

WALL PAINTINGS IN RISBY CHURCH

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GENERAL

The two paintings (Plates VIII and IX) already exposed in Risby Church were examined in detail, cleaned and refixed in the early spring of 1952. At the same time a large area of hitherto unexposed paintings was uncovered, and the whole recorded by measured drawings. The results seem of sufficient interest to place on record. But first a few preliminary facts should be stated.

Keyser¹ only mentions the rood-screen at Risby as being 'highly painted and gilt' (quoting Gage's *History of Suffolk*). Munro Cautley² has brief mention of the paintings then visible, as well as other features: and Dr. M. R. James³ merely lists 'glass, a screen and some wall paintings' without specifying any subject-matter. Bryant⁴ says 'Some mural paintings, c. 1380, are to be seen on the N. side'.

Old drawings preserved in the vestry suggested that one scene was Our Lord appearing to Mary Magdalene—but beyond these very sketchy facts, nothing was known as to extent, date or subject-matter of the two exposed paintings. And, of course, nothing of any further work.

In 1949, Canon Webling, then Rector of Risby, invited me to inspect the church walls and report on their treatment, preparatory to re-colourwashing. My report, dated September 1949, stated that there was evidence of extensive painting from the West end of the North wall of the nave as far as and including the lancet window, and suggested that this area should be left severely alone for future investigation. East of this window there was little tangible evidence of colour except in the vicinity of the large image-bracket. East of this again, I found a good deal of very fragmentary painting of several periods. I was able to identify two distinct periods of post-Reformation framed texts (16th and 17th century both in blackletter and Roman script), and a certain amount of medieval work. In the latter, there recurred a feature which had all the appearance of the way the skin or camel-hair robe of St. John Baptist was represented. And it may be that a life of the

¹ C. E. Keyser, *List of Buildings having Mural Decorations, etc.*, 1883.

² H. Munro Cautley, *Suffolk Churches and their Treasures*, 1937, p. 307.

³ M. R. James, *Suffolk and Norfolk*, 1930, p. 33.

⁴ T. H. Bryant, *Suffolk Churches*, 1912, vol. 1, p. 159.

Saint was here depicted. It was impossible to date this accurately, but it may well have been mid 14th century. I considered these latter isolated fragments did not justify preservation, and after careful notes had been taken I suggested they might again be limewashed.

Tests elsewhere in likely areas (above, and flanking the chancel arch, and all over the South wall) revealed no remains of painting, and argued a renewal, at some time, of perished plaster.

Unfortunately the specific and detailed instructions contained in my report as to raking out and repairing cracks; the use only of lime and sand for this; and the use only of a limewash and not a washable distemper on the walls, were not carried out. Joints were superficially repaired and wiped over with Keen's cement or Sirapite which is already 'blowing' as it always will in contact with lime: and a hard distemper has been placed on the walls thus forever destroying the small remains of the fragmentary paintings which would have come to no harm if merely whitewashed as I directed. The surface will also flake before very long. I place these facts on record as a warning to use the utmost care and vigilance in work of this kind, and only to use proper materials as laid down in any specialist's report. Only thus can waste of money and damage to the structure or fittings be avoided.

In the spring of 1952, a small grant from the Central Council for the Care of Churches, added to funds which the energy of the new incumbent, the Rev. Alan Spender had raised, enabled the work to be carried out on the wall paintings: and I wish to express my thanks for his enthusiasm and co-operation at every stage of the work. His sudden and untimely death in January, 1953, is a sad loss.

THE EARLY SERIES OF PAINTINGS

The tower, tower arch and western part of the nave at Risby were built in the 12th century. The piers and caps of the chancel arch, and the individual voussiors of the arch itself are also of this date. But the arch is pointed, and it may well be a complete rebuilding with the old material. This early nave appears to have had a scheme of painting of early 13th century date. Of this, a good deal survives on the North wall. At the extreme West end there is a section of the original plaster (which is a lime-mortar of very yellow or brownish tone often found in 12th century work), having on it a representation of an Ecclesiastic in mass vestments, under a rather flat trefoiled canopy, probably a niche with traces of a pillar or buttress on the West side. The figure is life-size or above—6-ft. 8-ins. to 7-ft.—and is in poor condition, having been exposed for

more than fifty years.⁵ It is now in barest red outline with yellow hair and beard. The mitre is of the early, flat type with infulae. The priest wears amice, alb, chasuble, possibly maniple, and stole. His right hand (spectator's left) is raised in blessing, and his left curved across his breast. There is no emblem or detail by which the figure could be identified. But in the South of England it is tempting to identify any mitred ecclesiastic who could be an archbishop, (though it must be admitted that in this instance there is no evidence of a pallium or cross staff) with St. Thomas of Canterbury. The painting was executed at a time when the cult of this almost national Saint had reached widespread popularity. And though robbed of its detail, the work still shows skill and dignity of outline. (Plate VIII).

Next on the East comes a break in the plaster with a later painting to be described below. At the top right of this, just West of the large 14th century window, is another small patch of the original plaster having part of a scroll band, and fragmentary subject-matter above it (Plate IX).

East of this North-Westerly window is the main section of original plaster, extending 15-ft. Eastwards, interrupted by remains of an original round-headed window, the North door and a later 13th century lancet (Plate X). The wall here is divided into three zones by elaborate scroll borders or bands of deep red, about 2-ft. 9-ins. apart. The top border was doubtless immediately below the original wall-plate and was damaged when the walls were heightened, probably at the time that the three large early 14th century windows were inserted. The upper and centre rows are occupied with figure-subjects, the various scenes being divided in most cases by simple pillars having plain cushion-type capitals. The arches could have been round, or trefoiled: but they are not complete, being cut off by the scroll borders. The lowest row or zone is at present plain, except for a Consecration Cross of unusual design East of the North doorway. There are traces of early pigment in this area; and one would have expected to find a painted representation of hanging drapery: but whatever there was has perished.

The borders and a few other details are in good deep red ochre. The ass, and other figures' hair is in yellow. The rest is now in the faintest outline, though there is evidence of the use of pink and white for garments and other detail; and two figures in the last scene on the East have grey or blue used in their robes. There is, in fact, little more than the ghost of the original preserved: never-

⁵ The Institute visited Risby Church on 1st August, 1901 and the account speaks of 'some frescoes, c. 1380, on the north wall, which have recently been uncovered'. (*Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xi (1903), p. 60).—ED.

theless much of interest can be gleaned from a close study of the remains.

The upper row originally contained an extensive Infancy or Nativity series, of which five scenes remain complete or in part. The set doubtless commenced East of the large figure of the ecclesiastic at the West end, where there is now a break in the plaster, and a later window has been inserted. There should have been an Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, and Adoration. The first scene now preserved occurs immediately East of this window and is partly obliterated by it.

1. *The Shepherds.* On the left, an older man with yellow hair and beard, red cloak and bare legs, with a sheep at his feet. On the right, a Shepherd boy, apparently in the act of dancing, and playing on a large pipe or horn. The background of the whole series is powdered with small red stars.

East of this is the round head, and upper part of the splay, partially opened, of one of the original Norman lights, discovered in the course of the work on the paintings. The splay is outlined in red, and has curved frond motifs springing from it, and, doubtless, scroll-work further in. Above it, divided from the other scenes by rather more heavily outlined pillars, capitals and arches, is the second Infancy or Nativity scene.

2. *An Angel.* Yellow hair, plain nimbus, outspread wings and hand. The paint is carried direct on to the stonework of the window-head. The figure is actually a half-figure, the window cutting it off about the waist.

3. East of this is an elaborate scene, somewhat larger than the rest, *the Massacre of the Innocents.* On the left, King Herod, seated on red throne; yellow hair and beard, shallow crown or cap of estate; right hand raised in judgment; left, finger pointing in condemnation to woman who kneels before him, hands outstretched in supplication, clearly beseeching him to spare her child. Two soldiers performing their deadly task complete the scene. Their costume details are most valuable for dating evidence. Each wears a flat iron cap or primitive helm, (apparently without face guard), and complete chain mail, showing on arms and legs where these protrude from a white surcoat. The large swords are lacking in detail, but have shortish hilts, round pommels and apparently straight guards. Of the hapless children, one is held aloft, the other grasped by the hair, its hands held out in supplication. The soldiers' feet extend down into the border.

4. *The Flight into Egypt.* Again, this is a somewhat larger scene, divided from the last by pillar and arches. Joseph with yellow hair, beard and stockings, walks behind, bundle on a stick over

PLATE VII.

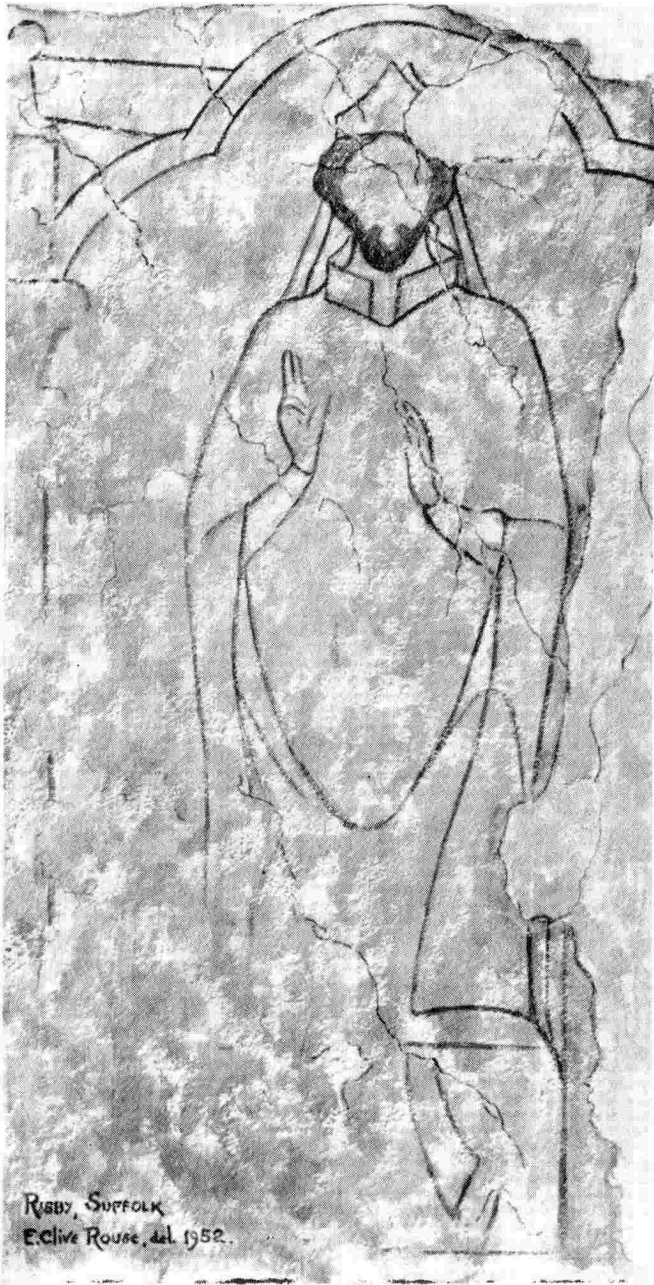


St. Giles' Church, Risby, Suffolk. Exterior



St. Giles' Church, Risby, Suffolk. Interior.

PLATE VIII.



RISBY CHURCH

N. wall of nave extreme W. end. Figure of an ecclesiastic under
canopied niche. Early 13th century.

PLATE IX.



RISBY CHURCH

N. wall of nave, W. end, W. of large window. *Noli me tangere*—Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden. Probably 14th century, mid or late. Top R., fragment of earlier scheme on original plaster.



RISBY CHURCH, EARLY SERIES OF PAINTINGS, (for details see below).

N. wall of nave, vicinity, of N. door. Early series of paintings, c. 1200 or early 13th century, divided by scroll bands.

1. Above. An Infancy or Nativity Series.
 - (a) Shepherds.
 - (b) An Angel—above partly blocked original window with contemporary decoration.
 - (c) The Massacre of the Innocents.
 - (d) The Flight into Egypt.
 - (e) The Finding in the Temple or Christ among the Doctors.

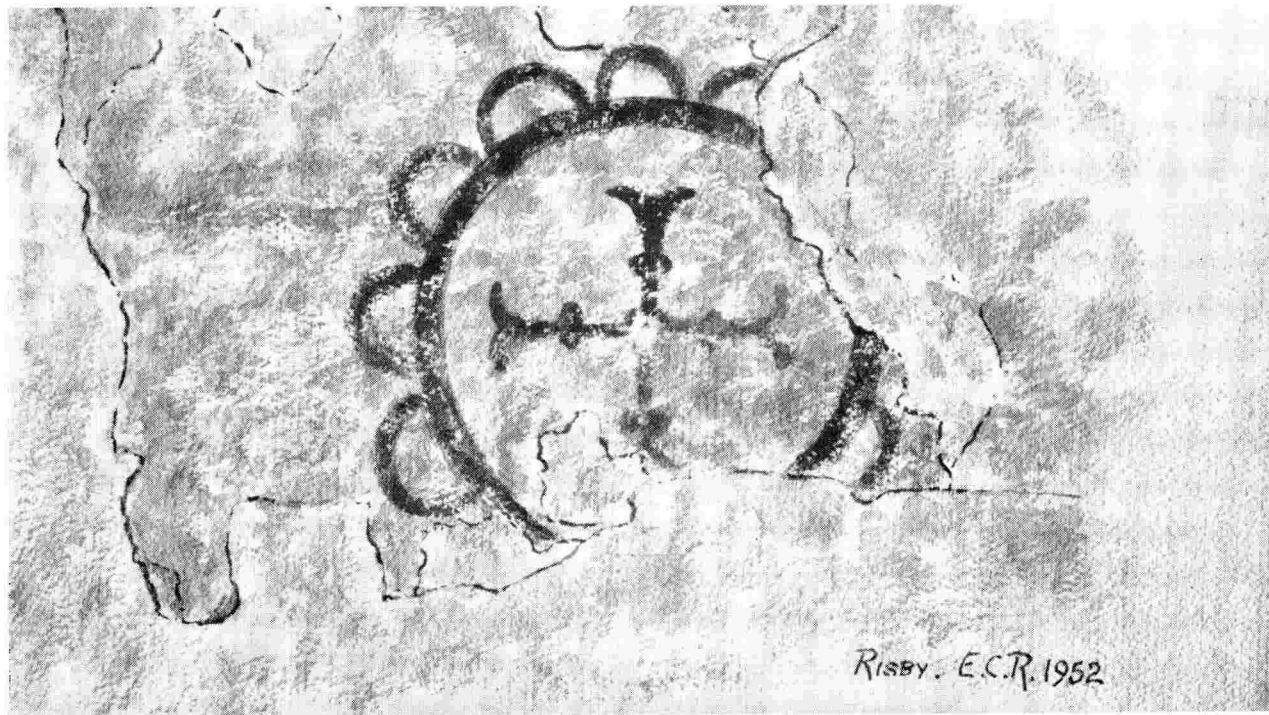
2. Below. Life of a Saint, or Series of Scenes in Life and Miracles of various Saints.
 - (a) Unidentified—? a figure on horseback, ? St. George, St. Martin.
 - (b) Unidentified, but either a scene in the Life of St. Margaret (which follows) or the Penitent Theophilus, a miracle of the Virgin.
 - (c) A female Saint birching the Devil—almost certainly St. Margaret of Antioch.

3. At base. A Consecration Cross of the early scheme. Detail see Plate XII.

The series interrupted by:

4. Mid or late 13th century lancet and recesses with contemporary scroll work and decoration.

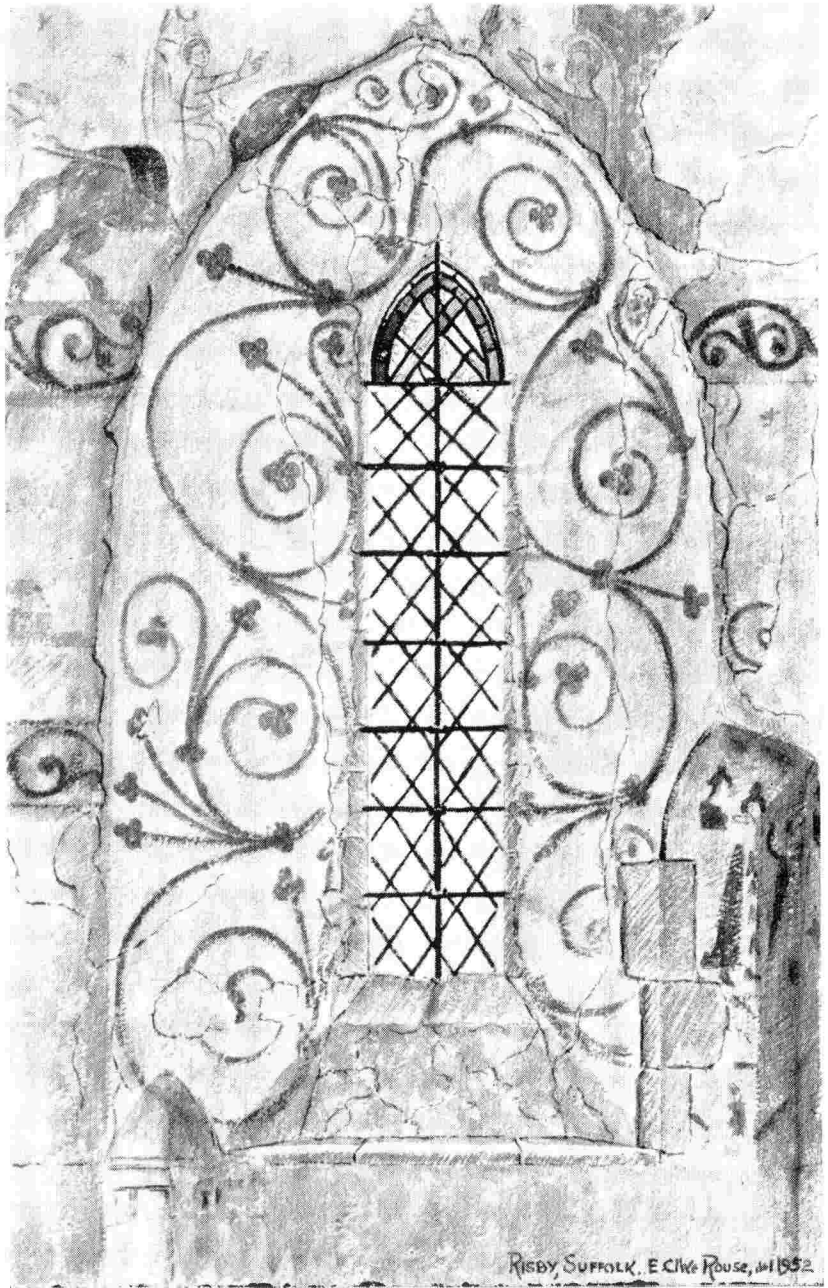
5. Blocking of original window on which a 15th century St. Christopher has been painted.



RISBY CHURCH

N. wall of nave, just E. of N. door (for placing see Plate X). A Consecration Cross belonging to the early scheme, *c.* 1200 or early 13th century.

PLATE XIII.



RISBY CHURCH

N. wall of nave. Ornamental scroll work decoration of ? late 13th century lancet and recesses inserted into original wall.

his shoulder, urging the ass on with another stick. The ass is painted in deep yellow, and has a red saddle on which the Virgin and Child are seated. Both appear to have a plain nimbus, and the Child has one hand raised in blessing.

The end of this, and most of the next, scene is cut into by the head of a later (? late 13th century) lancet window. These two scenes do not appear to have been separated by the usual pillar and arch, but we pass straight into the next episode:

5. *The Finding in the Temple, or Christ among the Doctors.* The head of a bearded figure, in grey-blue robe, hand held up in wonder, appears above the top of the window. On the extreme right, the Christ Child, in blue-grey robe, hand held out in argument or exposition is shown under a kind of canopy in yellow with window-openings, representing the Temple. The early plaster here comes to an end.

The lower, or middle row again now commences East of the North-West window of the nave, with an indecipherable scene including a figure throned or on horseback (compare two scenes in the row above).

Next comes the later blocking of the original window, itself with painting to be described below.

East of this again, and still partly over the North door, is a scene whose interpretation is somewhat difficult. In the centre is a figure apparently kneeling and holding out in his hand what looks like a scroll or document. Behind him is a figure, probably a female, in crown or shallow cap. On the right is a female figure in some elevated position; having the same crown or shallow cap and chin band, with hand outstretched over the parchment or object held by the kneeling male figure. The composition of this scene very strongly suggests one of the popular miracles of the Virgin—that of the Penitent Theophilus. This individual had sold his soul (by deed) to the Devil for advancement in his position, afterwards bitterly regretting his bargain, and praying for forgiveness before an altar on which was an image of the Virgin and Child. So genuine was his repentance that Our Lady was moved to compassion, appeared in person, and restored the deed to him. (This is the Golden Legend Version of the story). The scene is shown in very similar manner in paintings of *c.* 1300 in the South aisle at Chalfont St. Giles, Buckinghamshire.⁶ One might therefore expect the lower row to be occupied with a series of scenes depicting the Life and Miracles of the Virgin. But the difficulty arises that the next scene, divided from the last by the usual little pillar and arch, clearly has nothing

⁶ *Records of Bucks*, vol. XII, pp. 265-7. See also Brit. Mus. Royal MS. 10E4, ff. 162-99.

to do with this, being a crowned, and possibly enthroned female holding a small red devil by the neck, probably by means of a scarf or girdle, and about to administer a sound birching. This can be none other than St. Margaret of Antioch, whose particular attribute this is, as can be well seen by an almost precise parallel in one of the interesting early 14th century series of 14 scenes composing the Life of St. Margaret at Tarrant Crawford, Dorset, though the Devil is disguised as a dragon, and the saint is not crowned (see Plate XI).⁷ The preceding scene might well be the breaking of the dragon's belly if a St. Margaret cycle were represented. But to this the remains at Risby bear no resemblance. One is therefore driven to the conclusion, unusual as the arrangement is in medieval practice, that the lower or middle zone did not contain an ordered sequence of scenes composing the Life and Miracles of any one Saint or the Virgin, but isolated, miscellaneous scenes.

The next compartment in this row is almost entirely destroyed by the lancet window, and no clue as to the subject-matter is provided.

The lowest zone of all is, as has already been stated, blank, apart from a few indications of pigment, and a Consecration Cross—one of the set of 12 which would have appeared originally both in the interior and exterior.

The Cross is of unusual design (Plate XII), and is placed rather low (only some 4-ft. or so from the floor) East of the North doorway. A circle, 10-ins. in diameter, having (originally) 12 lobes or semi-circular ornaments on the exterior encloses a Cross 7-ins. by 7-ins. painted in deep red. The ends are splayed out, mill-rind fashion, and there is a knop halfway along each arm.

The detail of the scroll borders is very simple, consisting of a leaf with two curled tendrils ending in circular motifs, with a bud between the joins of the main scroll, and red or pink lines at top and bottom.

Taking the architectural, costume and decorative details into consideration, I am inclined to date this early set of paintings within the first quarter of the 13th century.

THE LANCET WINDOW

Next in order of date comes the splendid and bold flowing scroll decoration on the splay of the lancet window in the North wall already mentioned above (Plate XIII). The dating of this feature is a matter of interest. One must allow a reasonable length of time to elapse before the Church authorities would destroy so

⁷ Not yet published, but for a summary see Guide to the Church.

splendid a series of paintings as the Infancy or Nativity cycle, the other set, and the scroll bands and other features, even taking into account the remarkable absence of antiquarian prejudice among medieval artists and craftsmen generally. The window itself is a simple lancet, though on a large scale—the light is 5-ft. 9-ins. by 13½-ins. and the splay 9-ft. by 5-ft. One feels that it must come within the 13th century. The detail of the scroll decoration, though showing a logical development from the earlier examples, is not so very far separated in time, and is still definitely 13th century in character; so that one inclines to date this whole feature as late 13th century, perhaps at the very beginning of the last quarter. The leaves and round-ended tendrils of the earlier scroll have become elongated, curved, or circular branches ending in trefoil leaves or lobes, and spring from well-marked joints. The buds of the earlier scroll have multiplied and these also now end in trefoils, but none have yet reached the stage of true leaves, and the main stem of the scroll remains single. It is charmingly freely adapted to pass over the head of the window and is executed in a brownish-red pigment, with indications of intermediate branches or tendrils in pale pink.

A curious and most puzzling feature of this window is the way in which its base is cut away into recesses at the sides, higher and wider on the East than on the West. The work is obviously contemporary, as the painting continues into both niches, though the subject-matter defies interpretation. On the East there seem to be two figures, vaguely suggesting a Virgin and Child. From the fact that the character of the wall masonry changes at this point, I am inclined to think that the Norman nave ended here, and that the window and niches were inserted in connexion with a nave altar near the original chancel arch. This arch was swept away at a subsequent enlargement of the nave, the material being re-used further East, and the former chancel re-built, or re-faced internally and externally, becoming the Eastern part of a much longer nave, i.e. the present one, with its plain intersecting tracery windows of early Decorated character. A chancel was certainly re-built again in curvilinear Decorated style, c. 1330–40, which remains as the present one.

LATER PAINTING

Mention has already been made of remains of painting found on the North wall of the nave East of the large image bracket, suggesting scenes connected with St. John Baptist, but too isolated and fragmentary to justify permanent uncovering. Possibly belonging to the same period—mid or late 14th century, is the subject on a patch of plaster East of the early ecclesiastic at the West end of the nave. This patch may represent repair of some structural failure, or the filling in of another early light. The painting has been

long exposed⁸ and is very fragmentary. Cleaning and treatment revealed one or two fresh features and put the identification of the subject beyond doubt. It is a *Noli me tangere*, or our Lord's appearance to Mary Magdalene in the garden (Plate IX). He stands on the right, identified by a cruciform nimbus, one hand outstretched, the other raised, doubtless originally holding the vexillum. Mary Magdalene, with the conventional long hair, kneels before the risen Christ, hands upraised. Behind her is a tree to represent the garden. A curious and unexplained object is the head of a double axe with wooden haft on the extreme left. It is possible that this once belonged to one of that curious series of 'tool pictures' now known to be a warning to Sabbath-breakers, of which at least one example occurs in Suffolk, at Hessett,⁹ where a figure of Christ is surrounded and injured by tools of all manner of trades.

There was much evidence of later painting all over the early scenes on the North wall. The only surviving fragment is that on the filling of the 12th century window, immediately above the North door (Plate X). This has clearly been a large representation of St. Christopher, in its normal position opposite the principal entrance on the South. The remains consists of a hand grasping a long staff, a red background, white cloak decorated in yellow, and a pink under-robe. Some purple also occurs low down on the right; and the painting was probably of late 15th century date.

The only other painting remaining to be discussed is that above and flanking the large image-bracket halfway down the North wall of the nave. This had evidently been a background to whatever statue formerly stood there, and it may well have been brocaded: but it is now very fragmentary. Its date is probably 15th century.

There was ample evidence of post-Reformation texts: but these of course had to be removed in order to reveal the earlier work. None was at all complete, and none exhibited any remarkable or unusual features.

It is extremely valuable to have been able to examine the existing paintings, and to have recovered so much new and interesting material. A set of annotated photographic reproductions of my measured water-colour copies have been provided for the church for record purposes, and the use of visitors.

⁸ See footnote 5.

⁹ See *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, vol. v (1886), pp. 29-35, where this painting is discussed and compared with a similar painting formerly at Lanivet, Cornwall.—ED.