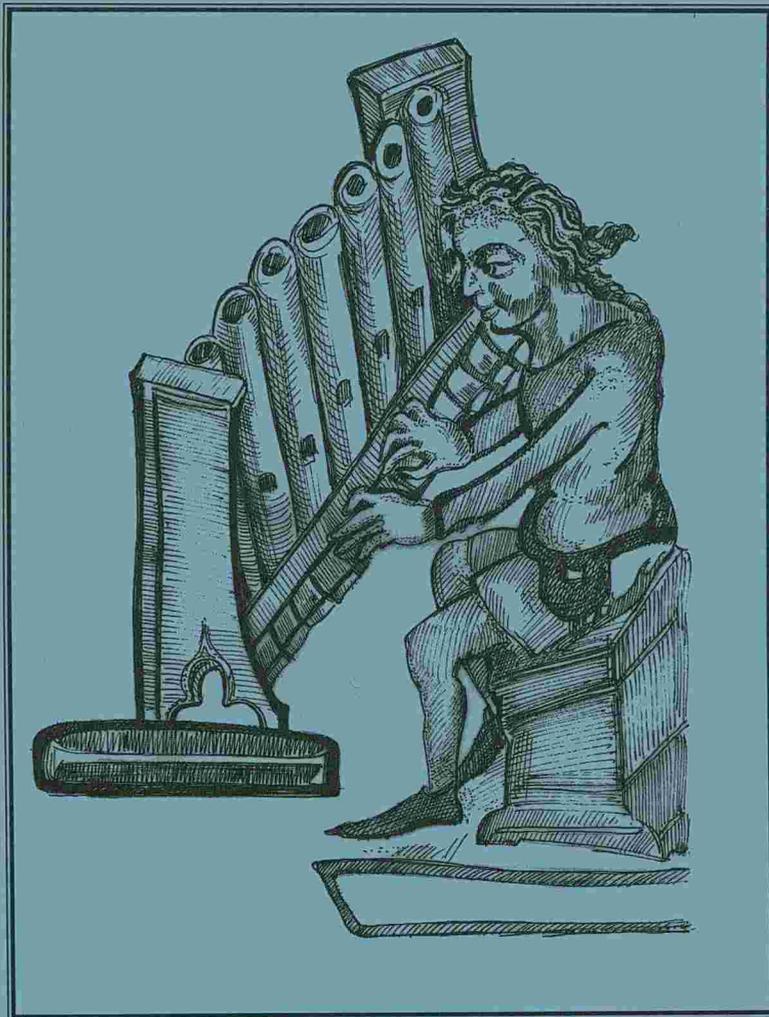


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Illustration of a young man in a yellow brown tunic playing a small 'positive' organ. Redrawn from an historiated initial in a mid-14th-century lectern bible thought to have come from the Benedictine priory of St Radegund in Cambridge. This must be one of the earliest East Anglian illustrations of an organ. See 'Two Pre-Reformation Organ Soundboards' in this Part.

(Drawing by Timothy Easton. Transparency and information kindly supplied by Dr Christopher de Hamel and Sotheby's, London.)

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# THE SAINT WITH A SCYTHER: A PREVIOUSLY UNIDENTIFIED WALL PAINTING IN THE CHURCH OF ST ANDREW, CAVENHAM

by MIRIAM GILL

IN 1967 AN exquisite wall painting was uncovered in the church at Cavenham, about seven miles north-west of Bury St Edmunds, during repairs to damp and crumbling plaster (Pl.XVII).<sup>1</sup> Although this image of a young king with a sceptre and a scythe is quite well preserved, it has remained a mystery. Recently, however, it has been identified as St Walstan, a rarely-depicted local saint, whose shrine was at Bawburgh near Norwich. The Cavenham image is the only extant wall painting of this saint, and provides one of the few pieces of evidence for the spread of his cult beyond the immediate vicinity of Bawburgh.<sup>2</sup>

The painting is on the north wall of the aisleless nave of Cavenham church, immediately to the west of the easternmost window. Painted at head height, it measures about 80cm by 60cm. In the uncovering process some of the final painting was lost, revealing the underdrawing, while other small areas of the mural are still obscured by limewash. The saint is shown standing before a grassy mound, holding a scythe in his left hand and raising the other in blessing. He is crowned and wears an ermine shoulder cape, and next to his right hand is the top of a sceptre. He looks down at the small kneeling figures of a man and a woman (Pl.XVIII): the woman has her hands raised, while her companion was perhaps shown supporting the large inscribed scroll which appears between him and the saint. The lettering on this scroll is now illegible, while there is no trace at all of an inscription on a second scroll that appears beneath the blade of the scythe. Above Walstan is a vaulted canopy, with a flying angel on either side. Fragments of a patterned border survive above and below the scene, along with part of a plain vertical divide to the left of the kneeling woman. The traces of painting beyond this divide are indecipherable.

The presence of a scythe alone is not enough to identify the main figure as St Walstan. Scythes were used to martyr St Sidwell of Exeter, St Urith of Chittlehampton and St Valentius; St Gunthilda used one for more peaceful purposes. However, none of these was a king like Walstan. It is the combination of scythe, sceptre and crown which identifies the young king in the Cavenham mural.

This strange congregation of symbols is explained by Walstan's legend. Three separate versions of the saint's life survive: a Latin text published in 1516 (Horstmann 1901, II, 412-15); an English rhyming life, originally inscribed on a triptych which probably hung above the saint's shrine (James 1917, 249-67);<sup>3</sup> and a brief post-Reformation account in John Bale's *English Votaries* (Bale 1560, 2nd part, 21). Of these the most comprehensive is the rhyming life, which also records eleven miracles worked at the Bawburgh shrine.

Walstan is said to have been the son of Benedict and Blida, who were the rulers of a small East Anglian kingdom, and to have come from Blythburgh in Suffolk.<sup>4</sup> He renounced his place in the succession at the age of twelve, and travelled to Taverham in Norfolk. There, as a farm labourer, he lived a life of prayer and apostolic poverty. His master's wife was irritated by his generosity, until she saw how the barefooted saint was miraculously protected from thorns while loading them into a cart. In the verse legend the thorns then turn on her, until she begs the saint for forgiveness (James 1917, 253). Walstan's childless master was so impressed by the mysterious labourer that he offered to make him his heir. But Walstan refused, asking only for the produce of a certain cow which subsequently bore twin calves. After living in obscurity for many years, his labours blessed by miraculously rich yields, Walstan was warned by an angelic vision of his approaching death. He immediately made his confession and received communion. The verse legend adds that a well miraculously appeared for the priest to wash the communion vessels



PLATE XVII – St Walstan, north nave wall of Cavenham Church (Photo: Conservation of Wall Painting Department, Courtauld Institute of Art).



PLATE XVIII – Detail of the kneeling devotees from the wall painting of St Walstan, Cavenham Church (Photo: Conservation of Wall Painting Department, Courtauld Institute of Art).

(James 1917, 256). The next day, a Saturday, Walstan again saw the heavens open, and this vision was shared by a fellow worker who consequently vowed he would never again work on Saturday afternoons. Before his death, Walstan asked that devout petitions made in his name by labourers or on behalf of livestock should be answered. In his will he requested that his twin calves should be allowed to draw his body where God willed. Their progress to Bawburgh was attended by miraculous events: the hearse was drawn over water and passed through a wall, and two springs miraculously appeared, one in Cossey Wood and the other just north of Bawburgh Church.<sup>5</sup> The bishop of Norwich came to conduct his funeral. Both medieval legends state that Walstan died in 1016.

This date is far too late for Walstan to have been the heir of an East Anglian kingdom, though too early for him to have been buried by a bishop of Norwich (Duffy 1992, 204). He was never officially canonised, and it is difficult to tell whether he was based on a historical figure, or whether his legend was a pious fiction concocted from a mixture of hagiographical and pagan sources.<sup>6</sup> The earliest documentary evidence for his cult is a reference to the church of St Mary and St Walstan at Bawburgh in 1250 (Blomefield and Parkin 1805–10, I, 392).

There are no other English churches dedicated to Walstan (Arnold-Forster 1899, II, 421), no pilgrim badges for his cult have been found, and no office for his feast is known (Duffy 1992, 200). The most extensive survivals from his cult are paintings on rood screens, dating from the 1470s to the 1530s, all but one of which are in Norfolk:<sup>7</sup> Barnham Broom, (Duffy 1992, pl.80); Beeston-next-Mileham; Burlingham St Andrew, dated 1536 (Pl. XIX); Denton (now forming part of a chest); Litcham; Ludham (Duffy 1992, pl.81); Norwich, St James (now in St Mary Magdalene, Norwich); Sparham (Borenus and Tristram 1927, pl.81); and Foxearth in Essex (*R.C.H.M. Essex* 1916, 97; Lillie 1944, 39). Although none of these is exactly like the mural at Cavenham, the paintings at Foxearth, Litcham and Ludham show the same combination of attributes. At Cavenham the lower half of the scythe is missing, so we cannot tell whether it had the elaborate double end depicted in the Denton and Sparham panels.<sup>8</sup> Some of the screen paintings add further references to the legend. At Barnham Broom and Sparham the saint's twin calves kneel at his feet. At Burlingham St Andrew (Pl. XIX) and Norwich he is shown barefoot. The prominent purse at his waist at Burlingham may allude to his prodigious charity, while the title at his feet terms him 'opifer', worker, or 'opifex', helper. On the screen from St James, Norwich, the uncrowned king accompanies a painting of a female figure labelled 'St Blida'. This female saint is often identified with Walstan's mother, Blida. There is no evidence, however, in the iconography of this panel, or that of a lost screen painting from Babingley to suggest that the St Blida, revered at Martham in Norfolk, had any connection with the Walstan legend.<sup>9</sup>

These nine rood screens indicate the extent of Walstan's cult. All but one of the miracles recorded on the triptych above the shrine at Bawburgh happened to local beneficiaries, and in the case of the other, a weaver from Canterbury, it was a Norfolk man who commended Walstan to him (James 1917, 262–63). In his recent discussion of the cult of Walstan, Duffy suggests that the saint is only depicted within a seventeen-mile radius of his shrine at Bawburgh (Duffy 1992, 200). The identification of the mural at Cavenham, however, is one of several pieces of evidence of devotion to the saint beyond the borders of Norfolk. There is a figure of Walstan on the hammerbeam roof in the church of Earl Stonham, Suffolk, while the much restored image of the saint on a screen at Foxearth in Essex has already been mentioned. There are also records of a chapel dedicated to 'St Wolstan' in the church of St Mary at Bury St Edmunds.<sup>10</sup> Devotion to Walstan may have been most intense in the area around his shrine, but it was not confined to it; indeed since most cults are spread by individual contact, their development is unpredictable rather than uniform (Finucane 1977, 156).

Sadly, we do not know exactly why Walstan came to be depicted in Cavenham church, though the chapel at nearby Bury St Edmunds may suggest that his cult was known in the Breckland area. Cavenham had four religious gilds, but none were dedicated to Walstan: the Gild of St Andrew, the Gild of St Mary (founded 1363), the Gild of Holy Trinity (founded 1377) and the



PLATE XIX – St Walstan from the screen at Burlingham St Andrew Church, Norfolk, 1536  
(Photo: Conservation of Wall Painting Department, Courtauld Institute of Art).

Gild of St John the Baptist (founded 1446) (Redstone 1906, 29 and 76). Walstan is not mentioned in any of the surviving wills from Cavenham of between 1450–1500.

Walstan had an obvious appeal for farm labourers,<sup>11</sup> but he attracted devotion in Norwich as well as rural Norfolk (Duffy 1992, 200). Moreover, the accounts of his miracles (James 1917, 259 and 261), as well as the rood screen paintings, show that the wealthy recognised him as a powerful intercessor and sought his aid. Although the soil in the Breckland area was poor, recent research shows that it supported a varied economy. Fifteenth-century Cavenham had water mills and fulling mills and produced barley, sheep and rabbits (Bailey 1989, 150, 169, 176–7). Wealthier farmers probably attended St Andrew's Church, but we cannot tell whether they or their labourers were identified with a particular affection for Walstan. It is also possible that the finance for the painting came from outside the village. In 1457 the church received a rich gift of vestments from Lady Ela Shardelowe of Bury St Edmunds (Tymms 1850, 13).

Nevertheless, the painting itself can still yield us valuable information. The fact that its right edge neatly corresponds to the adjacent Perpendicular window (Tricker 1982, 2) suggests that it too dates from the 15th century. Three features of the painting help us to establish a more precise date: the style, the saint's crown, and the costume of the kneeling figures.

The Cavenham painting has much in common with a 15th-century mural of King Henry VI found at Witton, near North Walsham, Norfolk, in the 19th century, but no longer visible. The Witton figure's frontal pose, with head turned to the left, his short hair, and cloak with ermine shoulder cape are all very similar, while he was also flanked by angels (Pl. XX).<sup>12</sup> The short-haired angel at Cavenham, however, bears a greater stylistic resemblance to those on an East Anglian painted cloth of Christ in Glory of c.1465–70 (Sutton 1980, pl.VII). The angularity of the drapery in the gowns of the angels at Cavenham is found in Norfolk stained glass, such as



PLATE XX – Detail of the painting of Henry VI, formerly on the north wall of Witton Church, near North Walsham, Norfolk (from a drawing by G.W.W. Minns in *Norfolk Archaeology*, VI, 1864).

that at East Harling, dated *c.*1463–80 (Marks 1993, 198). The treatment of Walstan's features, especially his elegant arched eyebrows and flattened upper lids, is characteristic of the 'Norwich School' of glass painting in the period 1460–80.<sup>13</sup>

Another feature shared by the Cavenham and Witton paintings is the arched crown. This form of crown was depicted in the decoration of Henry V's chantry chapel at Westminster Abbey, dating between 1438 and *c.*1450 (Stone 1955, 205). It is shown on a Henry VI pilgrim badge of *c.*1480, and by the 1490s had become the standard type of crown occurring on coins (Spencer 1978, 245).

The long gown of the kneeling male figure at Cavenham, with its gathered waist, straight sleeves and tight collar is almost identical to that of William Gybbys on a brass of *c.*1470 at Chipping Camden (Scott 1986, pl.104), and that of the notary Robert Wimbill at St Mary le Tower Ipswich, of 1479 (Blatchly and Northeast 1989, 257–67; Page-Phillips 1972, 60). This style of gown is found as late as the 1490s, on funeral monuments such as that of the wool-merchant, John Barton (died 1491), at Holme in Nottinghamshire (Scott 1986, 119). As that monument shows, however, by the 1490s male hairstyles were longer than the short bob sported by the devotee at Cavenham. The dress of the female figure at Cavenham is very plain, and eschews the flamboyant headgear fashionable at the end of the 15th century. Her headdress seems closest to the veil-over-box arrangement shown on the tomb of Joan Canyng of Bristol *c.*1460 (Scott 1986, 95). Taken together the evidence suggests that the painting dates from the second half of the 15th century, more specifically the period *c.*1465–85.

This late 15th-century date has a wider significance for the cult of Walstan. While the origins of devotion to Walstan are obscure, there is a great deal of evidence for his cult in the 15th and early 16th centuries. It is difficult, however, to know how we should interpret this. Evidence for local saints' cults is so varied that a few chance references and artefacts could be survivals either from a popular cult or remnants of an obscure and short-lived devotion. Moreover, there is evidence that patterns of devotion to a saint changed over time. While the first flush of enthusiasm for a saint such as William of Norwich, a murdered child whose death was attributed to the Jews, was marked by miracles and generous pilgrims, after this initial local enthusiasm, donations and reported miracles declined (Finucane 1977, 121, 161). But it is wrong to equate this decline at the centre with a loss of interest in the saint; while the level of gifts to St William's shrine in the 15th century was lower than in previous centuries, screen paintings show the spread of his cult to the parishes (Finucane 1977, 194). In the case of Walstan, it is much more difficult to make comparisons with preceding centuries. The Cavenham wall painting, however, is part of a persuasive body of evidence of Walstan's popularity in the late Middle Ages. A gift to Bawburgh is recorded in 1528 (Blomefield and Parkin 1805–10, I, 391); the rhymed life above the shrine was written in the late 15th century (James 1917, 241); and the life of Walstan was added to a collection of saints' lives published in 1516 (Horstmann 1901, I, xviii). There are also records of late medieval building work in the church at Bawburgh (Cattermole and Cotton 1983, 276). All this evidence suggests that he inspired considerable devotion in Bawburgh and further afield, in a period when the status and income of some long-established shrines declined. Indeed, faith in his healing well survived the destruction of his shrine at the Reformation.<sup>14</sup>

How are we to understand the Cavenham wall painting? Is it a self-contained devotional painting, like those found on rood screens, or was it part of a longer series of scenes from the saint's life? Who are the figures who kneel before the saint?

Though traces of further wall painting remain to the west, there is little indication that the surviving mural was intended to portray a scene from Walstan's life, such as his confrontation with his master and mistress. The most obvious objection to a narrative reading is the fact that Walstan is depicted as a king. An image of Walstan during his life would need to show a barefoot peasant; only a 'posthumous' ideal image, like those on the rood screens, could show him as befitted his rank. Although he holds a scythe as a reminder of his labouring life, the image at Cavenham shifts emphasis from his poverty and renunciation to his sanctity and consequent

power to intercede for his devotees. While the legend differentiates between the malicious wife and the kind master, there is no sign of such emphasis in the mural, where the woman kneels behind the man. Moreover, both devotees are about a third the size of the saint; this would be strange for a narrative image, but conventional in a scene of kneeling donors or devotees.

The hillock setting is naturalistic, but the architectural canopy which hovers incongruously above Walstan is of a type often used with single figures of saints, perhaps to make them resemble devotional statues. Although angels are referred to in Walstan's legend, those which flank the saint here, like those which accompany King Henry VI at Witton, are part of a devotional, rather than a narrative tradition. In the absence of a halo, they may indicate his sanctity, like the angel referred to at the start of the English life, (James 1917, 251).

It seems likely that the scrolls originally recorded the devotees' prayer to Walstan and his response. Sadly, without the inscriptions we cannot tell whether the kneeling figures were intended to represent specific individuals. But whoever they are, the painting stresses their close relationship with the saint by showing him returning their gaze and blessing them.

The identification of the Cavenham mural is a significant contribution to our knowledge of the cult of Walstan. It is the only extant wall painting of the saint. It is another important piece of evidence that he was known and honoured well beyond the Bawburgh area. It strengthens the impression that his cult was strong in the 15th and early 16th centuries. We should not, however, forget that this wall painting of Walstan is only a small fragment of the rich web of images on view in a late medieval parish church such as Cavenham. Though the statutes of the guilds are silent on the subject of Walstan, they mention three other holy images: the guild of St Andrew kept a light burning before the patron's image in the chancel, while the guilds of St Mary and Holy Trinity kept lights before their images (Redstone 1906, 27). The guilds may also have had their own altars. Indeed, the window immediately to the east of the mural has a piscina in its sill, suggesting that it was the site of a medieval aisle altar (Tricker 1982, 3). We know that by 1389 a rood beam crossed the chancel arch (Redstone 1906, 27). Perhaps the image of Christ the Judge loomed behind the image of the crucified. Murals on the nave walls may have set out the content of the church's teaching programme. Alongside these were the saints, 'the holy company of heaven',<sup>15</sup> whose lives were exemplars of virtue and whose prayers could aid now and in eternity. Today Walstan, the saint with a scythe, is the sole survivor. Perhaps paintings of his fellow saints still lie undiscovered beneath the limewash around him or elsewhere in Cavenham church.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to David Park for his help in the preparation of this article, and also to Carol Twinch whose forthcoming book on St Walstan is eagerly awaited.

#### NOTES

- 1 The date of discovery is given by Pevsner 1974, 161; for the restoration work undertaken on the church during 1966–68, see S.R.O.B., FL 547/5/8.
- 2 For the initial identification, see Park 1994, 169, n.34; it is also suggested there that wall paintings at Ashby (Suffolk), described as a 'history of St Wulstan . . . covered with a fresh coat of whitewash' (Keyser 1883, 9) may have shown this saint rather than St Wulfstan of Worcester.
- 3 A board with a legend for pilgrims can be seen in a commemorative print of Henry VI's shrine (Duffy 1992, pl.77). John Lydgate wrote poems for display before shrines and images, which employ the same rhyme scheme and metre as the Bawburgh life (MacCracken 1911, 145, 161, 173, 193).
- 4 This assertion is made by James 1917, 241, but see Twinch (forthcoming) for a discussion of its veracity.
- 5 The Cossey well dried up in the 19th century (R.E.B. 1899–1904, 472), but the Bawburgh well still exists (Pevsner 1962, 83).
- 6 Bale was the first to allude to the 'pagan' aspects, calling him a 'Norfolk Priapus' (Bale 1560, 2nd part, 21). This

- element is stressed by Alexander 1982, 24. However, Walstan also stands in the tradition of world-renouncing saints such as St Theobald of Provins (Hart 1864, 779), and in a recent useful discussion he is presented as a model of late medieval lay piety (Duffy 1992, 200–5).
- 7 Documentary evidence for dating most of the relevant Norfolk screens is cited by Cotton 1987.
  - 8 For the Sparham example, and other representations of scythes, see Woodforde 1950, 159 and n.3.
  - 9 I am grateful to Carol Twinch for highlighting this lack of evidence. The Babingley screen was destroyed in 1854. Its figure of St Blida was identified by Keyser, 1883, 302, (for an illustration, see B.L. Add. MS. 23,053, f.65). St Blida's name survives on glass at Cawston, and there is a figure of her in glass in the chancel at North Tuddenham in Norfolk (James 1917, 239). There are a few 15th-century references to her shrine (Blomefield and Parkin 1805–10, XI, 173).
  - 10 Carol Twinch kindly alerted me to the presence of this chapel, for which see Tymms 1868, 26.
  - 11 For an exclusively rural interpretation of his cult see Farmer 1985, 42.
  - 12 Minns 1864.
  - 13 For description and example of this facial type see Lasko and Morgan 1973, 53.
  - 14 In 1763 there was a riot among crowds jostling to collect holy water (Anon. 1763, 400).
  - 15 Will of William Cosyn of Cavenham, 1479. S.R.O.B., IC/500/2/11/168.

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#### Abbreviations

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| B.L.                 | British Library.  |
| R.C.H.M. Essex 1916. | Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), <i>An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Essex, I, North-West</i> . London. |
| S.R.O.B.             | Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds Branch.  |