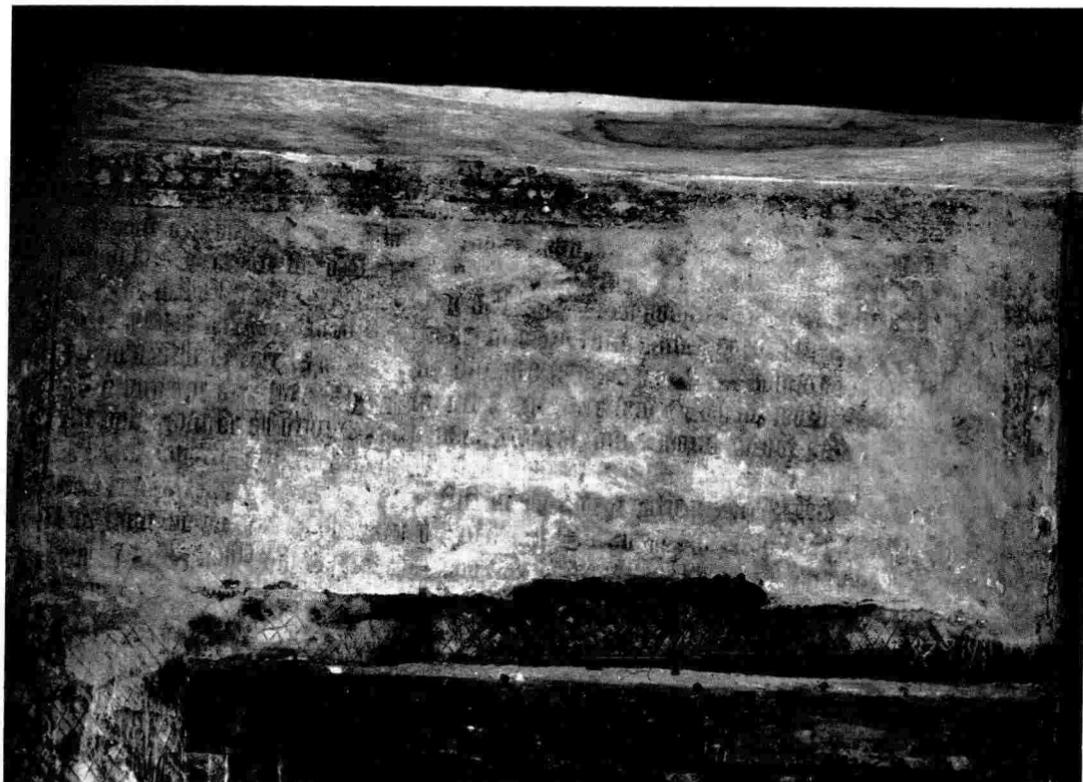


PLATE XXXIII



Woolpit: the larger panel (1952).

(photo: The Times)

PLATE XXXIV



Woolpit: the smaller panel (1952).

(photo: *The Times*)



Woolpit: the smaller panel (1952).

(photo: *East Anglian Daily Times*)

MURAL INSCRIPTIONS IN A HOUSE AT WOOLPIT

By LESLIE DOW, F.S.A.

Early in 1952, during renovation and redecoration, two large panels of black-letter inscriptions were uncovered on a wall in one of the ground-floor rooms of a sixteenth century house in Woolpit, which is about eight miles east of Bury St. Edmunds. Known as Weaver House, it is situated in the main street almost opposite the Bull Inn and belonged at that time to Mr. Thomas Toward of London. The builder employed on the work was Mr. J. M. Crone of Monks Eleigh and it is due to his skill and care that the inscriptions have been preserved. After removing several layers of wall-paper and whitewash, signs of writing were seen and the final stages of removal and cleaning were carried out with great care. Mr. Toward at once reported the find to Mr. A. R. Dufty of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, who got in touch with me. I inspected the panels with the late Mr. Iolo Williams of the *Times* newspaper, who brought a staff photographer with him; they were also seen by the late Mr. H. J. M. Maltby of Moyses Hall Museum and others. A short report, with a photograph, appeared in the *East Anglian Daily Times* of 10 March 1952. Now, after a regrettable lapse of ten years, for which I apologise, the inscriptions are recorded more fully.

The larger panel, over the fireplace, measures 7 ft. 9 ins. by 3 ft. 5 ins., contains eleven lines of writing and is enclosed in a decorative border (Plate XXXIII). Although the surface is in fairly good condition, the writing is faded and indistinct so that only a few scattered words and phrases are legible. But such fragments as **'all the days of our life'**; **'jesus crist owr lord'**; and **'the holy goost'** are sufficient to show that it consists of some kind of religious or devotional text.

The other panel is slightly smaller, measuring 7 ft. 4 ins. by 2 ft. 8 ins., and is situated over a doorway. It is surrounded by a similar decorative border and contains six lines of writing (Plates XXXIV and XXXV). In this panel the script is blacker and clearer, and can be read fairly easily, but unfortunately in several places the plaster has fallen out and has been repaired, so that some letters and words are lost. It is interesting to note that in neither panel does the writing seem to have faded in the ten years since it was uncovered. In the transcription which follows an attempt has

been made to supply, within square brackets, some of the missing or illegible letters and words.

Epaphrodus [?said] com hether wyf y[ou see] in [?what] case I lie here sycke, weake
 And [in] ye pre[sence] of god, loking every [?daye] [?to be delivered] out of this world
 And this [?visit]acion of god is unto [?me] welcom and I thanke ye lord wt all
 My [?hea]rt for dought not but yt when I am once gone owt of this wrechid
 Lyfe I shalbe in f[ar] better case than ever I was in this world, therefore I praye
 The good [?] not heavi but pray [?that] ye good wyll of god may be done in me

All attempts to identify this text as a quotation from biblical sources have failed although several experts in this field have been consulted. The name 'Epaphrodus' is quite clear, but it is suggested that this may be a mis-spelling for 'Epaphroditus' and attention is drawn to the *Epistle to the Philippians*, ch. ii, vv. 25-30, in which St. Paul writes:

Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus
 for he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because
 that ye had heard that he had been sick. For indeed he
 was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him
 I sent him therefore that, when you see him again
 ye may rejoyce Receive him therefore in the Lord with
 all gladness because for the work of Christ he was nigh
 unto death

The similarity of circumstances and language tempts one to think that the Woolpit text may be a piece of improvised devotional prose based upon or inspired by this passage from *Philippians*.

It is difficult to assign an accurate date to this kind of black-letter script because earlier styles persisted into later periods, especially in remote rural areas. The pattern of the decorative borders, probably early Renaissance, must be considered; also the probable date of the house itself. Taking all these factors into account, the concensus of opinion of those who have been consulted points to a date for the two panels of approximately 1550, possibly a little earlier.

Weaver House, which, with the adjoining property, originally formed one house, is a half-timbered, timber framed, building with overhanging first floor and moulded beams and brackets; it contains some interesting internal architectural features which suggest a fairly early date. It is classed as Grade II in the Statutory List and is there dated '15/16 century'. I would suggest that it may have been built about 1500. Unfortunately nothing seems to be known of its early history. The present owner is Mr. J. Shuttleworth

who bought it in January 1963 and in whose hands these interesting inscriptions will be well cared for. I am grateful to him and to his mother for allowing me to inspect them recently and for permission to publish this note.

Many people have helped me with information and advice, but I would particularly like to record my belated thanks to Mr. A. R. Dufty; Miss Kathleen Major; Mr. M. P. Statham; the late Col. R. C. Rome of Woolpit; Dr. J. E. Stevens; and the Venerable T. R. Browne of Shotley. Acknowledgement is also due to the *Times* and to the *East Anglian Daily Times* for the excellent photographs.