

A MEDIEVAL WALL-PAINTING AT ST. MARY AND ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH, STOKE CHARITY

By JOHN EDWARDS

ABSTRACT

The church of St Mary and St Michael at Stoke Charity contains a large fragment of a mid-thirteenth century wall-painting, hitherto regarded as unidentifiable. There are good general grounds, coupled with the internal evidence supplied by what is left of the wall-painting itself, for suggesting that, though the present state of the painting precludes certainty, its subject might nevertheless have been that of a Mass of St Gregory, and moreover that the particular miracle originally portrayed in it can be suggested.

The history of wall-paintings in English churches during the period before the Reformation is that, having flourished from certainly the twelfth century – or even from Anglo-Saxon times if the evidence of the painted stone now in the Winchester City Museum is accepted – to the early sixteenth century, they became a casualty of the Reformation. To quote from the Proclamation of 1538 dealing specifically with those relating to St Thomas of Canterbury, they were then required to be 'put down and avoided' (Borenus 1932, 109). In practice this was usually carried out not by physical destruction, but by whitewashing over the paintings so that they remained in existence, but under an increasing number of coats of whitewash as time went on, and became much at risk from the superimposition of wall-monuments, or even the knocking through them of new windows or doors.

Matters remained thus until the great outbreak of church restoration which began in Victorian times, and which again put wall-paintings in grave peril – almost as much from their restorers as from their destroyers. One of the most notorious examples of their destruction occurred at the church of St John's, Winchester, where the discovery in 1853 of a remarkably complete scheme of late thirteenth century wall-paintings of great interest did not prevent their complete

destruction only two years afterwards in the course of what their discoverer called, with surprising moderation in the circumstances, 'church desecration' rather than 'church restoration' (Baigent 1855).

The church of St Mary and St Michael at Stoke Charity has a wall-painting – the only one in the church – in the north chapel, at the east end of the south wall, as indicated in the plan (Fig 1). Canon King in his *Guide to the church* (1972, 4, 8) – a model of what such guides should be – states that the wall-painting 'came to light during repairs in 1966' and that 'there is not enough of it left to show the subject of the painting'. He adds that 'it was preserved by Professor and Mrs Baker, who date it firmly to the middle of the thirteenth century'.

The present paper is intended to examine the question of the identification of the subject-matter of the painting, so that it may be as well to begin by describing what is left to be seen (Fig 2) based on the present writer's last visit in 1983. The painting is now only an irregularly-shaped fragment, covering approximately 5 feet in height by 2 feet in width (1.50m x 0.60m) overall, the upper half being U-shaped with the right arm of the 'U' at least twice as long as the left as a consequence, King says, 'of when the present Gothic arch between the chapel and the chancel was inserted into the wall in place of the earlier and smaller Norman arch to make room for the tomb of Sir Thomas de Hampton in 1483'.

The painting shows two standing figures, the one on the right being much taller than the other. The latter is complete and gives the decided impression of being a woman. She is standing on some steps and is wearing a brown robe which may have a hood and certainly has a green over-skirt, the lower edge of which has a diamond-shaped pattern of white lines interspersed with white circles. The expression on her face cannot now be determined,

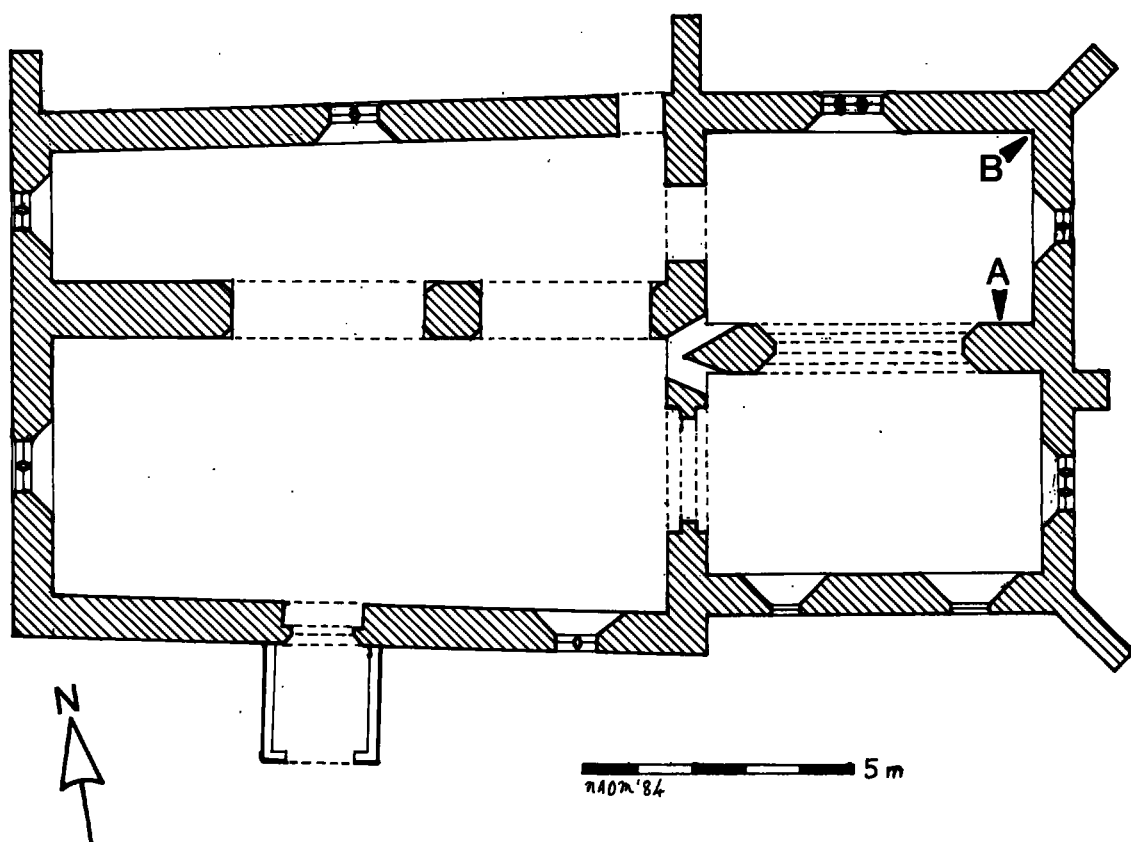


Fig 1. Plan of Stoke Charity Church, showing the positions of A) the wall painting and B) the sculpture.

but it is possible to imagine that her left hand (perhaps supported at the elbow by the right hand) is being held to her mouth. One cannot, in the present state of the painting, be dogmatic about this. She is certainly looking at the other figure, who, though now lacking a face, still retains enough of the neck and back of the head to make it appear that her look is being reciprocated, and that the head of the taller figure is bare. The greater height of the latter figure suggests that a man is represented. He wears a yellow robe with, just above ground level, a deep border of red. His right hand is held against the left side of his chest, almost at shoulder height, and from this area a long, scarf-like piece of cloth hangs downwards.

Both figures are standing in front of a stone

table, with tracery in the stone-work between them. There is a pattern of interlocking diamond-shapes interspersed with small circles running along the upper edge of the table, which continues, as it were, to be visible through part of the woman's side, doubtless because it was painted first, but the superimposed paint of this part of the woman's figure has since disappeared. The pattern running along the top of the table is reminiscent of that on the lower part of the woman's green over-skirt, but counter-changed, so that the lines and circles are red instead of white. Between the two figures, on top of the table, is a white space with a thin red triangle pointing upwards in the middle. Behind and above them is an arch, a crocket



Fig 2. The mid-thirteenth century wall painting at Stoke Charity (1983). Photo: John Edwards

on which is on a level with the man's left shoulder. The void under the arch is indicated by solid red; above the arch on the right-hand side is a masonry pattern, but though there is more painting above it, this cannot now be deciphered, nor can anything above the arch on the other side.

It would be satisfactory to be able to dispose of the question of interpretation forthwith if, so as to accord with the dedication of the church, the two figures were St Mary and St Michael. In the present writer's experience, however, gained not merely by study but also by the visiting of some 145 churches having surviving medieval wall-paintings, it is almost unknown for the dedication of a church to have any connection with the wall-paintings inside it. Even if this case were one of the few exceptions, the only subject which brings the Virgin Mary and the Archangel Michael together in one painting is a Soul-Weighing (Perry 1913). This shows St Michael being frustrated in his task at the Last Judgement of impartially weighing each individual soul and his good deeds against his evil ones, by the Virgin Mary performing the entirely uncanonical miracle of saving the soul from damnation merely by placing her rosary on the soul's side of the balance-arm of the scales. This is certainly not what is taking place in the wall-painting at Stoke Charity.

So far as the present writer can trace, the restoration following the repairs of 1966 is, apart from King's reference to it in his Guide to the church, otherwise unpublished, nor is there any reference to the wall-painting in such earlier articles and standard books on the subject as Waller (1850), Baigent (1855), Keyser (1883), the *VCH Hampshire* (1908), Kendon (1923), Tristram (1950), and Caiger-Smith (1963); nor in the *Proceedings*. Most of the writers who have mentioned paintings at all in connection with the church have concentrated on those which are on certain of the tombs, or, of more relevance to the present paper, on the fifteenth century sculpture of the Mass of St Gregory, and of a miracle which then occurred (Fig 3), which, like the wall-painting, is also in the north chapel. When this was 'discovered

during the replastering of the nave in 1849 embedded in the wall near the pulpit' (King 1972) the carving still bore traces of colour, as can be seen in the photograph of it in the *VCH Hampshire* (1908), though this has disappeared by now and the sculpture has returned to what Baigent and Waller (1851) called its 'chalky material'.

In these circumstances it is a little unexpected to find that Wall, in his book *Medieval Wall Painting* [1914] after describing a fourteenth century wall-painting of the Mass of St Gregory at Friskney, in Lincolnshire, should add that 'paintings of it have also been found at Beverston, Gloucestershire; Slapton, Northants; and Stoke Charity, Hampshire.' This statement has no doubt been prevented from becoming well-known by reason of the fact that Wall's Index does not include an entry in respect of Stoke Charity.

Before attempting to deal with the several questions to which Wall's statement gives rise, it may be as well to say something about St Gregory the Great, who lived from c 540-604, the last 14 years of his life being spent as the first Pope of that name. From the English point of view, one of the outstanding features of his papacy was the dispatch to this country of the missionaries led by St Augustine, so that the Pope was the perpetrator of 'Not Angles, but angels'. Réau (1958, 609-616) claims that St Gregory was responsible for no less than five miracles devoted to demonstrating the Real Presence at the Eucharist, but of these there are only two which need be dealt with here. The one shown in the sculpture at Stoke Charity arose when one of the Saint's own assistants at the altar expressed doubt about the Real Presence, whereupon, to prove it Christ Himself appeared on the altar, accompanied by angels and, in some representations, the instruments of the Passion. Where this miracle is concerned, Christ is usually portrayed as He must have appeared immediately after the crucifixion and at the moment of resurrection, still wounded and wearing only a loincloth.

This is indeed how He is shown in the Stoke Charity sculpture, where with His right hand

He displays His wounded side and is showing the wound in His left hand; He may even still be wearing the crown of thorns (Fig 3). The Saint is clearly the figure on the left-hand side of the altar, with his mitre laid on it just behind him, so that the other figure must be his sceptical server. Réau points out that the story of this miracle is a late development, not being referred to in any of the contemporary lives of the Saint, nor even in the *Golden Legend*, which appeared in the last quarter of the thirteenth-century, over five centuries after the Saint's death, and comprised accounts of a great number of real or alleged miracles. Réau mentions that it was not until the fourteenth century that this miracle had its first representation, though it enjoyed a great vogue in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This dating accords, of course, with that of the fifteenth century attributed to the sculpture at Stoke Charity.

The other relevant miracle of this nature performed by St Gregory is on a much humbler plane than the first, but has greater credibility in that accounts of it, according to Réau, go back to the eighth century. The story of this other miracle is that the Pope was celebrating Mass when, at the stage at which the bread is named as the body of Christ, a woman in the congregation was seen to smile. The Saint stopped the service, and, in the English version of the *Golden Legend* quoted by Waller (1850, 257-8) 'he demanded her tofore the people why she smyled, and she said because y^e brede y^e I have made with my proper hondes thou namest y^e body of oure Lorde Jhesu Cryst ... [whereupon] ... St. Gregorye sawe the holy sacrament in figure of a pyece of fleshe, as grete as the lytull finger of an honde.' The woman was suitably chastened and was thereafter a devout believer in the True Presence.

Having thus filled in the background where the relevant miracles of St Gregory are concerned, it is now possible to return to the statement by Wall, quoted above. He was not a specialist in medieval wall-paintings, and indeed the catholicity of his interests is indicated by the titles of some of his other

books appearing on the title page and in the advertisements at the back of his *Medieval Wall Paintings*. They include *The Monastic Church of Lastingham* (1894), *An Old English Parish* (1907), *Relics of the Passion* (1910) and *Porches and Fonts* (1912). The level at which his *Medieval Wall Paintings* was aimed is indicated by the fact that it appeared in a series given the generic title of *The Antiquaries' Primers*, to which Wall also contributed *Ancient Earthworks* (1908). In his Preface to *Medieval Wall Paintings* Wall makes no claim to have visited all the churches to which he refers and, after making his acknowledgements to other writers, modestly adds: 'my indebtedness to these sources reduces this work to a compilation; but the object is not to produce an exhaustive treatise, but to arouse an interest in a subject generally neglected ... since these pages were set up it has been suggested that I have largely relied on the work of others; this is quite true. ...'

It will therefore never be known whether Wall visited the church at Stoke Charity and saw the wall-painting to which he refers, but it is reasonably clear that, even if he never saw the sculpture, he must have known of it. This arises because in his Preface he mentions, as the two antiquaries of his day who were 'pre-eminent' in the sphere of wall-paintings, 'Mr J G Waller and F J Baigent, of Winchester, with whom I have spent many happy hours over this subject'; both refer in their writings to the sculpture at Stoke Charity (Waller 1850, with a woodcut; Baigent and Waller 1851, with a specific mention of it being coloured; and Baigent 1855) so that he could well have heard of it from these friends. In any event, Wall refers in his Preface to 'Mr Baigent in volume ... X of the *Journal of the Archaeological Association* ...'; he could hardly have done so without knowing that it mentions the Stoke Charity sculpture.

One way or another it seems therefore that Wall must have known of the sculpture of the Mass of St Gregory at Stoke Charity, which carries with it the implication that he also knew it was coloured. Is it possible that, when making what he himself called his 'compilation', perhaps many years later, he



Fig 3. The fifteenth century sculpture of the Mass of St Gregory, Stoke Charity Church (1983). Photo: John Edwards.

recollected that there was a painted Mass of St Gregory at Stoke Charity and, quite understandably, confused what was in fact a sculpture with a wall-painting, which would, after all, be the most usual type of surviving painting from medieval times, particularly as wall-paintings were precisely what his book was about and would therefore be uppermost in his mind. This seems the more likely in view of the great rarity of painted sculptures of this subject – King says (1972, 9) that only two others remain – compared with the comparatively large numbers of surviving wall-paintings. An argument on these lines could go on to regret that Wall did not check his recollection with what he called 'Keyser's monumental work', the *List of Buildings having Mural Decorations* (1883), where he would have found the St Gregory listed in the subject-index, but marked with a special symbol to indicate that it was indeed a sculpture rather than a wall-painting.

It must however be pointed out, in Wall's favour, that Waller, Baigent, and Keyser were writing many years before Wall's book was published, so that his wall-painting could have been discovered after their writings had been published. Less easy to explain is that, although the sculpture is enthusiastically referred to, there is no mention of any wall-painting in the record of the Hampshire Field Club's visit to the church on 27th July, 1911, only three years before Wall's book was published, and of course an even shorter time before his MS must have gone to his publishers. Even if the wall-painting had been discovered between those events, it is scarcely conceivable that it would have gone unrecorded elsewhere than in Wall.

As to works appearing after 1914, briefly referred to above, in addition to Tristram's published work, which does not refer to Stoke Charity at all, the present writer has seen a copy of the Stoke Charity pages of the Tristram/Bardswell notebooks. Though these pages are undated they mention several works of reference dealing with Stoke Charity, up to the year 1946, as well as noting paintings on tombs and the St Gregory sculpture, but no

wall-painting is mentioned. Pevsner (1967, 613) was, at first, thought to support Wall by referring, under Stoke Charity, to a 'WALL PAINTING'. Large mid-thirteenth century fragment on the N chapel S wall, with much colour preserved and for once not restored'. Bearing in mind, however, that what was published in 1967 cannot have been written later than 1966, it seems likely that Pevsner must have visited the church at the moment when the present wall-painting had come to light as a result of the repairs in 1966 alluded to by King, but before the Bakers had begun their work of preservation.

The present writer thinks it only fair to say that he has studied Wall to his great advantage and has not found him in significant error elsewhere in his book. Moreover, apart from his reference to Beverston, where the existence of a wall-painting cannot now be checked as it had already disappeared when Verey published in 1970 the Cotswold portion of the *Buildings of England* series, Wall's other examples of wall-paintings dealing with the Mass of St Gregory are correct. The present writer can vouch from his own knowledge for the one at Slapton, while the one at Friskney is well documented by Cheales (1893), whose article contains a reproduction of it; it was in two 'compartments'. Indeed, Wall reproduces in his own book some of Cheales' copies of other wall-paintings from Friskney, though not the St Gregory. By chance, the painting at Slapton is of the miracle of the sceptical server, whereas the one at Friskney shows the one of the woman bread-maker, the two compartments presumably being needed to show the bread before and after it had turned into the finger of flesh.

However, in the light of all the factors mentioned above in relation to Wall's statement, and not least, of course, of the testimony of Canon King, with which this paper began, that the wall-painting did not come to light until the repairs of 1966, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wall's observation, while its good faith is not in question, must be treated with great caution.

The proposition that the subject-matter of

the wall-painting at Stoke Charity is a miracle by St Gregory while celebrating Mass, once made, and whatever the status of Wall's remark at the time it was made might be, is nevertheless undeniably attractive, though in the present state of the painting it is of course impossible to be dogmatic.

In the first place, even though the Saint (unlike so many of those most often depicted in medieval wall-paintings) was a historical character and was not even a martyr, wall-paintings of him were by no means uncommon elsewhere in the country, coming within the top ten (equal ninth with St Jerome) of all those saints given in the statistical table which Kendon (1923, App III) has based on Keyser's *List* of 1883. It is, moreover, difficult to appreciate what else (Soul-Weighing having been already considered and eliminated) the painting could represent among the usual subjects, such as the first and last days of Christ; His mother; Dooms; other Saints; and the various Moralities.

Thus, the crocketed arch in the background of the painting would indicate to the contemporary spectator that the two figures were in a building, which he would assume to be a church by interpreting the stone table as an altar and the pattern of interlaced diamond shapes as its frontal. The male figure is bare-headed, as is the Saint in the sculpture. If he is indeed celebrating Mass, the scarf-like cloth he is holding could be the 'purificator', the white linen cloth used to cleanse the chalice after the celebration of the Eucharist (Ferguson 1972, 168). The white space on the altar between the two figures could represent either the 'pall', the white linen cloth which covers the chalice, or the 'corporal', the similar cloth upon which the elements of bread and wine are consecrated and which may cover them at certain times during the service (Ferguson 1972, 164, 168). The latter seems more likely, as the thin red triangle on the altar would represent the place where the edges of the cloth met, or just failed to do so; a matter which should not arise where the pall is concerned. Alternatively, the white space could be the book on the altar, as in the Stoke

Charity sculpture, the triangle being the shadow in the middle where the pages were turned back.

As to which miracle is represented of the two, the figure of Christ could well have been in the space now left blank between the two ends of the 'U' in the upper part of the painting, so as to suggest that of the sceptical server. If, however, the painting has been correctly dated as mid-thirteenth century (from which the present writer is in no position to dissent), this is a fatal objection, since, as has already been mentioned on the authority of Réau, the story of the miracle of the sceptical server had not become current by that time. There is, on the other hand, nothing inconsistent with the painting representing the miracle of the woman bread-maker, the figure on the right being the Saint, and that on the left the woman in question; in the painting of this miracle at Friskney (Cheales 1893), there are just the two characters, though at Friskney their positions are reversed, the Saint being on the left and the woman on the right. The two would naturally be looking at each other, as the Saint questioned her and she gave her answer, and if, indeed, the woman is holding a hand to her mouth this might well be a spontaneous gesture of astonishment, or even fear, at the occurrence of the miracle.

An objection to the subject-matter of the wall-painting at Stoke Charity being the Mass of St Gregory, in whatever form the miracle took, could be that it was not likely that a small parish church would house two representations of the same subject, one a painting and the other a sculpture. The short answer to this is, of course, that it is not an objection which can be levelled at the wall-painting, since, of the two, it was there first. Other examples of such duplication do however exist; thus at Little Hampden, in Buckinghamshire, an even smaller and more remote parish church than that at Stoke Charity, it has been argued by Keyser (1904) that there are no fewer than four paintings of St Christopher and the Christ-Child. Moreover, in relation to the brass on the tomb in Stoke Charity Church of Thomas Wayte,

who died in 1482, King (1972, 6) mentions that the figure of Christ upon it was thought to be either representing the resurrection or an altar with Christ 'upon it to represent the elements of the eucharist'. In this connection it is interesting to recall that those who first reported the discovery of paintings at Slapton probably mistook the Mass of St Gregory there for a resurrection (*Associated Architectural Societies Reports* 1874), a confusion which is not surprising in view of the way in which, in the miracle of the sceptical server, Christ is similarly depicted on both occasions. Although the doctrine of the Real Presence was questioned at least as far back as Wycliffe's *On the Eucharist* of 1379 (Holmes 1962, 170), it was still the official doctrine of the Church in 1482, so that there is a possibility that, by the end of the fifteenth century, the doctrine might have been alluded to in Stoke Charity church in the wall-painting, the sculpture, and on the tomb, though the reason for this is never now likely to be discovered.

To summarise, it would be unsafe to assume that there was in 1914 a wall-painting of the

Mass of St Gregory – the particular miracle unspecified – in Stoke Charity church solely on the strength of the statement to that effect by Wall in that year. He must, however, be credited with having thereby drawn attention to what cannot, in view of the present condition of the painting, be put higher than the likelihood of this being in fact the subject-matter of the wall-painting of which a portion remains on the south wall of the north chapel there, following its discovery after repairs in 1966. From this starting-point it has been possible to go on to suggest that, should the painting in fact be of this subject, then the miracle it portrays is that of the incredulous woman bread-maker.

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Author: John Edwards, 85 Jack Straw's Lane, Oxford OX3 0DW.

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