

# THE CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ILKETSHALL ST ANDREW PARISH CHURCH

## THE CHURCH

The earliest part of the existing building appears to date from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as can be seen from the south door, which has stylistic features suggesting a date of c.1120 -1140. The present chancel appears to have been constructed in the early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, at which time new windows were also inserted in the south wall of the nave. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the large windows were inserted in the north wall, and it appears that the upper parts of the walls were raised to allow for the ornately carved roof. It is probable that the porch was also added at this time. In 1898, following a severe fire, extensive work was undertaken throughout the church. In the chancel, the floor was tiled, the walls raised and replastered and a new roof was built. In the nave, extensive repairs were undertaken on the roof and the brick and wooden floor was inserted. Significant parts of the window tracery were also replaced throughout the church and it is possible that some of the windows were enlarged.



*The falling king on the Wheel of Fortune*

## THE WALL PAINTINGS

Prior to the Reformation, paintings of Biblical scenes, saints, morality subjects and decorative motifs would have covered all of the walls. The roof would have been decorated with elaborate polychromy, the windows would have been glazed with stained glass, and a painted rood screen would have separated the nave and chancel. The interior of the church would have appeared dark, colourful and mysterious. Following the break from Rome, the use of figurative imagery fell out of favour, and with the Civil War and the rise of Puritanism a century later, it was effectively banned. Sculptures were smashed, paintings and screens were burnt and wall paintings were limewashed over. In only a few generations, the interior of the church would have been transformed from a riot of colour into the plain simple space that we see today. Wall painting continued in the form of Biblical and religious texts, and occasionally some figurative subjects were employed, but the era of rich imagery was over. The paintings that have been exposed at Ilketshall are only a small fraction of the decorative scheme which would have existed before the Reformation, but they provide a small insight into how the church would have looked.

**North Wall:** The painting on the north wall shows a large church or cathedral, comprising a double arched nave with Romanesque cushion capitals and a smaller single arched chancel in which there is an altar with a chalice and paten. At the east end of the nave is what appears to be a large font, while to the west are tiny fragments of painting indicating where further details have been lost. At the west end of the building, there are fragments of a large tower, with masonry pattern and a pointed tiled roof.

It would appear likely that the painting is of a similar date to the chevron patterned south door and is part of the original decorative scheme of the Romanesque church. Cushion capitals of the type depicted in the painting tend not to be seen after c.1130, so in conjunction with the dating of the door, a date for the construction and decoration of c.1130 appears reasonable.

**South Wall:** The eastern most bay shows a fragmentary series of large arcades, in which angels with open wings rest on a dark red background. Within the main arcades are pairs of subsidiary traceried arches, in which are situated standing figures holding scrolls. Only the female figure on the far right has survived intact, while in the two adjacent arches, only fragments of underdrawing can be seen. The figure is dressed in a plain dark red robe, painted in vermilion and carbon black, with an indigo cloak decorated with clusters of three white dots and is wearing a white wimple and a crown on her head. Her arms are upraised at a sharp angle from the elbows and she holds a white scroll with black lettering. In the spandrel above the western arch is a crowned figure in a red robe, above which are fragments of architectural decoration.



*The king in the spandrel above the arcade*

Below the arcades is a band of what appears to be drapery, on which are painted a series of extremely curious demons or monsters. The two most visible are the demon with a cockscomb and spiked nose and chin, and a fish-like creature with a long beak, which appears to be looking up the dress of the figure. No other example of this type of decoration is known in English wall painting and their significance is unclear, although it is possible that they are similar to marginalia seen in contemporary manuscripts.

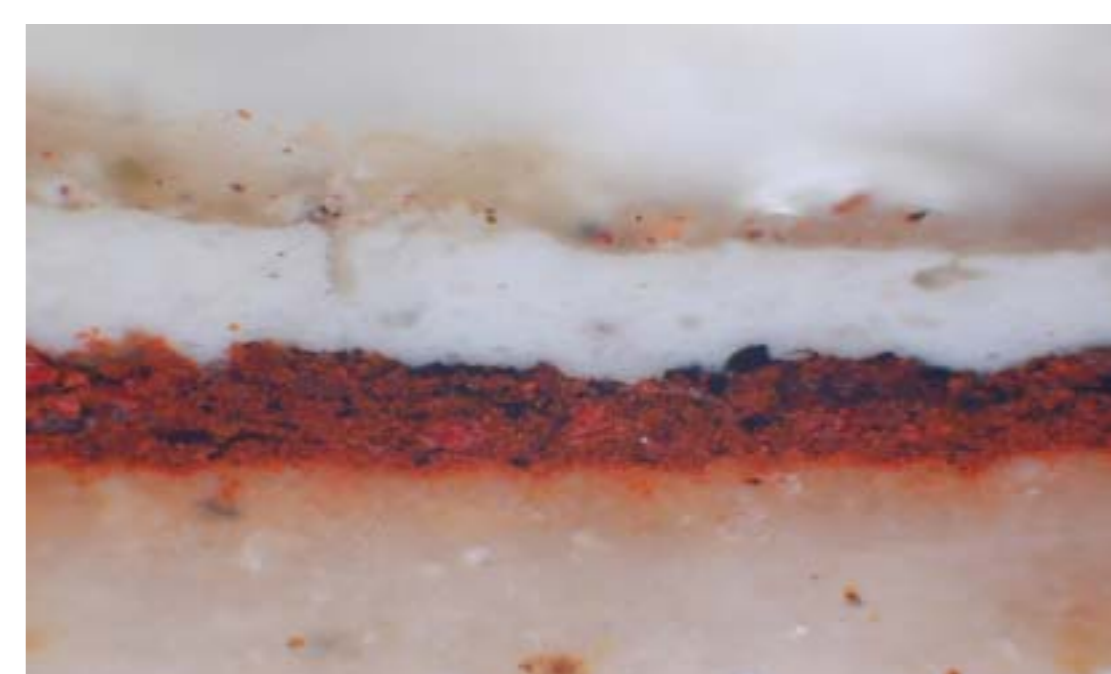
To the right of the window is a unique depiction of a Wheel of Fortune. In the centre is a large spoked wheel with the crowned figure of Fortune turning it in a clockwise direction, assisted by two small figures. Within each of the segments of the wheel is a large eye, painted in black, which is thought to be the eye of God. On the left side of the wheel, an uncrowned figure in an ornate robe and carefully groomed hair is being pulled upwards. On top of the wheel is a seated figure with characteristic crossed shoes, flanked by the word REGNO (I rule). Although the upper part of the painting is lost, where the wall is cut into by the 15<sup>th</sup> century alterations, this would originally have shown a crowned king. On the right side of the wheel is a crowned figure, with the same shoes,



*The female figure in the arcade*



*The altar with the chalice and paten*



*Cross section of the paint layer showing the vermilion and white lead in the background of the arcade*



The king in majesty on top of the Wheel of Fortune

being cast down. Although the painting appears dull and muted, this is largely because what we now see is the underdrawing, the main paint layer having been lost. However, paint analysis shows that the scenes would originally have been as colourful and bright as contemporary manuscripts. Pigments found on the falling king show that his robe was painted in rich vermilion, decorated with clusters of golden yellow dots made of a pigment called orpiment.

Intermingled with the Wheel of Fortune is a scene of the Doom, or Last Judgement. On the upper left side, Christ is seen sitting on a rainbow, with his chest bared and his arms raised, displaying his wounds. On Christ's left hand is an angel holding what appears to be a roughly hewn cross, apparently part of a group which would have originally included all of the instruments of the Passion. Below Christ, a trumpeting angel wakes the dead, who

rise from stone tombs and, at the bottom right of the scene, are the remains of demons dragging souls into the Mouth of Hell. Stylistic details in the paintings suggest a date in the late 1320s or 1330s.

#### ICONOGRAPHY

The Wheel of Fortune, and subsequently the Wheel of Life, were popular subjects from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, allowing artists a visual means to portray themes relating to the progression of life and the interaction with the Divine. The Wheel of Fortune is ultimately derived from the sixth century philosopher Boethius who, in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, depicted the figure of Fortune as blind, deaf, inconstant and two-faced, giving and taking favours as she pleased. This is further described as Fortune turning a wheel where man is pinned to the rim and powerless to stop. However, greater than Fortune is God, whose divine plan encompasses and influences these apparently random acts.



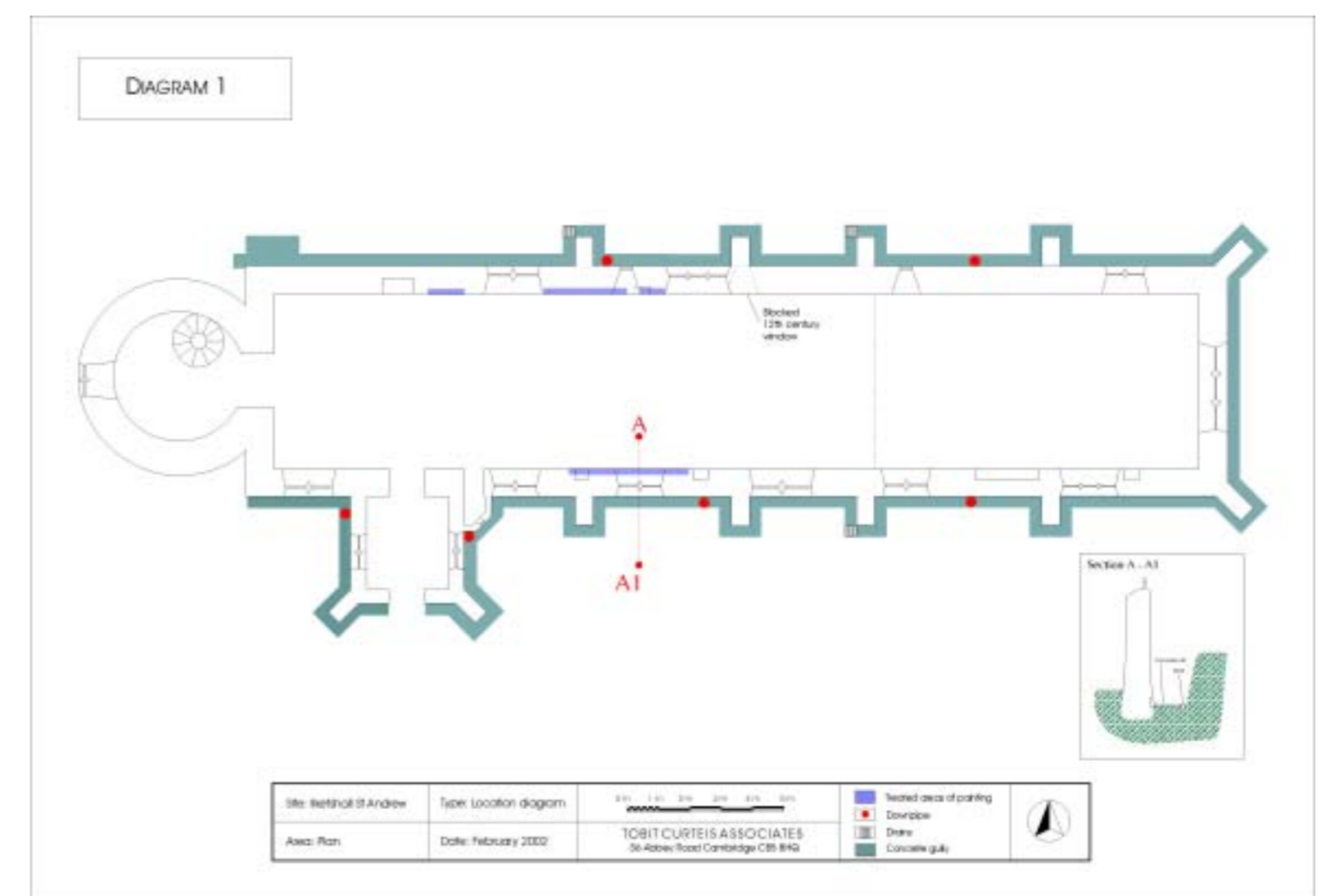
Trumpeting Angel raising the Dead

The subject is generally portrayed with the crowned figure of Fortune turning a wheel on which a man is pulled up from the left side, is then seated in majesty at the top, is then thrown down on the right, and finally lies beneath the wheel at the base, just as we have at Ilketshall. Traditionally these four stages would have been labelled, *regnabo* (I shall rule), *regno* (I rule), *regnavi* (I have ruled) and *sum sine regno* (I do not rule). Although the subject of the Wheel of Fortune is known in contemporary manuscripts, in English medieval wall painting, only two examples of the Wheel of Fortune survive; the painting seen here and that at Rochester Cathedral of c.1245-50.

The painting on the north wall also presents interesting questions of iconography. Monumental architecture of this kind is unknown in 12<sup>th</sup> century wall painting in England, and although it may be an underdrawing, it is none the less important. Parallels for this type of 'sectioned' building do exist in other media, the most notable being in some scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry, which although about forty years earlier than the Ilketshall painting, shows some stylistic similarities.

#### AUTHORSHIP AND PATRONAGE

The basic style and relatively simple technique of the 14<sup>th</sup> century painting suggests that it was carried out by a local painter, rather than an imported court artist. However, the iconography is unusually complex for a rural setting such as this and it seems probable that the patron would have instructed the artist in some detail as to what to paint and how it should be designed. During this period, the living was held by the Ilketshall family, and it appears possible that the Lord of the Manor during the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, Sir James de Ilketshall (d.1345), would have been the patron.



#### CONSERVATION

In 2001, during the redecoration of the church, wall paintings were discovered throughout the nave. As a result of the manner in which the paintings were exposed, extensive areas of both painting and plaster were lost and the remaining paintings, which were fragmentary and unstable, required treatment if further damage was to be prevented. Therefore, a programme of investigations and tests was carried out which culminated in the conservation treatment undertaken in summer 2005. Many of the partially uncovered areas of paintings towards the west of the nave were considered to be stable and it was possible to cover them over safely. However, the two sections in the centre of the nave were extremely unstable, and in order to conserve them it was necessary to fully uncover them.

The treatment involved the slow and painstaking removal of layers of limewash from the original paintings using tiny scalpels and dental tools. Once revealed, the paint layer was stabilized using methods which do not preclude other conservation techniques should further treatment become necessary in the future. The level of reintegration was limited, involving the use of toned limewash and watercolour washes on the losses, but the effect was to enable the surviving paint layer to become readable rather than being obscured by the areas of damage.

The conservation work, which was made possible by a generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, was undertaken by a group of independent conservators co-ordinated by Tobit Curteis Associates, a Cambridge based practice specialising in the conservation of wall paintings. If you are interested in knowing more about the wall paintings or their conservation, please contact Tobit Curteis 01223 501958 or Cynthia Parry, the church warden, on 01986 781637.



Conservation work in progress

