR CHEST

Now preserved in the North Presbytery Aisle,
Winchester Cathedral

BY A. R. GREEN, F.S.A.

A distemper on wood panel, 1320—1335.

This interesting relic, with its beautiful colouring, is all that remains of a chest which was given to the Cathedral Priory by Sir William de Lillebone, or de Lislebone, who flourished between 1258 and 1334.

In 1321 Sir William surrendered lands at Bransbury, Barton Stacey, to the prior and monks in return for a corrody (annual payment or annuity) of £10 per annum, and no doubt the following extract from the *Victoria County History*, Vol. iv, p. 419, refers to the same William, although his name is spelled differently. Bransbury "seems to have been held of the prior and convent of St. Swithun at fee-farm until 1321, when William Yellebeon obtained licence to alienate it to them in mortmain."

The only reference to this lid by the *Victoria County History* seems to be in an enumeration of the contents of the feretory, where it was formerly stored, and the brief statement is: "A late 13th century oak chest with painted decorations is also of much interest." In *English Church Furniture*, by Cox & Harvey, it is called a painted panel for use as a reredos, but no description is given. Along the lower part below the panels is an inscription in Lombardic lettering, now mostly obliterated, which seems to state that Willelmus de Insula Bona gave this chest for the holding of relics to the Church of St. Swithun, and the monks in return bound themselves [? to say masses for his soul at the Altar] of St. Thomas the Martyr and [? to keep an anniversary at the feast] of St. John Evangelist before the Latin Gate.¹

The donor and his wife, Anastasia, are seen to the right and left of the inscription, with St. John Baptist in the middle. (Plate I).

Sir William is clad in mail, over which is a cyclas charged with his arms—party per pale, argent and sable, a chevron counter-changed of the field—which also appears on his shield and ailettes. His wife, kneeling, wears a wimple, and on her red mantle are three shields of her husband's arms. (Plate II).

St. John Baptist stands in the centre under a trefoiled arch; he is clothed in a red garment, and carries the Agnus Dei in his left hand. (Plate II).

¹ Or perhaps the relics were to be exposed on the feasts of St. Thomas and St. John.

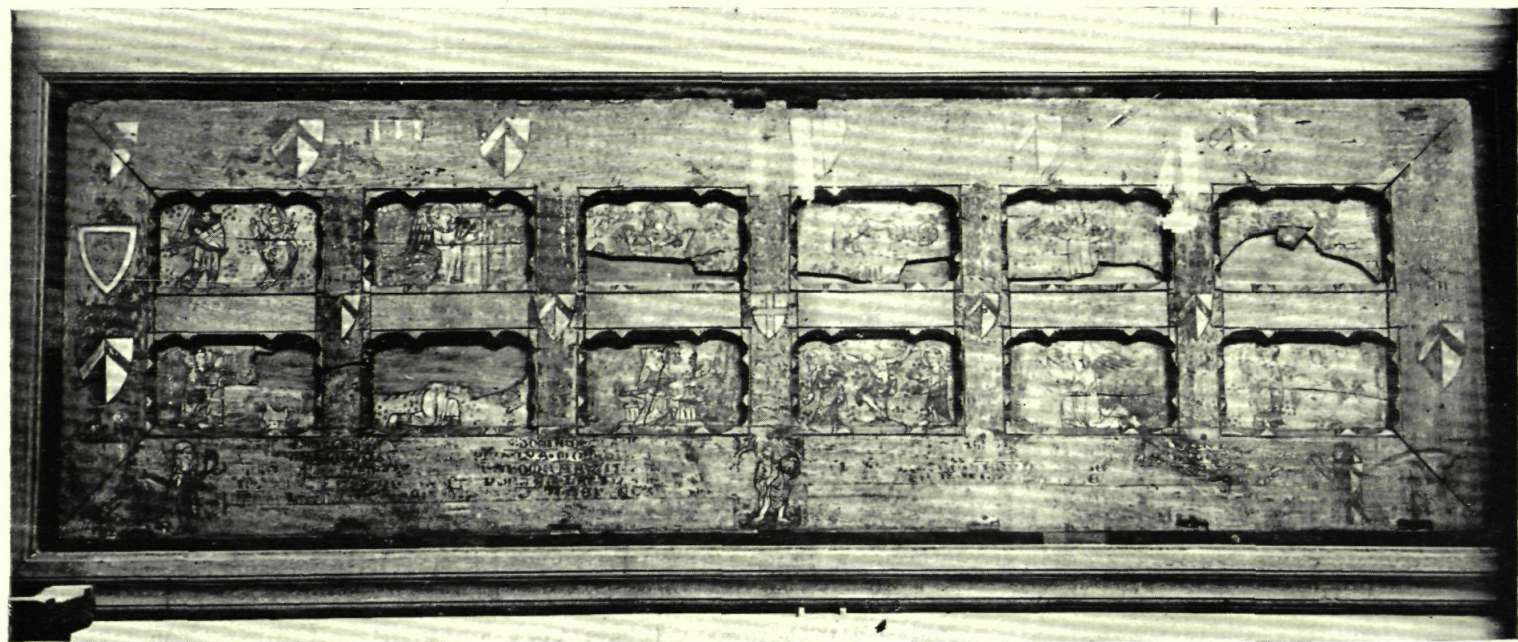


PLATE I

PAINTED LID OF RELIQUARY CHEST OR ALTAR CHEST

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PANEL XII. ECCLESIASTIC AND ST. MARGARET
DONOR



DONOR



ST. JOHN BAPTIST

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PANEL IV. CORONATION OF VIRGIN

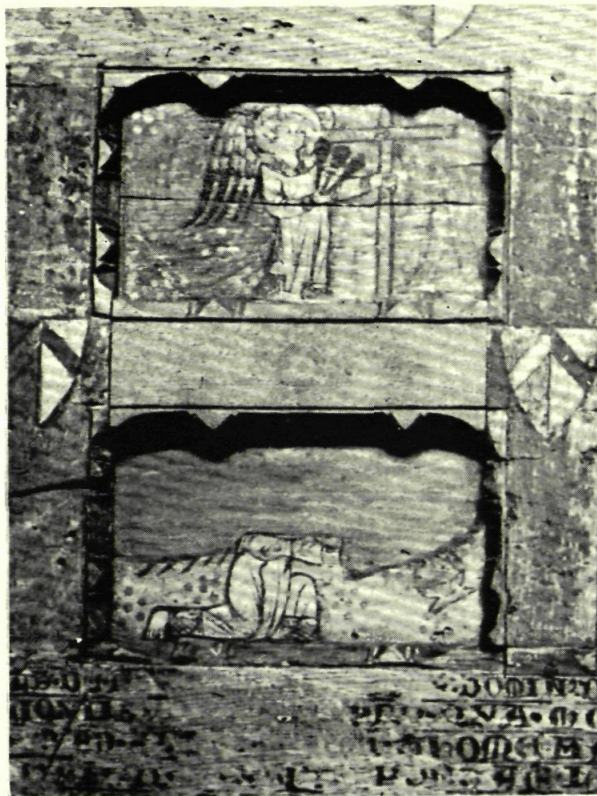
PANEL X. CRUCIFIXION



PANEL V. ANGEL WITH EMBLEMS OF THE PASSION

PANEL XI. ANGEL CENSING

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PANEL II. ANGEL WITH EMBLEMS OF THE PASSION

PANEL VIII. ANGEL CENSING



PANEL III. CHRIST IN MAJESTY

PANEL IX. VIRGIN AND CHILD [To face page 221]



PANEL I. ST. GEORGE AND ST. PETER

PANEL VII. ST. JAMES THE GREAT AND AN ECCLESIASTIC

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Arranged on what was the inner side of the lid are twelve sunk panels, in two rows. The four central panels contain representations of our Lord and the Blessed Virgin, and these are flanked by four angels, all facing inwards, and the four outermost panels contain figures of saints. Six of the panels are broken and incomplete, and the paintings remain in much better condition at the left than at the right end of the lid.

In the upper row, reading from left to right, are :—

1.—St. George and St. Peter. This is the best preserved panel. St. George is seen in banded mail and long surcoat. In his right hand he carries a sword, broad at the hilt and tapering to a point, the quillon or cross-bar being short and straight, and the pommel a spherical knob. Carried on his left arm is a "heater-shaped" shield, short and straight at the top, and emblazoned argent, a cross gules. The large square ailettes on his shoulders have been deliberately given a right-angled turn by the artist, for the correct position was parallel with the sides of the face, but in that position only perpendicular lines representing their edges would be apparent.

St. Peter is depicted bearded and nimbed, wearing a red chasuble and an amice, and carrying the keys, but only one is visible. On his head is a conical cap with a small round ball at the top, the first form of the Papal Tiara, in which St. Peter is often figured. Boniface VIII, 1294—1303, added a second crown, and a few years afterwards Urban V added a third crown.¹

The diapered background is well seen on this panel. (Plate V).

2.—An Angel with two emblems of the Passion, the Cross, and three nails. (Plate IV).

3.—The upper portion of a "Christ in Majesty" within a quatrefoil, surrounded, on a red background, by the symbols of the Evangelists, but only those of St. Mark (Marcus) and St. John (Johanne) survive. Over our Lord's left shoulder a trident appears, and a similar ornamental throne is seen in the ninth panel. (Plate IV).

4.—The Coronation of the Virgin by our Lord, who holds in His left hand an orb painted with symbols of land, sea, and sky. (Plate III).

5.—An Angel with emblems of the Passion, a spear in the left hand, and perhaps a sponge or the crown of thorns in the right hand. (Plate III).

6.—A damaged panel with the figures almost obliterated, but possibly representing a bearded ecclesiastic (? St. Paul), and a knightly figure or a military saint. (Not illustrated).

¹ Rock in *The Church of our Fathers*.

The lower row :—

7.—A Pilgrim with staff and scrip, and perhaps a scallop shell in his hat (St. James the Great). The feet are bare, the bag hangs over the left shoulder, and the staff held in the left hand has a round ball at the top, and a round knob on the ground. His right hand and very large forefinger are extended as if admonishing the figure opposite, which is, unfortunately, missing, the board being broken away. The missing figure, however, is evidently an 'ecclesiastic' (? St. Swithun), for the part now remaining shows the apparel on the lower part of a vestment reaching to the feet. (Plate V).

8.—The lower half of a kneeling and censing angel. (Plate IV).

9.—The Virgin and Child. The Virgin, seated on a throne, holds a branch with three lilies in her right hand, while the Child's left hand supports an orb. (Plate IV).

10.—The Crucifixion. Our Lord is depicted in a green garment, and the Cross and three nails are shown. The Virgin is clothed in red and St. John in green. (Plate III).

11.—A kneeling and censing Angel with a boat-shaped vessel in the left hand. A very beautiful and artistic figure. (Plate III).

12.—An ecclesiastic in a red chasuble with green apparel below, and another figure (the face is dimly visible), possibly St. Margaret of Antioch, for there are traces of a dragon in the lower part. (Plate II).

Shields bearing coats of arms are painted above and at the sides, and between the two rows of panels.

1.—Argent, a cross gules (St. George). (Plate I, centre).

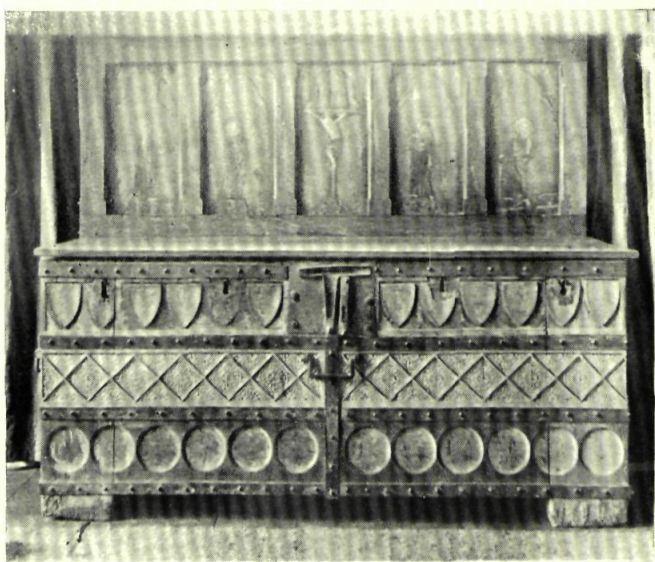
2.—Gules, three leopards or (England).

3.—Gules, three leopards or, a label of three points argent (Thomas of Brotherton, Earl of Norfolk, eldest son of Edward I by his second wife, Margaret, 1300—1338). (Plate I, above panel II).

4.—Gules, three leopards or, a bordure argent (Edmund of Woodstock, Earl of Kent, youngest son of Edward I and Margaret, 1301—1330).¹ (Plate V, left of panel I).

5.—Party per pale, argent and sable, a chevron counter-changed of the field (Sir William de Lillebone, the donor, d. 1334). This shield is repeated twelve times.

¹ "Edmund of Woodstock, Earl of Kent, was the leader of the Nobles at Winchester who were said to have conspired and planned in 1328 the overthrow of the favourite Mortimer. He was seized, attainted by a Parliament in the Castle of Winchester and condemned to die, but so much was he beloved that none could be found to behead him; and for a long day he stood waiting before the Castle Gate, until at last came an accursed ribald from the Marshalsea, who, to save his own wretched life, put him to death." (Kitchen's, Winchester).



THE NEWPORT COFFER

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The presence of the arms of Thomas of Brotherton and Edmund of Woodstock suggests that the date of the chest is not earlier than about 1320, and the date of the donor's death makes it unlikely that it is much later than 1334.¹

So far as can be ascertained, no account of this extremely valuable example of mediæval art in England is to be found in any book, but in 1923 it was loaned to the Exhibition of British Primitives at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and copies of the panels, painted by Professor Tristram, may be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum.²

Dimensions of the lid Length 7ft. 9in. Height 2ft. 6in.
Dimensions of each panel Length 10½in. Height 6in.

It has generally been assumed that the chest to which the lid belonged was used to contain relics, and the inscription, so far as it is legible, bears out this view. Nevertheless, another or an additional use is not only possible but probable.

At St. Mary's Church, Newport, Essex, there is preserved a XIIIth century portable altar coffer, and the Winchester lid may have belonged to a somewhat similar portable chest. (Plate VI).

The Newport coffer, which is now in permanent use as an altar in the children's chapel in the north transept, has large iron rings at each end by which it could be lifted, and it is provided inside with receptacles or cupboards for holding the sacred vessels, missal books, and vestments, and under a false bottom there is a place for hiding the consecrated marble altar slab, which is not now present, but which no doubt contained a relic or relics. Such a coffer could be lifted on to a waggon, and might be used for celebrating Mass on the battlefield, or on occasions when Mass was said out of doors. It is fitted with a hinged lid, and has a separate painted reredos, consisting of five panels, which can be set up as a re-table when required (see photo), or, when not in use, can be laid in the coffer and locked up. The Winchester lid seems to have been hinged to its chest, but when it was opened the painted panels on its under side would have served as a reredos in much the same way as the movable reredos of the Newport coffer.

The late Very Rev. W. H. Hutton, D.D., Dean of Winchester, whose devotion to the Cathedral and interest in everything it contained was unbounded, and whose regretted death leaves a blank very difficult to fill, most willingly gave me every facility for taking the photographs which illustrate this paper, and my thanks are especially offered to Canon A. W. Goodman, F.S.A., to whose researches much of my information is due, and who again has drawn upon the manuscripts of the late Mr. F. J. Baigent.

¹ Catalogue of Exhibition of British Primitives.

² Since the above was written the lid has again been on view in London at the Exhibition of English Mediæval Art, which commenced in May, 1930, at the Victoria and Albert Museum.