

# THE UNCOVERING AND CONSERVATION OF THE MEDIEVAL WALL PAINTINGS AT ST JAMES THE LESS' CHURCH, LITTLE TEY

by Tobit Curteis

## Abstracts

The recent programme of conservation in the small 12<sup>th</sup>-century church of St James the Less at Little Tey, revealed two unusual and interesting schemes of wall paintings, dating to the 13<sup>th</sup>-century and the 14<sup>th</sup>-century respectively. On the walls of the apse, an extensive 13<sup>th</sup>-century Passion cycle was discovered, as well as fragments of a later painting, indicating that a similar narrative cycle had been painted there in the following century. Elsewhere in the church, fragments of other 13<sup>th</sup>-century paintings were uncovered, including scenes of Adam and Eve and of two unidentified saints. Of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century paintings, the most interesting discovery was the Virgin and Child on the south wall and the previously uncovered Three Living on the north wall. Although many of the paintings were fragmentary, it is clear that both the 13<sup>th</sup>-and 14<sup>th</sup>-schemes were of an unusually high figurative quality.

## Introduction

Although small fragments of medieval wall painting are regularly uncovered in medieval churches, the discovery of complete narrative schemes is far less usual. Therefore, the discovery in the 1980s of an extensive scheme of wall paintings in the parish church of Little Tey, near Colchester, was of particular significance.

Situated at the north end of the village, the church of St James the Less is a simple single-celled structure, constructed of flint rubble with limestone dressings for the doors and windows, and incorporating a number of quoins of undressed pudding-stone. Although the main structure of the building is 12<sup>th</sup>-century, a number of windows were inserted in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century, and the level of the roof has been raised. The church was also

restored in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century when the east window was replaced.

During the 1960s, the internal walls of the church were decorated with a synthetic non-porous paint, which had since deteriorated very badly. By the 1980s, the loss of the modern paint had begun to reveal areas of what appeared to be two schemes of early wall painting, and some important sections of the paintings were uncovered by Jane Rutherfoord, at this time.

## Pre-conservation survey

A detailed examination of the church was carried out in 1995, in order to assess the nature and extent of the surviving wall paintings as well as their current condition and the possibilities for their full uncovering and conservation. This survey showed that a band of the original lime and sand render, approximately 165cm in width, survived on all of the internal walls, at a height of approximately 194cm above floor level. Below this level, the original plaster had been lost and replaced with a modern lime mortar dado, while the area above was repaired with a mud and straw render.

The initial uncovering tests in the area of original render revealed at least two schemes of wall painting of different dates, both of which appeared to extend around all of the walls. On stylistic grounds, as well as their relationship with the architectural structure of the church, it appeared likely that the schemes dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-and 14<sup>th</sup>-centuries respectively. The fact that a scene of the Last Supper had been partially exposed on the north wall indicated that the earlier of the two schemes included at least part of a Passion cycle. However, it was far from clear at this early stage whether the later scheme followed the same narrative structure or if the paintings were of an

entirely different type. At the west end of the north wall, a number of very small fragments of paint were found, which appeared to be part of a much larger scheme of decoration, which had been almost entirely destroyed.

The structure of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century paint layer was relatively simple, with the pigment layer applied on a single limewash ground over an uneven, but fine layer of lime render. The 14<sup>th</sup>-century painting was applied directly over the previous scheme, on a single fine layer of limewash. Above this were a number of layers of limewash, and a single layer of blue distemper followed by at least three layers of brown distemper. Most recently applied, in 1966, was the layer of slightly grey Walpamur,<sup>i</sup> a synthetic emulsion paint. In all, there appeared to be approximately 12 separate paint and limewash layers above the render.

The paint analysis showed that the palette used for both the 13<sup>th</sup>-and 14<sup>th</sup>-century paint schemes was fairly similar, containing red and yellow ochres in an organic medium.<sup>ii</sup> In addition, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century scheme contained some areas of a lead pigment which had converted from its original colour to a dark brown or black. The paint layers of both schemes were found to be relatively fine (approx. 15-25µm) in comparison to the limewash layers (approx. 150-300µm), making them particularly vulnerable to mechanical damage. It was also noted that in a number of areas the pigment layers appeared to lack cohesion. Analysis of pigment samples taken from some small fragments of what appeared to be later paint work on the north wall, showed the use of vermilion and green verditer.

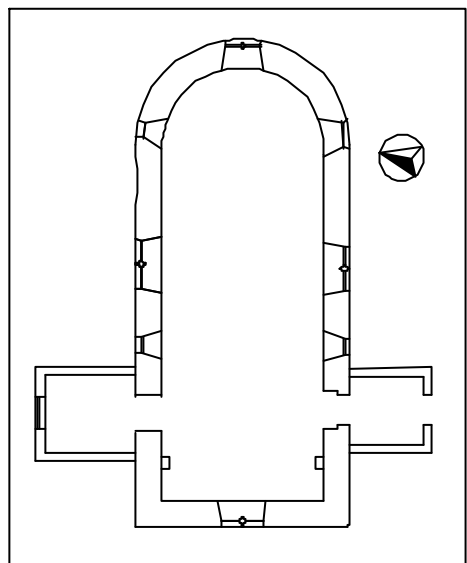
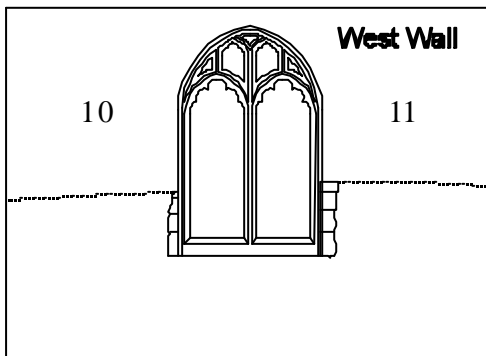
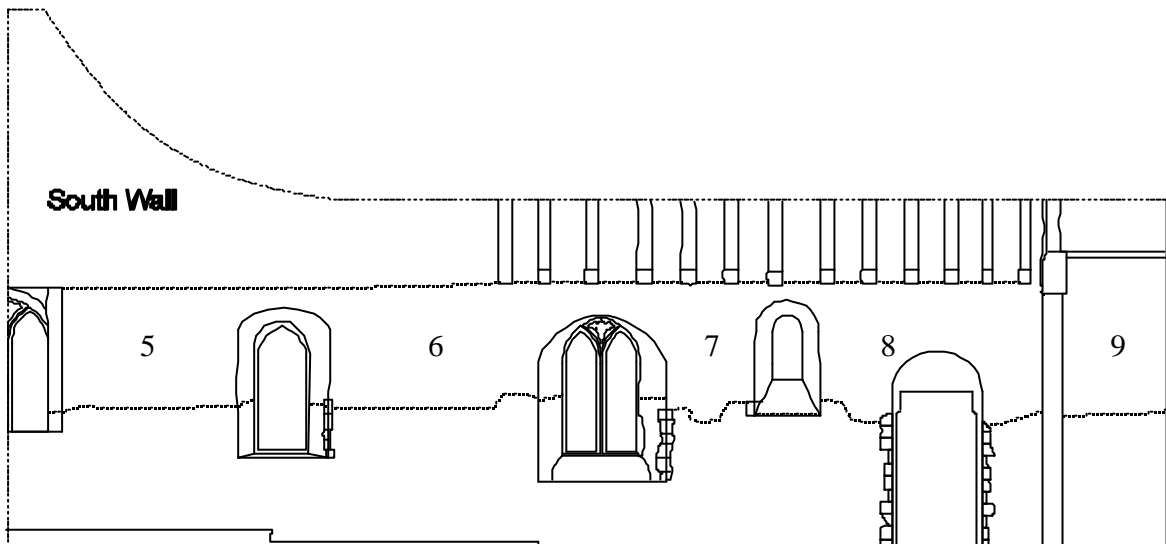
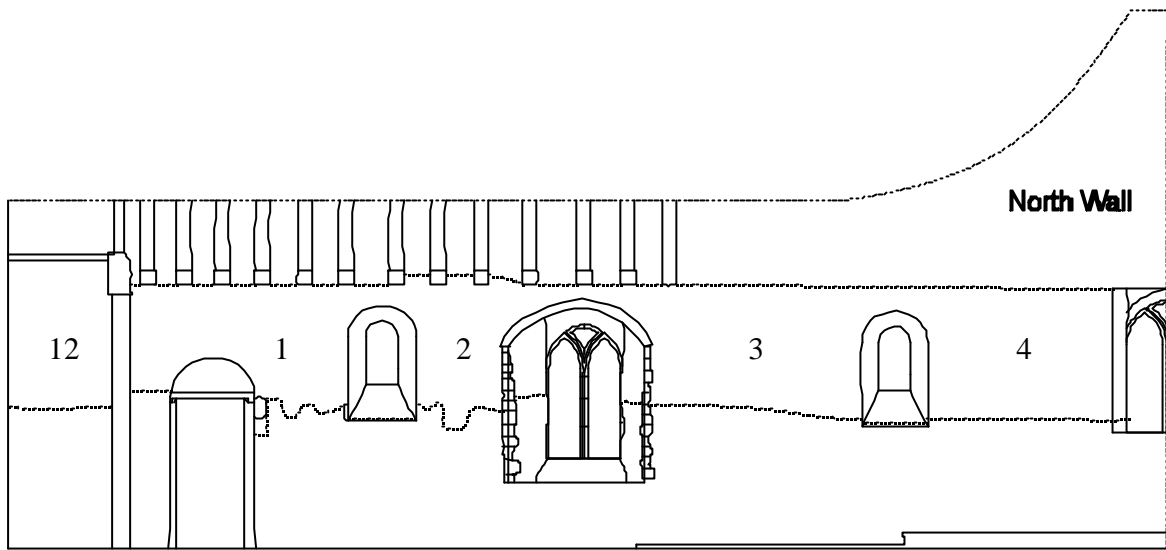
The analysis of the blue pigment in the later distemper showed it to be artificial ultramarine. Although artificial ultramarine was first synthesised in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, it was not commercially produced as an artists pigment until the 1850s, and it was presumably later still that it began to be used as a cheap pigment in distemper. As a result, it was possible to tell that all the layers above the blue layer, including all the brown distemper layers, were later than the mid 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Therefore, in areas such as those in the apse, where the brown distemper was applied directly onto the 13<sup>th</sup>-century paint layer, it can be concluded that all the paint layers between the 13<sup>th</sup>-and the 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries had been lost.

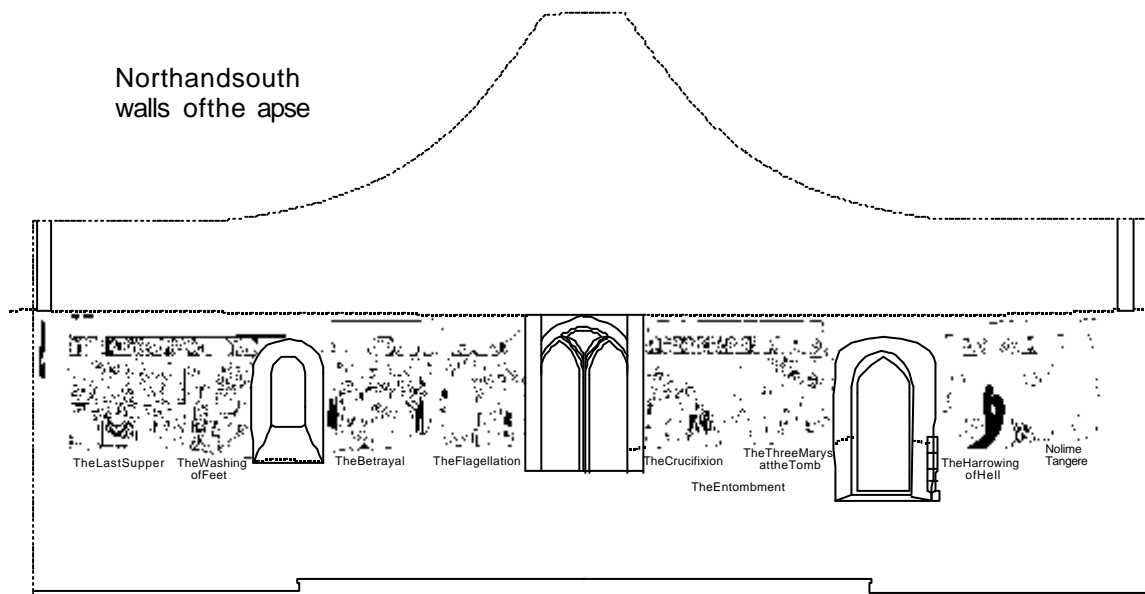
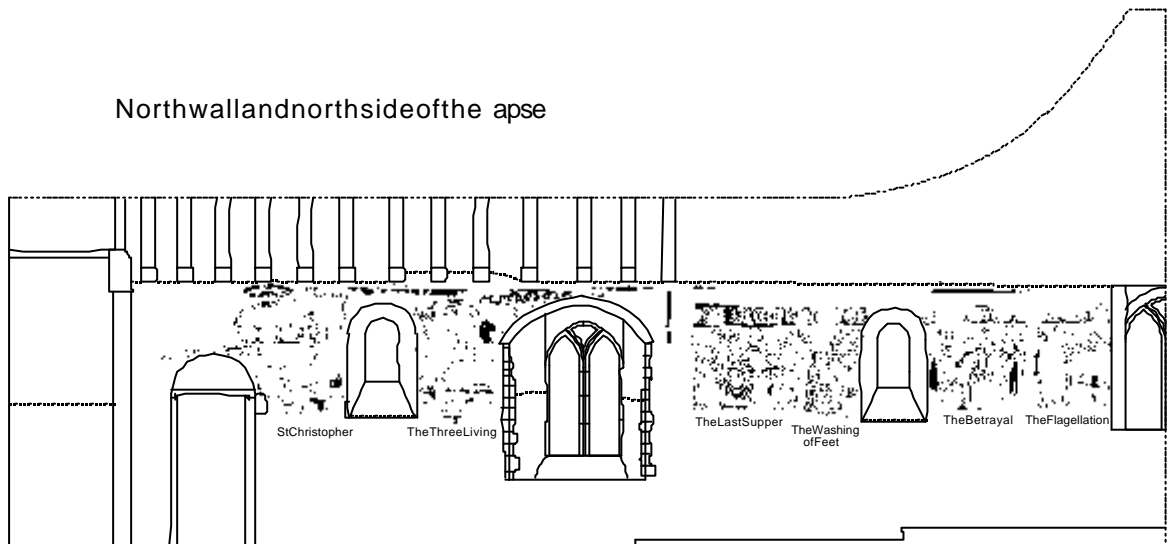
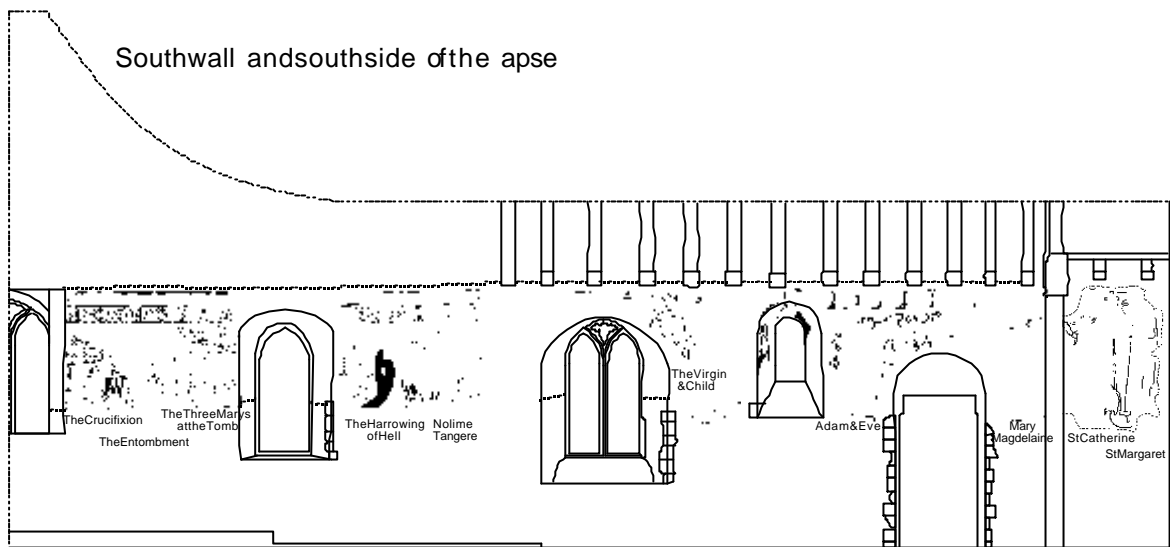
Since its application, the Walpamur had shown signs of extensive delamination and flaking over much of the area of the church. This had caused large areas of the lower coatings to delaminate and flake, including in some areas the original paint layers themselves. It appears that in order to prepare the wall surface for past redecoration, extensive preparatory scraping down and cleaning was carried out. In some cases, this seems to have been extremely vigorous, with extensive damage throughout the layer structure and a characteristic linear scarring on the plaster layer. The most notable example of this is in the apse, where the preparation of the surface for the brown distemper had removed all layers above the 13<sup>th</sup>-century paint scheme. As a result, in most sections of the apse, the distemper was applied directly over the badly damaged 13<sup>th</sup>-century paintings. In the few small areas where patches of limewash survived, acting as an intervention layer, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century painting survived in better condition. However, in most other areas, there was extensive surface abrasion.

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<sup>i</sup> Purcell, Miller, Tritton & Partners, Specification for St James Church, Little Tey, Essex. Conservation of the Wall Paintings, Job No.7763, February 1993/January 1994. P1, Para. 110.

<sup>ii</sup> Tobit Curteis Associates, *Condition Survey and Revised Proposals for the Conservation of the Wall Paintings, St James the Less, Little Tey, Essex*, (unpublished) October 1995.





## Conservation Programme

In many cases where wall paintings are discovered in situations similar to this, it is considered the best conservation practice to leave them covered, and merely to record their presence and ensure that they are not deteriorating. However, Little Tey was considered to be an exception as it was the covering layers themselves which were to a large extent responsible for the paintings' deterioration. Therefore, it was decided that the layers of limewash, distemper and modern paint should be removed, in order that the paintings could be exposed and conserved. Significant sections of the paintings, including the Last Supper and the Three Living and the Three Dead were uncovered by Jane Rutherford in the 1980s. The main programme of uncovering and conservation was undertaken by Tobit Curteis Associates in 1996. The stabilisation of the paint layers was considered to be the primary aim of the conservation work once they were uncovered. In conjunction with this, the areas of damage were repaired and losses were treated with a tinted limewash in order to reduce their visually disruptive appearance. At no point was retouching or reconstruction of the paintings undertaken.<sup>iii</sup>

## The Paintings

The wall paintings are described in a clockwise order, beginning with those over the north door. In order to allow easier identification of the different sections of painting, the walls of the church have been divided into twelve sequentially numbered areas. [Diagrams 1 & 2]

**North Wall (Areas 1 & 2)** Although the painting in the area around the north door is very badly damaged, a fragmentary 14<sup>th</sup>-century painting of St Christopher is clearly

visible. The Christ Child sits on the shoulder of the saint, with an orb in his left hand and his right hand raised in a blessing.

Interestingly, he appears to have a scalloped rather than a crossed halo. [Plate 1] The figure of St Christopher is extremely fragmentary with only a section of the head and bearded face readily visible, though fragments of his dark drapery can be seen on the plaster below. Paint analysis demonstrated that the black pigment was a converted lead pigment. Above and to the right of the figures is a border of contemporary vine scroll, painted partly on a fine lime mortar repair with which it appears to be contemporary.

In the area above and to the right of the north door, a series of fragments of later wall paintings were uncovered, which appeared to date to at least three different periods. Although the earlier of the fragments might be figurative, it is possible that the later fragments are the remains of decorative frames for biblical texts.

To the east of the north door, in Area 2, the most important painting is the scene of the Three Living and the Three Dead, which has been dated to the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century on stylistic grounds. The wall painting, which is very similar to that found at St Mary's, Belchamp Walter, also in Essex, shows distinct similarities to the example in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle (British Library, Arundel Ms 83 II) of c.1310.<sup>iv</sup> The right hand side of the painting, which would have contained the figures of the Three Dead, has been lost due to the insertion of a window with simple Y tracery, characteristic of c.1320.

While much of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century render survived in this area, the only feature which is clearly visible is the fleur-de-lys border which runs above the window to the right. However, the most interesting area of 13<sup>th</sup>-century painting is on the lower part of the wall below the main painting. This shows the

<sup>iii</sup> A full account of the materials and techniques used for the conservation of the wall paintings is included in the conservation report. Tobit Curteis Associates, *Uncovering and Conservation of the Wall paintings, St James the Less, Little Tey, Essex*, (unpublished) August 1996.

<sup>iv</sup> Sandler, L.F. *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle*, London & Oxford 1983, p.42, Pl.5.



**Plate 1.** The Christ Child on the shoulder of St Christopher, on the north wall of the nave. (Photo copyright: Tobit Curteis Associates)

top of a second decorative border, similar in design to that seen in the upper area, and is the only surviving indication of how the lower edge of the painting would have been decorated.<sup>v</sup>

**The Apse (Areas 3 to 6)** The walls of the apse are decorated with a cycle of 13<sup>th</sup>-century paintings depicting the Passion of Christ. The first scene, shows the Last Supper, while to the right, is the Washing of the Feet. The paintings in this area are by far the most complete and retain the most interesting figurative details. Although the two scenes are clearly differentiated by the counterchanged background of red and light pink, figures in the Last Supper encroach on the Washing of the Feet, giving an impression of progression in the narrative cycle.

The iconography of both scenes is not unusual for the period. In the Last Supper, Christ sits at the centre of the table with St John asleep on his breast and the other

disciples on either side. [Plate 2] His left hand is held out to Judas who kneels on the other side of the table with his head bent back and his arms outstretched. In the Washing of the Feet, Christ is seen kneeling before St Peter, holding his foot above a raised water basin, and with his left hand raised to admonish Peter for his reticence. Peter has his left arm upraised in surprise, while the rest of the apostles look on. An almost identical representation occurs in a manuscript of c.1220-30, at Emmanuel College, Cambridge (MS25, folio II).<sup>vi</sup> Interestingly, in the manuscript, Christ has the towel over his shoulder in the more conventional manner, while in the wall painting, the towel is hung over a rail at the back of the scene.

The trefoil devices in the upper border, [Plate 3] which is particularly clear in this area, is very similar to that found on the nativity cycle at St Clement's, Ashampstead, in Berkshire, which has been dated to the early to mid 13<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>vii</sup> Such an early date for a Passion cycle, makes the scheme of paintings at Little Tey a particularly rare example.

While very little 14<sup>th</sup>-century painting is seen over the Last Supper, a particularly interesting area was discovered on the Washing of the Feet. On the right hand side of the scene, superimposed over the figures of the Disciples, is the outline of a single standing figure, in a long robe. Small fragments of a dark robe, similar to that of St Christopher in Area 1, were also found. On analysis these were found to contain converted lead pigments. Although these remains are only fragmentary, they are of particular importance in showing that 14<sup>th</sup>-century figurative painting had definitely been carried out in the apse.

To the left of the Last Supper there were large losses in the original plaster, which had

<sup>v</sup> Area 2 was uncovered prior to the current programme.

<sup>vi</sup> Morgan, N. J. *Early Gothic Manuscripts (1) 1190-1250*, Oxford 1982, Pl.176.

<sup>vii</sup> Tristram, E.W. *English Medieval Wall Painting, The Thirteenth Century*, Oxford 1950, pp.501 – 502.



**Plate 2.** The central section of the Last Supper on the north wall of the apse. (Photo copyright: Tobit Curteis Associates)

been repaired using various mud straw and other renders. It is noteworthy that to the east of the repairs, the trefoil border was painted significantly below the wall plate, while to the west, it is higher and far closer to the original wall plate. The only explanation for this appeared to be that when it was painted, there was a physical barrier between the nave and the apse, and therefore there would not have been the visual continuation which we have today. Whether such a barrier was structural or merely a wooden screen is not clear, but, there is a corresponding loss on the other side of the apse in area 6.

In area 4, to the right of the Washing of the Feet, the scenes of the Betrayal and the Flagellation were among the most significant

discoveries of the recent programme. Like the previous scene, the iconography is typical of the period, with the central figure of Christ being kissed by Judas. To the right is St Peter with the sword in his right hand, with which he cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus, who crouches on the left hand side. Behind them are the figures of the soldiers, one of whom holds an axe, and the evil-looking profiles of the high priest's followers. The depiction of the scene on the *verso* of the folio of the Emmanuel College manuscript mentioned above, contains many of the same groupings, although in this case the layout is a little different. However, the similarity between many of the figures and objects is noteworthy.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>viii</sup> The similarity between the lamps is striking.



**Plate 3.** of the decorative border above the Last Supper.  
(Photo copyright: Tobit Curteis Associates)

To the right, the scene of the Flagellation had suffered far worse loss and only the fragmentary halo of Christ could be seen on the left of the scene. The figure of his tormentor, who is wearing a knee length tunic above bare legs and has his left arm raised, stands to the right of Christ. To the right of the Flagellation is what may be a fragment of the Christ Carrying the Cross.

Most of this scene has been lost as a result of the enlargement of the east window.

Most of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century painting in this area had been destroyed. However, one particularly interesting area was found over the lower half of the figure of Christ in the Flagellation. This fragment of painting appears to show two crossed legs, dressed in buskins, and may therefore be the fragment



**Plate 4.** The Virgin and Child on the south wall of the nave. (Photo copyright: Tobit Curteis Associates)



**Plate 5.** The Virgin and Child at Little Wenham. (For comparative purposes, this plate has been printed in reverse). (Photo copyright: Courtauld Institute of Art)





**Plate 6.** The figure in the soffit of the window in the south wall. (Photo copyright: Tobit Curteis Associates)

of a figure of Pilate in a 14<sup>th</sup>-century depiction of Christ before Pilate. If this were the case, it would be particularly important as, in conjunction with the scene of the three Marys at the Sepulchre described below, it would indicate that there was a 14<sup>th</sup>-century repainting of the Passion, rather than a series of individual subjects.

To the right of the east window, in area 5, are scenes of the Crucifixion, the Entombment and the Three Marys at the Sepulchre. Although it is badly damaged, the **13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY** painting of **THE** Crucifixion is particularly striking. The iconography is more complex than usual, and includes the figures of Longinus (with the lance) and Stephaton (with the sponge of vinegar). This layout is more clearly seen in

a contemporary manuscript at the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (091.21001, f.4<sup>v</sup>).<sup>ix</sup> At Little Tey, the figure of St John adopts an unusual stance with his right hand held up under his cloak, in the manner shown in a watercolour of the wall painting of the Crucifixion at Bapchild Church in Kent. Unfortunately, due to the enlargement of the east window, the figure of the Virgin as well as most of Longinus has been destroyed. Above the figurative scene is the fleur de lys band, which was also found to be in relatively good condition.

To the right, is a badly damaged 13<sup>th</sup>-century scene assumed to be the Entombment, due to the small shrouded or cowled head which

<sup>ix</sup> Morgan, N. J. *Early Gothic Manuscripts* (2) 1250-1285, Oxford 1988, Pl.303.

appears at the base of the painting. Fragments of a second head looking down at the figure were also found. Further to the right, adjacent to the window is the scene of the Three Marys at the Sepulchre. The three obvious wimpled figures and the seated angel date to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century. However, close examination shows a second set of figures, slightly above these, which are clearly part of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scheme. This is particularly interesting as both the 13<sup>th</sup>-and the 14<sup>th</sup>-century paintings appear to be depicting the same subject. In conjunction with the fragments on the previous scenes, this appears to indicate quite strongly that there was indeed a second, later Passion cycle painted over the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scheme.

In Area 6, adjacent to the window is the scene of the Harrowing of Hell. The haloed Christ is depicted standing in front of the large open mouth of Hell (whose eye can be seen above the open mouth). The souls of the Damned, which were presumably painted coming out of the mouth, have deteriorated so badly that they are no longer visible. However, what can be seen is a small yellow demon which is jumping out of the mouth towards Christ.

To the right is the scene of Noli Me Tangere. The lower part of the kneeling Magdalene is clearly visible, as is the lower section of Christ's robe. However, most of the upper bodies are destroyed, and only Christ's head and the top of the pennant staff can be seen. Although the scene is difficult to read in its current condition, comparison with the very similar example in the rolls of the Velletri, Museo Capitolare,<sup>x</sup> clearly demonstrate the layout of the scene. Further to the right is a single bare leg from an unidentified scene.

Like its counterpart on the north wall, the western side of area 6 has been repaired with various mud straw renders. The level of the fleur de lys band also rises significantly in

area 7, indicating the presence of a physical barrier at the time of painting.

**South Wall (Areas 7 to 9)** Immediately to the right of the window is a very fine depiction of the Virgin and Child, with the Child, who is holding a orb, sitting on the hip of the crowned Virgin. [Plate 4] The Virgin can be seen to be holding the stem of a lily in her very delicately painted left hand. A rather similar but more sophisticated depiction of c.1300 can be seen at Little Wenham Church, in Suffolk. [Plate 5] As with the Three Living and the Three Dead, with which it is contemporary, the scene has been cut into by the insertion of a later window.

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century figure in the soffit of the window between areas 7 & 8 wears a white undershirt with a red cloak over its left shoulder. [Plate 6] While most of the facial and other linear details, including the halo, have been lost, the figure retains most of its bright yellow hair. Due to the lack of detail, the identification of the figure is not clear. However, it is possible that it is one of a series of paintings of saints or martyrs which would originally have adorned all of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century windows.<sup>xi</sup> On the eastern splay of the window is a second similarly dressed figure also with yellow hair. However this figure, who holds what appears to be a scroll in its left hand, is wearing a red robe over its right shoulder. The outside edge of the window is decorated with a chevron pattern painted in light pink, which has deteriorated significantly. Although the details of the figure differ, this same form of painted decoration on the soffit and splays of windows is seen at Easthorpe Church in Essex and at Barfreton Church in Kent.

Although the level of damage in area 8, to the east of the windows is relatively high, much of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century render was found to have survived and fragments of painting were uncovered. In the area adjacent to the window, the remains of the figures of Adam

<sup>x</sup> Op. Cit. Morgan, 1988, Pl.127.

<sup>xi</sup> None of the other 12<sup>th</sup>-century windows retained any traces of painting.

and Eve were discovered. Of the two, both of whom are naked, the figure of Eve is most visible. The structure of the breast and lower ribs are similar to that seen in the far earlier example at Hardham Church in Sussex. The ribs and upper chest of the bearded figure of Adam are also visible. Above the south door are fragments of at least two further figures. That on the left appears to be an angel, while the only other clearly visible figure is bearded. Given its juxtaposition with the previous scene, it would appear likely that it is the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The broken fleur de lys border can be seen running above both scenes, indicating that they are part of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scheme.

To the right of the door, much of the original render has been lost. The only surviving section of 14<sup>th</sup>-century painting is a fragment of the figure of Mary Magdalene, which should be viewed in conjunction with the figures to the west of the structural wooden post in area 9. These two fragmentary figures are identified as St Margaret and St Catherine.<sup>xii</sup> The figure of St Margaret is in the west corner and can be identified by the small dragon at her feet and her long crossed staff. In style, she is similar to the figure of St Margaret at Little Wenham Church in Suffolk. To her right, adjacent to the wooden post, are the remains of the upper part of a figure of St Catherine holding a wheel, again similar to the figure of that saint at Little Wenham. On the basis of this grouping of figures, the small red circle in area 8 can be identified as the top of the pot of ointment held by the Magdalene.

## Conclusions

The discovery of two such interesting schemes of wall paintings is certainly an uncommon event. What makes the paintings of particular interest, apart from their exceptional artistic quality, is the opportunity on stylistic and architectural grounds to date them relatively closely. The similarity

between the ubiquitous fleur de lys border seen in the earlier of the two schemes and the same design at Ashampstead, suggests that they are very close in date. The latter paintings have been dated to the early to mid 13<sup>th</sup>-century, which by implication makes the paintings of the Passion cycle at Little Tey almost unique in Essex. The similarities between the scene of the Three Living and the Three Dead on the north wall and the example in the de Lisle Psalter of c.1310 are also striking. Given that the wall painting must post-date the Psalter by some time and must predate the Y-tracery window, (the insertion of which destroyed the figures of the Three Dead), this leaves a very limited period, in the early 14<sup>th</sup>-century, when they could have been executed. This would make the Three Living and by implication the other parts of this scheme extremely early examples of their type.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>xii</sup> I am grateful to Sharon Cather of the Courtauld Institute of Art for identifying this sequence of figures.