

WALL PAINTINGS AT ELMS FARM, MENDLESHAM

by *Joseph Michel, B.A. and David Park, M.A.*

Extensive, and important, remains of late 16th- or early 17th-century wall painting have been uncovered in recent years during alterations to the interior of this fine timber-framed house. The structure itself, which dates from the 15th century, is of the Wealden type. The central open hall was divided up later, apparently in the second half of the 16th century, and the inserted work now visible – moulded ceiling timbers in the present hall and the room immediately above it – is of high quality. Painted decoration – perhaps dating from the time of these structural alterations – survives in the east room on the ground floor, originally the parlour, and in the east and centre rooms on the upper floor. In all cases it had been covered over by a lath and plaster skin and by layers of wallpaper.

On the upper floor the most elaborate painting, and the first to be discovered, is that in the room at the east end (part of which is now partitioned off to form a corridor). It is now confined to the north (Pl. XV) and south walls, but must originally have covered all four. The design is painted on a slate-grey ground which covers studs and plaster panels alike, and which, when new, must have been very dark. But all is now rather faded and decayed. At the top runs a frieze, about 20in (50.8 cm) deep, of a conventional Renaissance type, with stylised fruit and flowers. Decorative shields and framed texts alternate at intervals. The shields bear the initials R.K. and presumably commemorate a member of the Kybyll family which occupied the house from its building up to the second half of the 16th century. The texts are in black letter on a white ground. Two on the north wall are still clearly decipherable; they are taken from Coverdale's translation of Psalm 130, verses 3, 4 and 5. The frames crudely simulate wood. A simple narrow guilloche border in yellow ochre runs beneath the frieze. The main design (about 56 in (142.3cm) deep) is a Moresque diaper pattern of an hitherto unrecorded type. Like all patterns of its class, it would, if properly constructed, have been based on a grid of diagonal, vertical and horizontal lines. Here, with so simple a design, the painter probably dispensed with all but the diagonals, spaced at 6in (15.24cm), putting in the details by eye. Vertical undulating bands or ribbons, with alternately clockwise and anticlockwise coils, frame stylised flowers. The ribbons are pink, highlighted with white (on the timbers the painting is still fairly fresh, on the plaster it has faded to grey). The flowers are alternately orange/red and white. Vivid green taches randomly fleck the entire surface – an unusual and somewhat disturbing refinement. Below is a skirting, a simple band of pink and yellow. In the west wall (now in the corridor) is a fireplace with traces of orange flowers on the wooden lintel.

The centre room has remains of painting on all four walls. Three of these are of the usual close-studded type. The west wall (Pl. XVI), which is a partition wall, is constructed of vertical lapped elm boards which vary in width from about 9 ½ to 15in (24.13 to 38.1cm). Once again the designs are painted on a continuous slate-grey ground. The frieze is a variant of the type found in the east room: vegetable ornament with texts and shields. The texts are almost wholly obliterated, but enough paint survives to show that originally the east and west walls carried three, and the north and south walls two. On the north wall one shield bears the initials RKA (?). The main design is a diaper pattern, simpler than that in the other room, but, though this is not immediately obvious, closely related to it. Based on a 10in (25.4cm) diagonal grid, it is composed of intersecting cusped diagonal bands (originally pink now faded) enclosing stylised flowers. It may also be read as a pattern of contiguous quatrefoils. The flowers are alternately white, and red with white details, and they give a strong left to right diagonal emphasis to the design. The left edges of the bands

are shaded in red, the right edges are highlighted in white. Although unrelated to the actual lighting of the room, this gives an illusion of relief. There is no skirting as such, but the west wall is bordered at top and bottom by a simple linear pattern enclosing an arrangement of polygonal panels (some pink and some yellow, but now faded) somewhat reminiscent of the plaster ceilings of the period. A fireplace in the east wall has a wooden lintel with traces of painted orange flowers.

Notwithstanding their common geometrical basis, the main designs in these two rooms present a striking contrast; that in the east room is sinuous and flowing, whilst the design in the centre room is rigid and angular. In their entirety, the schemes are important additions to those of the type already known. In these, a variety of diaper patterns is constructed on the same basic grid: bands interlink, intersect, overlap or are coiled; floral fillings are *de rigueur*; and frieze texts and guilloche borders are common. The most famous, and most immediately relevant, examples of the genre decorated two rooms on the upper floor of No.3 Cornmarket Street, Oxford. In the frieze of one of these (now destroyed) texts alternated with initials, and from the latter, the painted decoration was dated 1560–81 (Leeds 1936, 144–50, Pls. xx, xxi; Croft-Murray 1962, 29, 186, Pl. 40). In Suffolk, ornamental painting closely related to one of the Oxford designs was discovered in the 1930s in a house in Debenham (Harris 1937–39, 181–82, Pls. bet. pp. 182 and 183).

The paintings in the parlour of Elms Farm are of an entirely different type. Remains of two designs survive. On the close-studded north wall (Pl. XVII) the decoration consists of 8in (20.32cm) wide vertical grey/blue stripes based on the irregular timbers (i.e. the stripes encroach on to the adjacent plaster). At the top of the intervening panels is a simple motif, about 7in (17.78cm) wide, stencilled in red ochre on to the cream ground; eight of these survive. The scheme is of a type which appears to have been quite common in the eastern counties (Reader 1941, 188–92). At its most elaborate, it takes the form of an imitation arcade, usually formed by modifying the profiles of the studs of close-studded walls; these are conceived as columns silhouetted against the void of the untreated plaster panels. They are linked by painted arches. Stylised foliage and flower motifs occupy the heads of the panels, sprouting from the tops of the columns or hanging from the centres of the arches. A schematised version, where the arch linking the stud columns is merely hinted at, and where the decoration on the panels takes the form of an elaborate stencilled motif detached from the fictive architecture, has been recorded at a house in Kelvedon, Essex (Benton 1951, 137–38, Pls. IIIa and IIIa). The Elms Farm design (where the stencilled motif shows some similarity to that at Kelvedon) is an extreme simplification of this type, its rudimentary character being, presumably, determined by the very close spacing of the wall timbers.

The second scheme occupies the space above the fireplace on the west wall. An elaborate stencilled design in red ochre is repeated three times on the bare plaster (Pl. XVIII). The design has a central shield, charged with a fret reserved in white, surrounded by stylised leaves and flowers which, once again, recall elements of the Kelvedon pattern. The shields would seem to be purely ornamental, since no family connected with the house is known to have borne these or similar arms. A generalised heraldic content is, moreover, typical of the decoration of the period. An overall fretted design has been uncovered in a house in Lewes, Sussex (Reader 1936, 229, Pl. facing p. 230); and a stencilled design recorded at Little Horkesley, Essex, has a quasi-heraldic 'star' (surrounded as here by stylised vegetation) which forms the decorative fillings to an overall pattern of square painted panels (Benton 1942, 13, Pl. VII). The Elms Farm motifs, which look somewhat isolated and incomplete, would clearly lend themselves to this treatment. Nevertheless, the decorative propriety of placing shields above the fireplace should be noted. Taking the room as a

whole, it may be wondered that such apparently humble decoration should have been considered adequate for one of the most important rooms in the house, particularly when contrasted with the elaborate paintings on the upper floor. But remains of a comparable arrangement have been uncovered in recent years in a house in Bocking, Essex, so in this respect too, the Elms Farm paintings contribute significantly to our understanding of the decoration of the lesser houses of the period. It is, therefore, greatly to be hoped that the conservation work begun on these murals can be completed.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the owners of Elms Farm, Mr and Mrs Clement Smith, for help and advice during the preparation of this article.

References

- Benton, G. Montagu, 1942. 'Some Domestic Wall-Paintings of Essex' (Part I), *Trans. Essex Archaeol. Soc.*, n.s., xxiii, 1-17.
- Benton, G. Montagu, 1951. 'Some Domestic Wall-Paintings of Essex' (Part II), *Trans. Essex Archaeol. Soc.*, n.s., xxiv, 132-48.
- Croft-Murray, E., 1962. *Decorative Painting in England 1537-1837*, Vol. 1. London.
- Harris, H. A., 1937-39. 'Wall-Paintings at Debenham', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.*, xxiii, 181-82.
- Leeds, E. T., 1936. 'A Second Elizabethan Mural Painting in No. 3 Cornmarket Street, Oxford', *Oxoniensia*, 1, 144-50.
- Reader, F. W., 1936. 'Tudor Domestic Wall-Paintings, Part II', *Archaeol. J.*, xciii, 220-262.
- Reader, F. W., 1941. 'A Classification of Tudor Domestic Wall-Paintings, Part I', *Archaeol. J.*, xcvi, 181-211.