

St Mary's Church, Binsted, West Sussex

Medieval Wall Paintings

Condition Report

Introduction

I inspected the wall paintings on 28th May 2019 at the request of assistant church warden Penelope Hadley. I met church wardens Kate Mills and Carolyn Coles on site.

I had carried out conservation work on the murals in 1983, and made a follow up inspection in 2008.

General Description

The paintings are on the window splays of the north wall of the chancel, and are thought to date from the mid 12th century.

On the right side of the window splay is what seems to be a female figure, on the left is a three branched tree and in the centre at the apex of the arch is a star or sunburst. The edges of the splay are framed by a scallop design.

The predominant colours are red and yellow ochres, and what now appears as black, but was originally colour mixed with lead white which has blackened over time. Thus flesh tints on hands and face that would have been in pink are now quite black, and there may also have been some white mixed into the green of the small dots of the scallop edging as these too are now very darkened.

According to a description from an article in the Sussex Archaeological Collection by Philip Johnston of 1833, the paintings in the small Norman window are all that remain of a more extensive decorative scheme. Both the chancel and nave were painted, with an Entombment and Enthronement in the chancel, and a painting 'of unknown subject' in the nave.

The paintings are therefore both a tantalising and an extremely important

survival that give some idea of how the interior of this ancient church might have looked in the middle ages.

Present Condition of the Paintings

As noted in my brief report of 1983, all remedial work was done using lime putty and lime mortar.

The paintings remain in very good condition. The paint is sound and the plaster repairs have not deteriorated over time. Because the paintings are on the north wall and not exposed to sunlight, the colours have not faded.

Although general conditions in the church show significant signs of damp damage, the conditions in the Norman window splay are good.

Both paint and plaster on the south wall are detached and peeling badly, with salt efflorescence particularly noticeable near the pulpit. There is also flaking paint on the north wall, although in general this wall is less badly off, possibly because it is less exposed to changes in temperature.

Both walls have what looks like a wide band of a cementitious mix on the exterior along the base of the wall. As E.Clive Rouse noted in 1983, this may be pushing damp further up the walls.

Significance of the Paintings

The subject of the paintings is a mystery, and although they are usually dated to the mid 12th century, their date is also open to debate. The identity of the female figure on the right is so uncertain that even her gender has been questioned!

In the reconstruction of 1888 (displayed in the church) the letters above the figure were interpreted as S/A MARG:. As the description notes, the figure has a 'curious early crown with wimple', and no identifying attributes. It has been suggested that she is the Saxon princess Queen Margaret of Scotland. This would mean the paintings are not as early as previously thought since she was not canonised until 1250.

The identity of the figure is well discussed by Celia Woodruff in *Binsted*

and Beyond (2002) pp13-16, who looks into all the various possible identities and also suggests that the figure may be the Virgin as Queen of Heaven.

The significance of the tree is equally problematic. It stands quite alone on a little hillock, balancing the figure opposite in its scale and strength, and this must surely mean that it is symbolic, with possibly multiple references. Celia Woodruff suggests that its three branches may represent the Trinity. It has also been called a 'Tree of Life'.

An initial trawl through images of this date, both in wall paintings and medieval manuscripts has not shown anything quite comparable.

I have not found another example of such a tree in medieval wall paintings in the UK. But highly stylised trees of this type may certainly be found in contemporary illuminated manuscripts. For example in the 12th century Aberdeen Bestiary - an English manuscript originally in the Royal Library at Westminster. On folios 8v, 12v and 16v one may see several examples of trees that look very like the one at Binsted. The depiction of Jesus' Agony in the Garden in the St Alban's Psalter (also 12th century) shows a three branched tree which must surely refer to the coming crucifixion as well as possibly being a reference to the Trinity. The tree here is less bulbous than that at Binsted, but nonetheless similar in style.

Interestingly the crucifix is sometimes shown as being a tree, as for instance in the 12th century Codex Bodmer (127 053v) probably made in Germany-Weissenau Cologny. At Binsted the similarity of the 'fruits' at the ends of the branches to grapes, may also refer to the association of Christ with the vine.

Thus the seemingly simple tree at Binsted may carry multiple meanings.

The star or sunburst at the apex of the arch is no less mysterious. I would suggest that it is not merely decoration, but has a greater symbolism.

Several crucifixion scenes show a sunburst to one side of Christ's head with a moon on the other. A good example of this is the Peterborough Psalter c 1220-25 Folio 12r, where the sun is quite similar to that at Binsted. The same iconography may be seen in the Psalters of Robert de

Lindeseye (before 1222) and Blanche of Castile (c.1235). - see attached photocopies.

It is quite possible that images painted in the south window of the nave bore complementary symbols that would make more sense of those in the north window.

It is of course possible that the image at Binsted is not a sun at all, but a star. At the centre of the arch in St Gabriel's chapel Canterbury Cathedral are painted seven stars in a circle representing the seven churches of Asia. It is unlikely that the design at Binsted has the same meaning, but it is an example of the range of symbolism that may be relevant.

Style and Date of the Paintings

As noted above. The paintings have generally been thought to date to close to the building of the church in the 12th century, although there is no evidence for this. Their style could indicate any date between 1160 and 1250.

It is interesting to wonder who did the paintings. They were very well executed, and their style is elegant and sophisticated. The female figure is well proportioned and shows the nice gently curving pose so popular in the 12th and 13th centuries.

The tree likewise displays a curving elegance that lends it a striking vigour and energy. The lively scalloped framing and well laid out composition show much resemblance to images in illuminated manuscripts of the 12th and 13th centuries.

Wall paintings of a similar sophistication may be seen at St Alban's and Canterbury Cathedrals, both dating to the 12th century. The paintings in Hailes church Gloucestershire which are thought to date from 1290 are also comparable. But many wall paintings in England are relatively simple and crude in their execution, while this small fragment at Binsted is by a confident and knowledgeable hand.

Future Research

There is no doubt that this small fragment of medieval painting is well worth much more detailed research. It is a rare and precious survival and indicates that the church at Binsted was an important place of worship. It may have been a stopping place for pilgrims to Chichester or between Chichester and Canterbury. It may have held particular importance because of its scheme of mural painting, some of which may even yet survive beneath later washes.

The future survival of this little church and its paintings should be a high priority.

Fiona Allardyce, spring 2019