

THE WENHASTON DOOM.

The Doom brings many antiquaries to Wenhaston Church for, as John Kirby said of one of his books, "it doth entertain the curious."

This old painting in tempera on boards nailed together, is a rare specimen among the countless pictures of the Last Judgment that were painted "to frighten yer into religion" as an old Cockney remarked. Besides being one of the eight examples of Judgement paintings done on wood, it is one of the three known instances of incorporation with the Cross and figures of the Virgin and St. John on the Rood Beam. Its original position may be responsible for this distinguishing feature, for the panel entirely filled the Chancel arch, where it would come immediately behind, and on a level with, the beam. The artist must have resented this obstruction and so, fixing the Cross and figures to the panel, he made six divisions into which he painted his decoration.

The subject is treated in a similar way to other examples—Christ in Glory; the Weighing of Souls; entry into Heaven and Hell. The predominating colours are the favourite red and green of East Anglian Church woodwork.

Of the picture's history there is no definite evidence. There are conflicting (but equally feasible) theories as to date, donor and reason of concealment. Some antiquaries date the picture as c. 1490, while others, as "early sixteenth century," but Mr. Francis Bond* says "between 1500 and 1538."

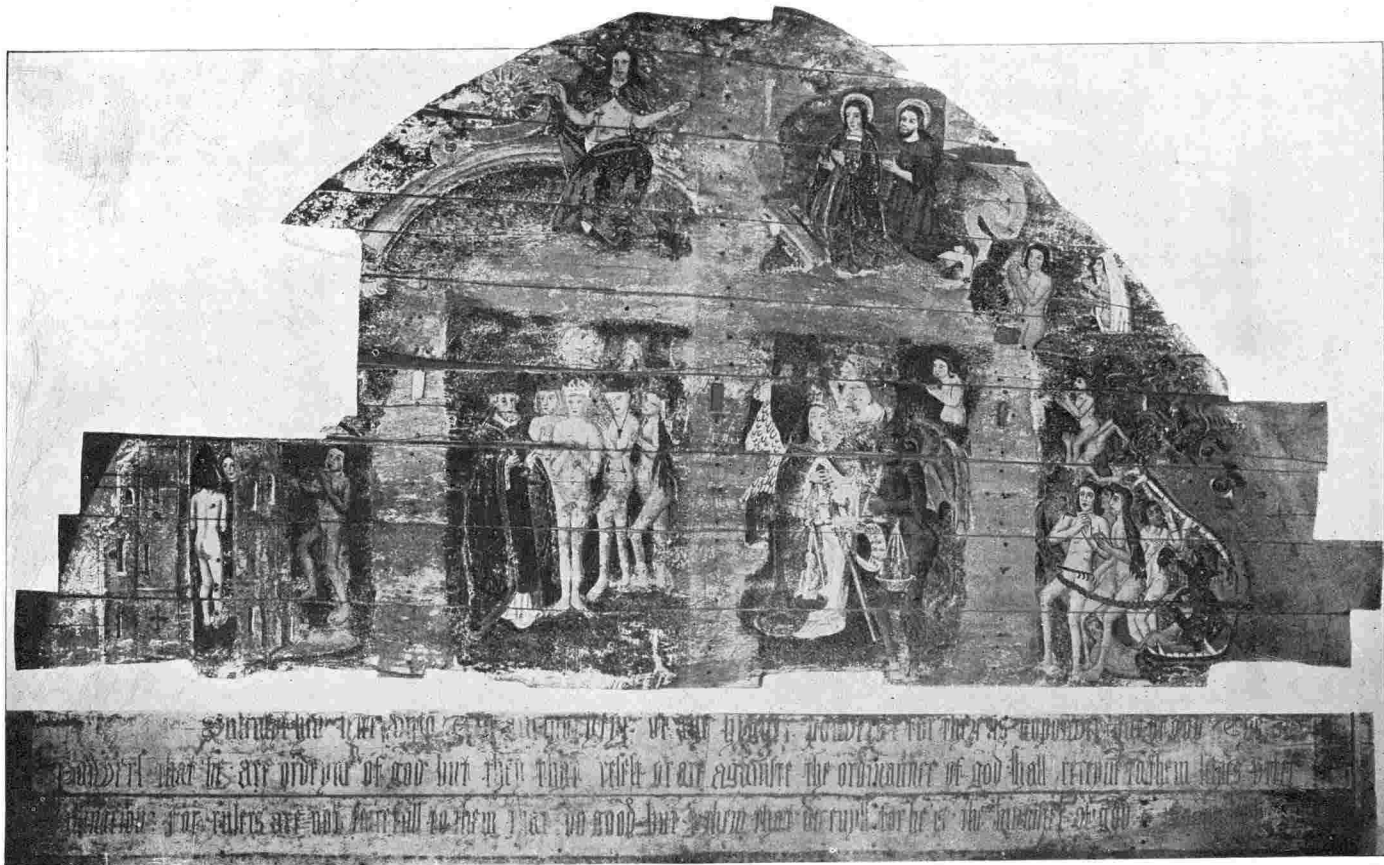
As to the donor of it, Mr. Keyser, F.S.A. (who supervised the re-setting up of the Doom after its discovery), in his paper† probably comes nearest the truth, although he calls his theory a "conjecture that can neither be verified nor disproved." He considers it was painted by a monk of the neighbouring Priory of Blythburgh, to which the advowson of Wenhaston belonged.

A testator may have left a sum of money for its execution, but no mention can be found in a bundle of wills of contemporary date at Somerset House.‡ This fact rather points to the possibility of the first theory, since, if the Doom was painted by a Blythburgh monk, the Priory would bear the expense, and details of cost go down in the accounts.

*"Screens and Galleries in English Churches."

†Archæological Institute Journal, XLIX., 399. 1892.

‡See Rev. J. B. Clare's "Curious Parish Records," 1903.



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Reason for hiding the picture calls for speculation. It is popularly supposed that it was white-washed over just before Dowsing's§ visit, April 1643, and so survived; but it is known that Queen Elizabeth in 1560 enjoined Churchwardens to paint texts on walls and surfaces unsightly with *recently defaced frescoes*.|| Hence, according to Mr. Bond, the text below the Doom now. Its lettering is Elizabethan, its purport (Romans XIII., 1-4) that of the picture it replaced.

The lateness of style of the upper window in the South wall, said to have been inserted to light up the Doom, gives support to the Dowsing theory, for, if the picture had been covered up in 1560, there would have been no need for an obviously later window. In all probability it was Dowsing who tore down Cross and figures and ordered the whitewashing.

The Doom was discovered by chance. Workmen "restoring" the church in 1892, removed a white-washed partition from the chancel arch, and threw it into the churchyard to be burnt. That night it rained, and when the sexton came in the morning to unlock the door, faces looked out at him from the rubbish. He still says "he runned home as if he'd seen a gorst!" He came back and assisted the Vicar to *scrub the boards with a yard broom and bucket of water*.

And so this famous picture, after being hidden for two centuries, "shielded by kind neglect," narrowly escaped destruction by fire and water within twenty-four hours of discovery.

M. JANET BECKER.

Paper (abridged) read before S.I.A., June 10th, 1925.

§There is no mention of Wenhaston in Dowsing's Journal, though he was at Blyford and Blythburgh on April 9th. That the Church *was* visited is certain, for in the churchwardens' accounts for that year is the entry:—"Layde out to the men wch cam to breake downe pictures in the glasse windows 5/-." It may therefore be presumed that Dowsing's deputy, Jessop (whom he joined at Blythburgh), and not Dowsing himself, visited Wenhaston. (See paper by Rev. C. H. Evelyn White in Proceedings, S.I.A. 1888, Vol. VI., page 236.)

||Francis Bond. "Screens and Galleries."