



St. Margaret's Church

I P S W I C H

Evidence of Medieval Wall Paintings in the church

At first glance a visitor would wonder why there is an information sheet about medieval wall paintings at St Margaret's, given that the walls are whitewashed.

We only know of one medieval C14th painting in the church, which was rediscovered in 1846.

It is noted in the Arch. Journal XXX, 96. Antiquary 1872, II, 232. Wodderspoon, Mems. of Ipswich pg 398 "that on the north of the nave is St Anthony, St Christopher and several texts".

As well as being of artistic interest, it has also been used to determine how the church might have looked before the clerestory windows and double hammerbeam roof were installed at the end of the C15th.



Pre-reformation churches, in general, were a riot of colour. Images on the walls told a graphic biblical story, an effective method of communicating with people in medieval England, where the population was largely illiterate and services were conducted in Latin.



St Margaret's Church would certainly have had many painted surfaces at this time. If you look carefully at the carvings within the medieval roof structure, excluding the more recent (1694-5!) panels, traces of colour are still easily visible.

However, when the Protestant faith became the norm, there was a gradual eradication of imagery on church walls.

St Margaret's Church, along with many in Suffolk, also suffered at the hands of the Iconoclasts. We know that William Dowsing visited the church in 1644, damaging the font and removing angels from the ends of the hammer beams in the roof.

In 1846 above the second and third arches (from the east end of the church) on the north side of the nave, a wall painting of part of St Christopher was uncovered. This was whitewashed over in 1881 and was again visible for a short time when the hatchments were moved during the conservation of the roof in 1994. The position of the painting can nowadays be judged as it lies under the westernmost hatchment on the north nave wall.

The following photograph (of an early photograph of a painting) shows the wall painting as it appeared in 1872



On the reverse of the photograph the following has been added:-

Photographed from a watercolour painted by Rev Augustus Gedge, Rector of Ludborough Lincs, soon after it was discovered. St Christopher's gown was pink. That of the monk at bottom, if I remember rightly, was dark green. Presented to St Margaret's Church by Rev Arthur A L Gedge son of the above Jan 7 1931. The fresco was between two of the arches on the north wall. A.A.L.G.

It is clear that the photograph and, before that, the watercolour may have deteriorated over time and we can be certain that the colour shown here is not representative of that which was seen on the wall.

What can be seen is the lower part of St Christopher's cloak as he strides through the water with fish and eels at his feet. There is no sign of any text.



The photograph above was taken from the larger picture and digitally enhanced to show more clearly the figure at the foot of the picture, previously said to be of St Anthony.

A more recent review of the photograph postulates that the person kneeling is not St Anthony. The figure is small and of a lay person, thus showing their humility and insignificance. It is suggested that the figure represents the hermit, a frequent subject appearing with St Christopher. St Christopher, on his quest for "the greatest prince on earth", finally met a hermit who preached Christ to him and instructed him in the Christian faith. It was the hermit who directed St Christopher to the river to help people cross safely. St Christopher built a shelter and there on one occasion carried Christ, who appeared as a child, across the river.



The figure seems to have a fashionable beard and a high-necked tunic as would be worn in the late C14th. Beneath his kneeling legs there appears to be a sketchy Coat of Arms. It is likely that the figure and Coat of Arms represent a donor to the parish church, probably one who paid for this painting.

It is not known who this might be and further research will be undertaken to see if he can be identified.

It has been suggested that the upper part of the figure of St Christopher was lost when, in about 1495, the roof was raised and the nave walls were cut away to put in the present larger clerestory windows. This would date the wall painting as probably C14th.

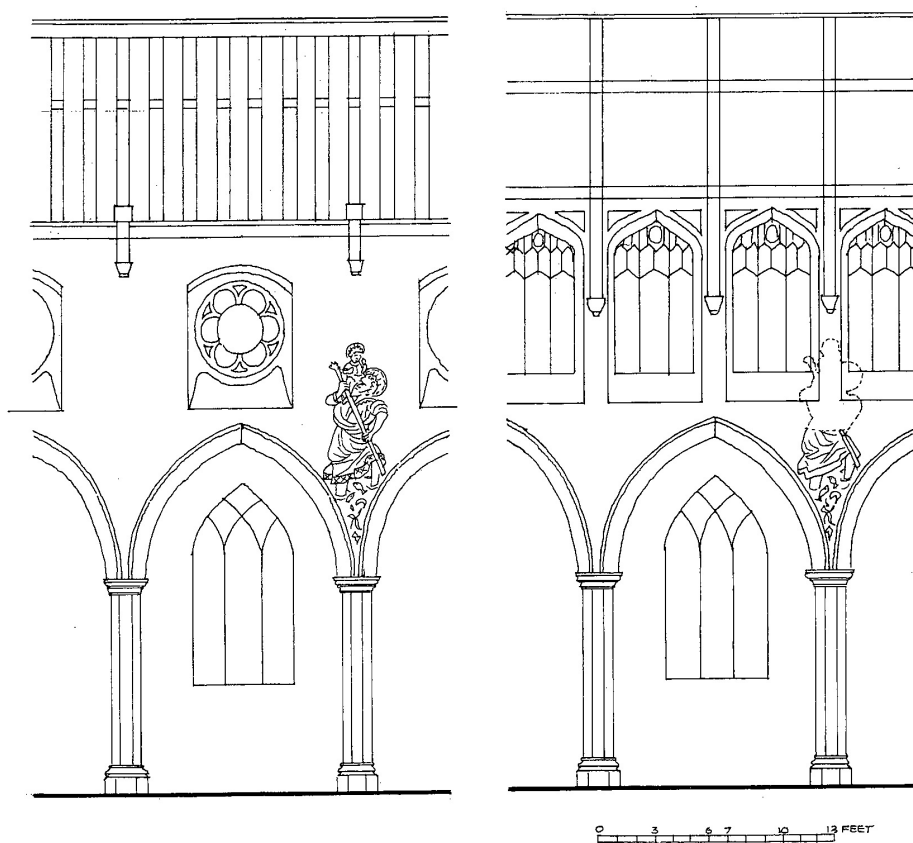
There has long been speculation about how the church might have looked before the new roof was built in the late C15th.

Unfortunately no information about the exact layout of the walls exists and there are no known paintings of the church at this period.

However it has been suggested that if there had been no clerestory in the original building then the nave walls need not have been as tall as they are now.

It can therefore be deduced that there must have been a clerestory in the original church.

A local architect, Birkin Haward, in conjunction with John Blatchly and Peter Northeast, produced a set of drawings in 1996 that show what the original layout might have been and demonstrate how this was deduced from the wall painting of St Christopher.



The image on the left is a conjectural diagram of the arcade, clerestory and roof structure of the earlier church circa 1300, showing the painting of St Christopher as it would have been seen originally.

The image on the right is a diagrammatic view showing the new clerestory of the late C15th, which is how it is seen today. It shows how it would have been necessary to destroy the upper part of the painting of St Christopher to accommodate the new, larger, clerestory windows.

Acknowledgements:

Conjectural Diagram Images used by kind permission of the Estate of Birkin Haward.

Most information taken from "Discoveries in the clerestory and roof structure of St Margaret's Church Ipswich" by John Blatchly and Peter Northeast and published in: Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History Volume XXXVIII Part 4 1996.