

THE CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ST MARY'S CHURCH HOUGHTON-ON-THE-HILL

THE CHURCH

Although almost certainly situated on the site of an earlier church, the surviving architectural details, including the characteristic double splayed windows, suggest that the earliest part of the existing building dates to the period soon after the Norman Conquest. In the mid 12th century, the south wall of the nave was opened up with two large arches and an aisle was added. In the 14th century the aisle was demolished and the arches were blocked. The obvious decorated window was inserted in the nave north wall at about the same time. The tower was added in the 15th century and at the same period the large south window was inserted. The basic structure of the church then remained unchanged until the 18th century, when the chancel was demolished and replaced with the small square construction seen today. In the 19th century, the south window was changed to its present restored state .

By the 1930s, the church was in a parlous condition, but although it fell out of use, it remained consecrated. In the subsequent years the roof collapsed in many places and the church became overgrown with ivy. In the early 1990s it became one of twenty such churches which were targeted by English Heritage and Norfolk County Council for emergency repairs as part of their Ruined Churches Repair Project. Much essential work took place between 1994 and 1996 with funds raised by the Friends of St Mary's.

THE WALL PAINTINGS

In April 1996, investigations exposed large areas of wall paintings from beneath the plaster which had been protecting them. In 1997 temporary windows were installed and the roof was reconstructed. The present windows were reinstated early this century.

The wall paintings are one of the most important discoveries of their type in recent years, being among the earliest examples of monumental mural painting known in Britain. On stylistic grounds they have been dated to the end of the 11th century and therefore appear to have been painted soon after the construction of the building.

Most significant, is the huge figure of the Trinity on the east wall with the throned figure of God in a triple mandorla, with Christ on the Cross held before him and the Holy Ghost, in the form of a dove. Below this is a band of figures holding scrolls and scenes of the Dead being raised from their tombs by trumpeting angels, while in the surrounding panels are further Biblical scenes.

On the north wall there are fragmentary scenes thought to show details of the Creation, while on the west wall there are parts of what might be a Doom. On top of some sections of the 11th century paintings are fragments of later schemes of decoration possibly dating to the 15th century and the post-Reformation period.

THE CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

The methodology of the conservation programme has been developed over a number of years by a committee comprising art historians, conservators, statutory and funding bodies, and the PCC.

The aim of the present intervention is to stabilise and conserve the paintings *as found*. In other words, the intention is to protect the

paintings from further deterioration and loss by stabilising the paint and plaster layers, and to remove overlying dirt and microbiological growth. However, it is not the intention of the work to remove the later layers of medieval and post medieval painting and plaster in order to expose the small sections of 11th century painting which are still covered over. The present treatment is being undertaken between August and October 2006 by a team of specialist wall painting conservators coordinated by the Cambridge based practice, Tobit Curteis Associates.

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 **Norfolk** County Council

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TOBIT CURTEIS ASSOCIATES
36 Abbey Road Cambridge CB5 8HQ
www.tobit-curteis-associates.co.uk
email: tc@tobit-curteis-associates.co.uk

