

# CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ST MARY'S CHURCH, YELDEN

## THE CHURCH

The original structure of St Mary's Church appears to date from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the present chancel, nave and south aisle being remodelled in the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century, at which time the west tower was also added. Significant alterations were made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, including the addition of the clerestory and south porch. The church was then heavily restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## THE WALL PAINTINGS

Prior to the Reformation, paintings of Biblical scenes, saints, morality subjects and decorative motifs would have covered all of the walls of the church. The roof timbers would have been painted, 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 and richly colourful. Following the break from Rome, the use of figurative imagery fell from 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 church would have been transformed from a riot of colour, to a plain simple interior, much as we see it 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 medieval paintings visible at Yelden 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. Likewise, the texts give us some idea of how the walls would have appeared in the period after the Reformation.

*St Christopher:* On the south wall, is a figure of St Christopher set against a background of masonry pattern, each block of which is ornamented with a small red rosette and a faint pink scrolled tendril. The giant figure of St Christopher is wearing a red tunic with a diaphanous white apron and holds a spade-like staff in his right hand. The top and the bottom of the painting have been destroyed as a result of replastering and so most of the head of St Christopher, as well as the whole of the figure of the Christ, is lost. Rather than standing in water as is commonly shown, St Christopher's feet rest on a group of fish, which clearly represent the river that is being crossed. On stylistic grounds, the painting is likely to date to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The painting shows distinct similarities to the St Christopher at St Andrew's Church, Stoke Dry, some twenty miles north of Yelden, which is of a similar date.

The painting is carried out on a limewash ground over a coarse layer of lime plaster. Simple red underdrawing can be seen in a number of areas, as well as numerous drips from the painters brushes. Although only ochres and lime white have been identified by analysis, it is likely that the painting would originally have had a more extensive palette of pigments. The painting would have been carried out in an organic medium.

*St James:* On the east wall is a fragmentary figure in an architectural niche thought to be St James the Great, on account of his staff and pilgrim dress. On the north side of the wall, are fragments of a second niche which would have contained another figure. These figures, which also date to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, would originally have flanked an altar.

*Texts:* In the centre of the north wall of the nave there is a large and elaborate set of 18<sup>th</sup> century texts. The central two panels contain the Ten Commandments, while the smaller two outer panels contain the Lord's Prayer (left) and the Creed (right). The individual panels are framed by bands of fictive yellow marble and are decorated with blue scrolled motifs. Above this is a heavy wooden cornice also painted as fictive marble. The texts were carried out on a layer of fine lime, sand and hair plaster prepared with a coat of limewash and then a ground of lead white. The paint layer included white lead, carbon black, Prussian blue and an unidentified yellow lead pigment, probably in an oil medium.

## DETERIORATION AND CONSERVATION

No record of their uncovering has been found but it is likely that they were discovered when the church was restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at which time much of the damage to the plaster appears to have taken place. At the same time, most of the medieval plaster appears to have been replaced with the hard lime plaster now found on the nave and chancel walls.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some parts of the church fell into a state of disrepair and, as a result, the wall paintings also deteriorated. Areas of the paint layer flaked away from the ground and much of the finer detail was disguised by a thick layer of dirt and dust. In the 1990s a large programme of building repairs was undertaken to arrest the damage to the building.

Following a period during which the moisture conditions in the building improved and stabilised, a programme of conservation treatment was undertaken on the paintings in May 2007. The aim of the treatment was to stabilise the vulnerable paint layer to prevent further loss and to reduce the accumulated dirt layer in order to allow the detail of the paintings to be properly seen. Losses were toned down in order to let the detail of the painting come forward, but minimal retouching of pictorial detail was carried out.

The conservation of the wall paintings was made possible by the generosity of English Heritage, The Council for the Care of Churches, The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Historic Churches Trust, The Allchurches Trust, The Francis Cole Charitable Foundation, The Garfield Weston Foundation, The Manifold Trust and the Society of Antiquaries of London.

