

TUDOR WALL PAINTINGS IN GORE STREET HOUSE,
MONKTON, THANET

By F. H. WORSFOLD, F.S.A.

IN June, 1950, some repairs and redecorations were being effected in the N.E. bedroom of this lovely old Tudor Farm House, during which, the workmen engaged in stripping the walls preparatory to repapering, discovered in the western portion of the room's north wall a considerable run of mid-16th-century(?) mural work. This evidently had been uncovered and its design revealed at some earlier period, for with a view to its preservation against damp and decay, a framework of deal slats had been nailed over these "tempera" paintings, on which canvas had been attached for the wallpaper to be placed. However, no written record or otherwise can be traced of this earlier exposure.

The interest from an archaeological point of view in Wall Paintings of this character is obvious, because of their extreme rarity, only twenty-five or twenty-six have so far been discovered in ancient domestic dwelling houses in Kent, although in other counties a far greater number have been noted, a list of which has been given in an appendix to Mr. Francis W. Reader's splendid illustrated articles entitled "Tudor Domestic Wall Paintings" to be found in the *Archaeological Journals*, XCII (1935) and XCIII (1936), which followed his earlier papers on this same subject in volumes LXXXVII (1930) and LXXXIX (1932).¹

Our Gore Street House composition reveals the technique used in the preparation of the walls for this class of decoration to perfection, and whoever removed the over-lying modern plaster some $\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick, has picked out the ancient work in a remarkably understanding manner, which is brought out clearly in my accompanying photograph of this particular section. One notices the hidden vertical studs connecting the building's main lateral timbers of its upper story, are filled with the usual daub and wattle and chopped straw clay, a thin film of which

¹ I have to thank our Member and Joint Editor, Mr. J. H. Evans, F.S.A., who, when visiting Gore Street House with me in the summer of 1950, called my attention to Mr. Francis W. Reader's articles in the *Archaeological Journals* mentioned in this paper and which I have found most helpful; and also to our Member, Mr. E. Lawrence Nicol, for the advice which he gave to Mr. T. M. Willett's Contractor, in regard to the preservation of this Wall Painting.



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is spread over and so obscuring the uprights, thus forming an unbroken wall surface. On this a thin layer of fine white plaster about $\frac{1}{8}$ in. thick has been spread, which in turn was always sized in this class of work. It is on this the plain black and white and the later coloured decorated work is displayed.

It will be noted that two differing designs appear. The earlier shows grotesque animal forms in black line on white. The head and shoulders of a fearsome dragon-like creature can be seen on the frieze beneath the word "Trust" in the over-riding text, whilst in the lower central part of the photograph appears a boar's head(?) with other indistinct animal shapes in its vicinity. The dragon's head is not unlike that in the quaintly designed frieze at Ulcombe Place, near Maidstone, which Professor E. W. Tristram describes as "a striking example of Transition work with classic volutes and other details, whilst it preserves the Gothic spirit and feeling." One of these Black and White wall paintings of some merit was found in an old house at Rochester in 1909. It is illustrated in *Arch. Cant.*, XXVIII, p. *xcvii*, and must have presented a more pleasing aspect to the room's occupiers than our Gore Street House monstrosities which quite soon were expunged, being overpainted by an elaborate floral design with a well-executed frieze, this latter consisting of bunches of white grapes with foliage, alternating with flower posies and punctuated at regular intervals with red bosses showing geometrical markings in white on their faces.

The main design of the composition consists of a run of dwarfed arcading, all hand-drawn, arranged in tiers in such a way that the shafts of the upper series impinge on the crowns of the arches below. The whole forms a satisfying net-like set of compartments in each of which appears the oft-repeated floral design, consisting of two detached marguerite-like flowers on stiff stems with stylized leaves, whilst in the lower right-hand section of each nook a similar flower is drawn, but in this instance springing from a bunch of dark coloured blossoms.

The arches are $7\frac{1}{2}$ in. in width and about $9\frac{1}{2}$ in. in height, and are painted in a warm slatey pink. The whole ensemble is quite restful to the eye. There was probably a narrow dado to complete the work, which the present skirting board now entirely hides. Mr. J. C. Wall, in his book *Mediaeval Wall Paintings*, shows how these designs deteriorated as the years passed, becoming later in the 17th century overcrowded, blatant and oppressive, marking the decline to extinction of this ancient form of art.

Some information as to the working of the craft is to be obtained from W. A. D. Englefield's *History of the Painter-Stainers Company of London* (1923).

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Although their regulations were limited to a radius of 4 miles round the city, it is probable that similar rules governed other centres, to which their influence no doubt spread and were largely observed in remote districts.

In 1532 the Guild was able to acquire a common hall, and in 1581 they were granted a full charter in which they are described as "The freemen and citizens of the City of London of the art and mystery of the Painters of the said City commonly called in English, Painter-Stainers," but by 1603 their records show they had hit on evil days, owing doubtless to the greater use of wainscot and plain walls which came in with the growth of Puritanism.

The colours used in the production of the Gore Street House paintings were few, red, green, yellow, white, slate and black, as will be gathered from the excellent water-coloured sketch of the work which my friend, Mr. Graham Woodland, so kindly made for me to illustrate this article, to whom I tender my best thanks for this valued assistance.¹

It is worth while noting that the ancient medium used with the pigments for these "tempera" paintings consisted mostly, as far as the English practisers of the art were concerned, of parchment size, eggs and vinegar, and a manuscript in the Public Library at Strassburg contains a recipe for making this, namely "Parchment cuttings were thoroughly boiled, white vinegar was added and the whole again boiled."

Only a passing mention has yet been made of the Text which forms so prominent a part of the composition under review. That the passage in question in its framing has been superimposed on the older floral frieze is patent, as in the course of time its paint has worn thin through which the underlying design can be detected.

Unfortunately the left-hand portion of the text which is in bold black letterscript has been destroyed, but enough is preserved to enable it to be traced to its source, namely Ecclesiasticus, chapter ii, verse 6. This reads in the Authorized Version dated 1611, "Believe in him and he shall help thee, order thy way aright, and trust in him," but this edition is obviously of too late a date to look to in endeavouring to assess within a year or two when our text was here displayed. So I approached the authorities of the British Museum to see if earlier editions would be closer in step with what is thought to be an approximate date of its origin. They kindly informed me that in the "Great Bible" of 1539 the text reads:

"Beleue i God & he shall helpe the: order they waye aright,
and put thy trust in him."

¹ It is regretted that high costs do not permit the reproduction of this coloured illustration.

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and in the Bishops' Bible of 1568 :

“Beleue in God and he shall helpe thee : order thy way aright,
and put thy trust in hym.”

He further told me he had compared a large number of old editions of the Bible and finds in every one of them the word “way” in place of “selfe.” The Septuagint has “*εὐθύνων τὰς ὁδοὺς.*” He is therefore compelled to think that the text at Gore Street House is a careless and inaccurate quotation, so that it will be difficult to identify it with any version of the Bible. Our text if restored to its original form would read one surmises :

“Beleue in God and he shall help thee, order thy selfe aright
and put thy trust in hym. Ecclesi. II.”

This question of mis-quoting the Scriptures in these early days of their issue in the vulgar tongue became so noticeable, that Bishop Bonner of London, A.D. 1544, issued a mandate, after noting that some had procured certain Scriptures wrongly applied to be painted on the church walls, “charged that such Scriptures should be razed, abolished and extinguished, so that in no means they could be either read or heard” (Wall's *Mediaeval Wall Paintings*, p. 116).

A parallel instance of this misquoting or paraphrasing of text display was found in Bazing Farm House, near Cowden (see *Arch. Cant.*, XXI, p. 103-4) where the lines are in the usual old English black letters and are an adaptation of Proverbs xxi. 13, where in the Bishops' Bible the verse runs :

“Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cryinge of the pore, he shal
crye himself and not be hard ”

becomes

“For hee that will not heare ye crye of them that stande in
neede, shall crye himselfe and not be hard when he doth hope
to spede.”

That this text exhibition is of fairly late origin is testified by the Scarletts Mill House example adjacent to Bazing, where texts existed in a room there with a Tudor fireplace dated 1597. But close dating of these “tempera” paintings generally and the later texts is difficult. Of the actual seven instances where dates appear, only one of the 16th century, and that at Prittlewood Manor House, Hants, declares its origin as 1580, besides the aforesaid Scarletts Mill example. F. W. Reader sums up the dating question thus : “Figure subjects usually afford a guide to its period and other examples can be approximately dated by natural evidence. In the greater number of cases the date is largely speculative and in a general way the majority may be placed in the latter half of the 16th century and the early part of the 17th century, as the practice became more widespread with the

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improved building of the houses of the ordinary citizens. Moreover, the later examples had by their lateness a greater chance of surviving the ravages of time and change." "Tudor Domestic Wall Paintings" (*Arch. Jour.*, XCII (1935), p. 276.)

No documentary evidence of the date of the building of Gore Street House can be traced in the Kent County Histories, but from the grandly carved stone fireplace in the western downstairs room and a corresponding great rounded inglenooked one in the east living room, constructed in plain unfaced brick work, point to a mid-16th-century origin, so that the plain black on white decoration on the walls of the room above can be nailed down close to this date, to be followed after a short while with a new floral design. Then at a still later time the text was applied on the frieze, probably during the latter years of Nicholas Robinson Gent., who according to a brass memorial plaque on the west wall of Monkton Church, Thanet, lived at this Manor house and died there in 1594, but whether or no he was responsible for the erection of the building in his earlier days remains a problem.

It must be put on record that the present owners and occupiers of the property, Mr. and Mrs. T. M. Willett, have been greatly intrigued in the unveiling of these rare Tudor wall paintings, and have given me every facility in making the necessary photographs and sketches which are such an assistance in making clear the written word on the subject, for which I am truly grateful. They have even gone further in having the best preserved section of the Paintings made permanently visible through a framed glazed panel, so that they can be studied at any future time by anyone interested in this form of art.

It is worth while noting that in this vicinity there are two other houses which are adorned with this class of work, one found in 1913 at Stodmarsh Court (see *Arch. Jour.*, XCIII, p. 246), and the other at Paramour Grange, discovered in 1915 (see *Arch. Cant.*, XXXIII, p. *liii-liiv*), forming a fitting trinity of craftsmanship in this now almost extinct form of decoration.

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