

# THE CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ST MARY AND ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, WILLINGHAM

## THE PAINTINGS

### *The 13<sup>th</sup> Century*

The earliest wall paintings which are located in the small 13<sup>th</sup> century window on the west wall of the south aisle, consist of two schemes, the earlier of which is the double line masonry pattern, decorated with ornate floral motifs, and painted quoins. On a limewash layer above this are two elegant female figures, possibly showing St Etheldreda, the founder and abbess of Ely (d.679) and her sister, St Sexburga (d.c.699). While the figures are obviously later than the masonry pattern, it appears likely that both layers of painting date to the mid to late 13<sup>th</sup> century.



*The 13<sup>th</sup> Century paintings in the south aisle*



*Detail of the 14th century St Christopher*

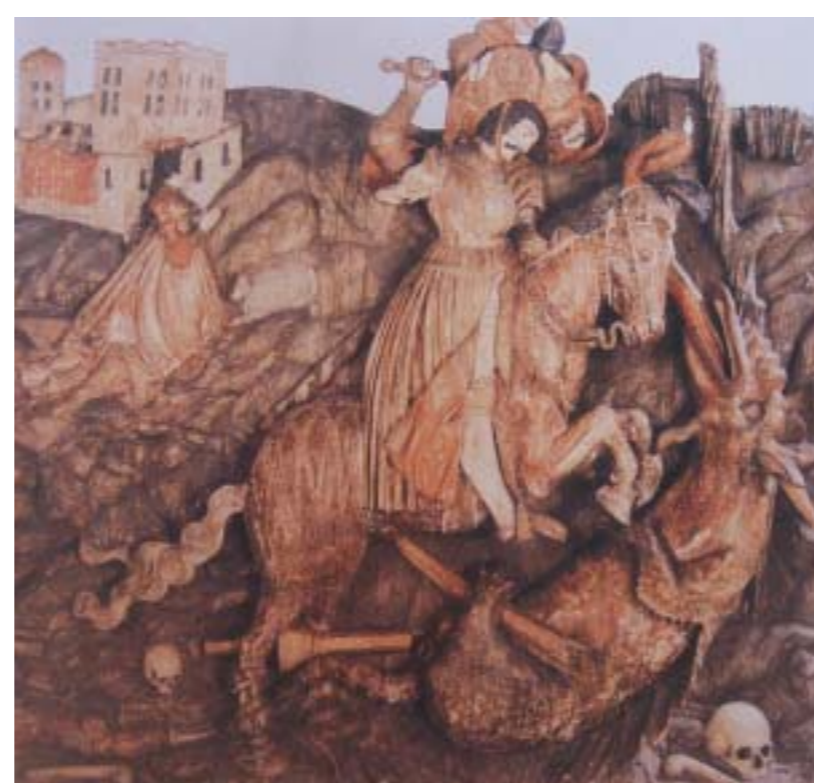
### *The 14<sup>th</sup> Century*

The next paintings, in chronological order, appear to be the scenes of St Christopher and St George, on the north arcade, which are thought to date to the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century. The scene of St Christopher is unusually complete, with the figure of the saint in red and green robes, holding a Tau crossed staff in his right hand, and the Christ child on his left arm.

In the middle of the nave north wall is the badly damaged scene of St George and the Dragon in a bold cable moulded frame. Clearly visible in the lower part of the painting are St George's horse, the broken lance and the coils of the dragon, with blood flowing from his side, while in the top left corner are the remains of the walled city with the crowned king and queen watching the contest. The figure of St George and the central section of the painting are almost completely lost, but the point of his raised sword can be seen above the frame. It has been suggested that the paintings of St Christopher and St George are of a similar date. However, stylistically they are rather different and it is interesting to observe the iconographic similarities with a relief sculpture of St George and the Dragon of c.1500 from Konopiste Castle in the Czech Republic.

### *The 15<sup>th</sup> Century*

The most striking scheme of painting was carried out in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Two fragments of the Doom survive on the north and south sides of the chancel arch. The one on the south side shows the Damned being tormented by demons and burned, while that on the north side shows the Blessed being welcomed by St Peter. The central section of the painting has been lost due to the insertion of a window, while the outer edges are obscured by the hammer beams of the roof. The Doom extends onto the south wall where, rather incongruously, two of the demons can be seen adjacent to the scene of the Visitation.



*Sculpture of St George and the Dragon from Konopiste Castle*



*Digital reconstruction of the head of the Dragon, based on the Konopiste sculpture*



*The 15<sup>th</sup> Century Visitation on the south wall*

The Visitation is the best surviving scene from the Life of the Virgin cycle. Situated at the east end of the south arcade, the painting shows the haloed figures of the Virgin and St Elizabeth in blue robes, trimmed with ermine. To the west is the fragmentary scene of the Assumption of the Virgin, of which only the lower part of the painting remains. On the north wall is an extremely badly damaged Annunciation. The shields on the north and south arcade walls are contemporary with the scheme and contain both heraldic details and images from the Passion.



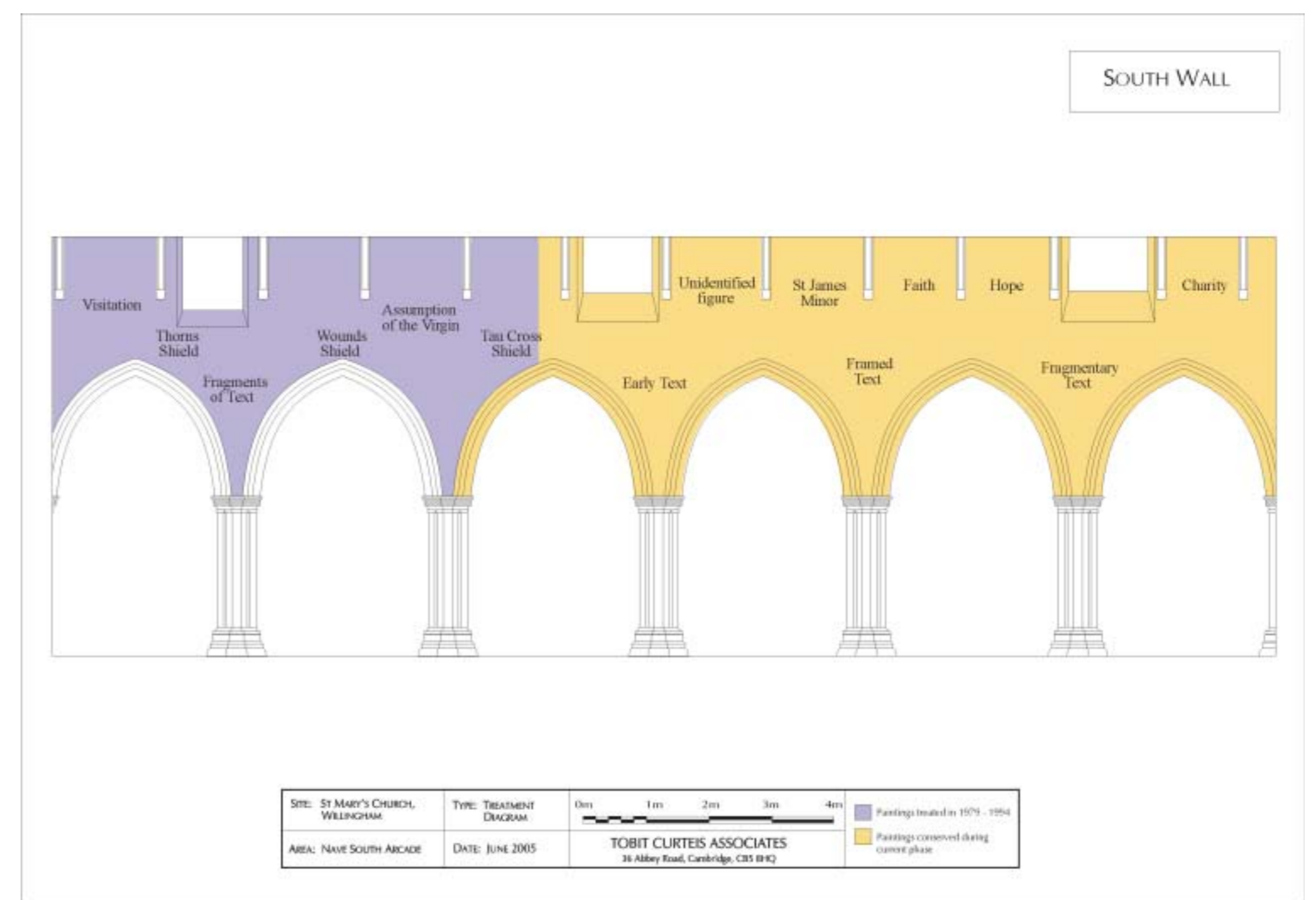
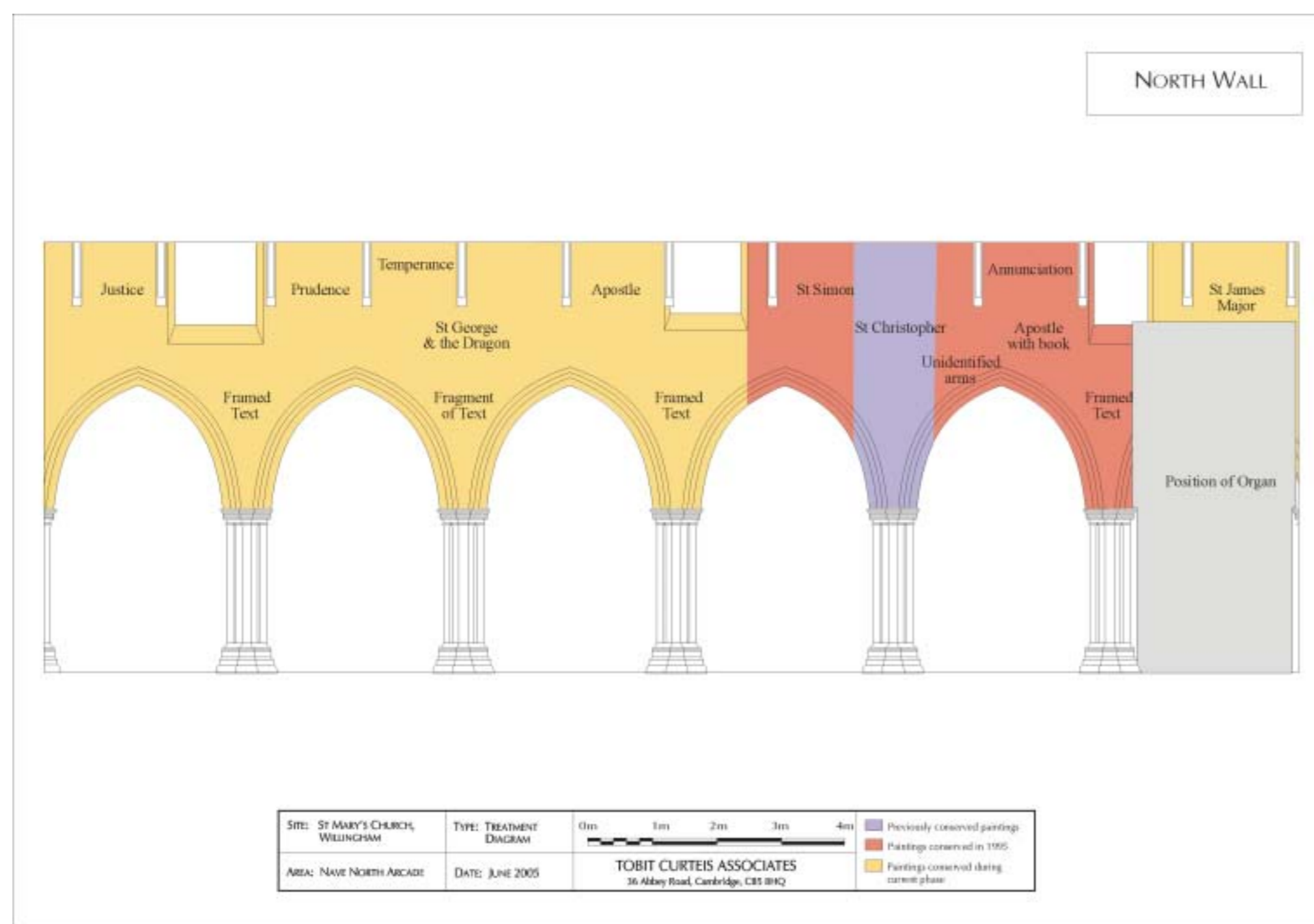
*15<sup>th</sup> Century shields with the wounds of the Passion, on the south wall of the nave*



*Detail of the figures of the Damned in the mouth of Hell*

## 16th and 17th Centuries

The later wall paintings consist of a series of framed texts, showing the Ten Commandments and a series of large figures of Apostles towards the east end of the nave with Cardinal and Theological Virtues towards the west.



On the south wall of the nave, the first visible figure (from the east) is an unidentified bearded man dressed in 17<sup>th</sup> century costume. To the west is a figure holding a club, thought to be St James the Less. Proceeding further to the west are the three theological virtues starting with the voluptuous figure of Faith, holding a cup and a cross. Hope, with her robes picked out with blue/green decoration, is identified by the anchor, while to the west, Charity, although badly damaged, can be identified by the foot of the child that she holds.

On the south side of the tower arch wall is a fragmentary figure of an angel in classical Roman armour, holding an hourglass, which appears to be contemporary with the Virtues. On the layer above the angel is a large square frame supporting a circular clock face, with roman numerals, above which is a winged hourglass with the words MORI MEMENTO in black capital letters, beneath. This type of reference to time and death was popular at this period and winged hourglasses are not uncommon.



17<sup>th</sup> Century figure of St James the Great

On the north wall is the figure of Justice holding the scales and the sword. To the east is the fragmentary figure of Prudence holding a mirror to her face with her right hand and a snake in the left hand. Over the left side of the frame, surrounding St George, are the remains of the upheld arm of Temperance pouring water into a jug, while the bay to the right, which would presumably have held the figure of Fortitude, is entirely empty. Further to the east are the figures of another unidentified Apostle and then the figure of St Simon with his saw. Finally, at the east end of the wall, is the striking figure thought to be St James the Great, now partially hidden behind the organ pipes.



17<sup>th</sup> Century figure of Faith

There are at least three schemes of text on the nave walls. The earliest of these is the finely painted and unframed red lettering on the south wall, below the unidentified bearded figure. Next, in chronological order, are two black letter texts, the later of which has the ornate red and black frames which are clearly visible in the spandrels. The wording is not clear in all cases, but it appears probable that they include the Ten Commandments. The final surviving text is an extremely fragmentary scheme of which only small sections remain.

## CONSERVATION

Since they were uncovered in 1895, areas of the paintings have been restored on a number of occasions. The most notable of these was in the 1930s when areas of the paintings were treated with a wax coating, which subsequently deteriorated and absorbed ambient dirt, making them dark and hard to read. Between 1979 and 1994 most areas of the later paintings at the east end of the nave were cleaned and restored. A survey of the paintings undertaken in 1995 showed that the areas of the wall paintings which had been treated in the recent past were in a relatively good condition. A number of small areas of flaking were noted but such damage was very limited. However, the later paintings, towards the west end, were far less stable and were likely to deteriorate further if left untreated.



Conservator stabilising the paint layer

In 2000 a programme of treatment was undertaken on the painting on the area surrounding St Simon, on the north wall. This allowed the treatment techniques for the remaining areas to be developed and refined. Following a fund raising programme by the parish, and the award of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, a programme of conservation was undertaken on the remaining areas of wall paintings towards the west end of the nave. The aim of the work was to stabilise the wall paintings in order to prevent further deterioration and loss. In conjunction with this, the level of accumulated surface dirt was reduced, so that the paintings can be more clearly seen and the subject matter made more accessible to the viewer. The work 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 on 01223 501958 or Alan Fawcitt, wall painting secretary, on 01954 204024.



Delamination and flaking of the paint layer