

# THE WENHASTON DOOM: A BIOGRAPHY OF A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PANEL PAINTING

by KATHLEEN WHALE

THE CHURCH OF St Peter in Wenhaston is mentioned in Domesday in 1086, along with a mill and sufficient woodland to feed sixteen hogs. Two other churches, the chapel of St Margaret, Mells, and the chapel of St Bartholomew are known to have existed, both of which paid their dues to the mother church of St Peter. Regular services seem to have continued at St Margaret's chapel until 1465, but little is known about St Bartholomew's chapel (Gowers 1894, 359ff). The advowson of St Peter's was held by Blythburgh Priory, founded in the early 12th century as an offshoot of a priory in Essex dedicated to St Osyth. Her effigy is to be seen under a canopied niche on the right side of the 19th-century wooden chancel arch and is a reminder of the one-time connection between Blythburgh and Wenhaston.

Three carved stones found under the east window of the church at the time of the 1892 refurbishment of the chancel provide evidence of a Saxon church on this site. Two narrow lancet windows with deeply splayed embrasures of Romanesque type in the south wall of the nave, as well as lancet windows of early Decorated style in the north and south walls of the chancel, indicate that building and refurbishment continued in the 13th and 14th centuries, when the small door in the south wall of the chancel was also constructed. The nave and tower were built in the late 14th century.

In common with many other Suffolk parish churches, a major rebuilding programme was begun at St Peter's towards the end of the 15th century. It has been suggested (Cautley 1982, 363) that the arch-braced collar roof of the nave dates from this time, as does a small window above the south-east window of the nave. Unfortunately, this rebuilding programme is difficult to date with accuracy, since the churchwardens' accounts are available only from 1547. One firm piece of evidence is provided by the will, proved in 1489, of John Townysend of Thorington who left money for the new candlebeam at Wenhaston.<sup>1</sup> The north aisle was added about 1530, a date given substance by Robert Pepyn's will of 1535, instructing that he should be buried in the new aisle (Clare 1894, 7). The south porch was added about this time.

The rood screen, of which John Townysend's will had provided the candlebeam, was still in its customary position between nave and chancel with the rood loft in reasonable condition when D.E. Davy visited St Peter's on 3 June 1808. At that time the screen was covered with scriptural texts, and the King's Arms were displayed above the rood loft. On Davy's second visit on 20 November 1828, the screen had been removed (Clare 1894, 18). A receipted account dated 30 March 1811 for £16 1s. 3d. for 'repairing the church, taking down the end of the same and clearing away' is recorded (Clare 1894, 18), and a new beam and 'Gothic' arch were put up.

Further refurbishment of the east end of the church was begun in 1892, during which the remains of the late 15th-century candlebeam were found some 3m below the roof, still bearing traces of colouring and gilding. In addition, a large arched partition thickly coated with whitewash was found to occupy the space between the position of the old candlebeam and the roof. This partition was taken down in pieces and placed outside in the churchyard. An overnight heavy shower of rain washed off some of the layers of whitewash, exposing a portion of panel with parts of the figures of the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. The boards were carefully washed, then the whole was re-assembled at a cost of £4 7s. 0d. (S.R.O.I., FC 189/E5/20), revealing a painting of the Doom or Last Judgement, complete in all respects apart from a square hole which had been cut into the left-hand side to accommodate a stove-pipe



FIG. 79 – The Wenhaston Doom, general view: the unpainted outlines of a raguly cross and two figures. Christ as Judge; the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist; general Resurrection; damned souls and Hell's mouth; St Michael weighing deeds; St Peter receiving saved souls; and the ascent into the Heavenly City (photo: author).

some forty years earlier. Two other boards bearing text were found below the remains of the candlebeam, and were subsequently nailed to the lower edge of the painting. The painting was exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries in December 1892, and an accompanying paper by C.E. Keyser, F.S.A. gave a detailed description of the painting and its finding and compared it with other extant Doom paintings, noting its uncommon features.

Keyser's published paper (Keyser 1894, 119-30) included a coloured reproduction of the painting; comparison with the present-day appearance (Fig. 79) indicates that there have been no significant changes to the painting, other than its placing in the church.<sup>2</sup> Mrs Eve Baker, the conservator, undertook preservation of the painting in 1970. Her report (C.C.C., Wenhaston file) noted that the painting was blooming, following the application of wax in 1951, and that some preservative had been applied over the central figures, but not very successfully. There was no evidence in Mrs Baker's report of any repainting of the original work, though traces of vermilion were embedded in it from the later painting of texts and the Royal Arms. The old preservative was removed, some loose paint on the extreme right of the panel was stabilised and the whole was cleaned. Small repairs were necessary to the boarding, including infilling of the nail holes where the figures associated with the rood would have been. The clear, bright painting is now handsomely displayed, well-lit and accessible on the north wall of the church, facing the south door.

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE WENHASTON DOOM

The painting measures 5.25m at its widest and 2.6m in height. It is painted on nine oak boards, the uppermost of which is some 15cm, the remainder 30cm, wide. On the right-hand side, the upper five boards have been shaped to produce a curve which precisely fits that between the



FIG. 80 – Upper third of the Doom: Christ seated on a rainbow, with a faint wheel-like sun (*photo: author*).

roof and the former candlebeam. A hole 99cm x 76cm has been cut out of the middle left-hand edge.

The unpainted outlines of a large cross raguly occupy the centre of the painting, extending to its full height, the arms stretching 1.83m across the upper third. Immediately below the ends of the cross are the unpainted outlines of two figures, which would have been those of the Virgin Mary on the left and John the Evangelist on the right, each 1.37m high. Nail holes which fastened the crucifix and the figures to the boards are clearly visible. The field of the painting is thus effectively divided into eight compartments, two on either side of the upper portion of the cross, two occupying the spaces between the ends of the arms of the cross and the two carved figures (though the middle left-hand compartment has been obliterated by the hole for the stove pipe) and four compartments at the bottom, on the outer sides of the carved figures and between the lower part of the cross and the carved figures respectively. The medium is size in tempera on a thin gesso ground and, though some parts of the painting are faded and indistinct, the major features are clearly seen. The range of colours is wide, with extensive use of vermilion, some blue, yellow, brown, flesh tones and varying shades of grey as well as black and white. Much of the background is painted olive green. It is apparent that the carved crucifix and figures were nailed on to the boards before the painting was carried out, as there is discontinuity in some parts of the painted surface – for example the curve of the rainbow in the upper left compartment, where the two discontinuous parts occupy part of the space to the left and right of the outline of the upper part of the crucifix; and the right wing of St Michael, which has a paint-free area consistent with the shape of one of the crockets of the cross.

In the top left compartment, Christ is seated on a rainbow, clothed in a red robe, open to show the wounds in his side and on both hands (Fig. 80). The robe partly conceals the right foot, on which no wound is visible, and completely conceals the left. The hair is brown, and the head is surrounded by a star-like nimbus, now very faint. The faint outline of a wheel-like sun to the left of the figure can be seen, as can the outline of an angel above the figure's head. The right hand of the figure carries a scroll, though no letters are visible. The top right compartment is occupied by the kneeling figures of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, the hands in a supplicating gesture towards the figure of Christ (Fig. 81). Both figures have brown hair and are nimbed. The Virgin Mary wears a red robe covering a blue dress, the design of which receives more detailed comment later in discussion of the dating of the painting. Above and to the left of the Virgin's head is the outline of a crescent moon. John the Baptist is bearded and wears an ochre coat with rough fringed sleeves and hem, revealing bare arms and legs. A scroll on which no text is visible occupies the extreme right of the compartment. There is some paint loss on the blackish-grey background to the figures.

Opposite the right-hand end of the crucifix and immediately above the outline of the figure of John the Evangelist, in the middle right compartment, two figures, one nude in the posture of a donor, the other clad in grave clothes, rise from graves, their hands raised in a supplicating gesture towards the figure of Christ. A similar nude figure is closely associated with the figures destined for Hell in the bottom right compartment, whilst two others clamber from graves in the upper part of the bottom centre right compartment, in which St Michael weighs deeds. The corresponding compartment on the left has largely disappeared. All that remain are the hands of an angel holding a trumpet, which is indistinct but appears to be pointing towards the group of figures with St Peter in the bottom centre left compartment.

The bottom right compartment is occupied by scenes relating to Hell (Fig. 82). The gaping toothed jaws of a monster are surmounted by a snout and glaring eyes. Much of the paint has been lost but sufficient remains to define the detail of the head and to indicate flames against the flesh of some of the figures within. A hairy devil with a spiny back blowing a serpent-like instrument perches on the snout. The jaws are crammed with figures of damned souls and a devil who hauls on the leg of a figure who gazes out at the observer as it is dragged on its back

into the jaws. The figures inside the jaws and the standing figures outside are held by a red chain whilst a cloven-hooved devil with clawed hands wields a four-pronged meat hook. All the figures are nude and in general face the crucifix, their hands in a supplicating gesture, though those within the jaws of Hell seem resigned to their fate, with gestures and expressions suggesting despair. Immediately above the group of figures being herded into Hell, a red devil carries on his back a woman, head down with arms outstretched and her legs over his shoulders.

The figures of St Michael carrying in his right hand a long sword and in his left the balance on which he weighs deeds, and a large black devil carrying a closed scroll in his right hand and a text-bearing scroll in his left occupy the greater part of the bottom centre right compartment (Fig. 83). St Michael is dressed as an angel with red and white wings. A red robe lined with yellow, clasped at the neck, covers a white undergarment. On his head is a circlet with a cross similar in design to one seen in the masonry of the Heavenly City, depicted in the bottom left compartment. The left-hand pan of the balance has the longer chain and is occupied by one small nude figure, hands raised in supplication. The right hand pan contains two devils, one red and one black. A devil's face is seen immediately behind the right-hand pan and appears to be part of the belly of the large devil.<sup>3</sup> The large devil has wings, large pointed ears, a hooked



FIG. 81 – Close-up of upper right compartment of the Doom: the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, hands clasped in a supplicating gesture; the faint outline of a crescent moon to the left of the Virgin's head; a scroll to the right of St John (photo: author).

nose and a tail and wears breeches painted to indicate fur, strongly suggestive of a costume worn in a play. The unrolled scroll in his left hand bears the words 'Nam quo deest tu facies tui bonum esto', translated by Keyser (Keyser 1894, 120) as 'Be it so, for in sofar as it is wanting though [*sic*] mayest count this to thy advantage'. My source<sup>4</sup> suggests the wording 'For in what is deficient make [up] thou for it. Be thou good'. The significance of the depiction of this devil and the text will be discussed later.

St Peter, in the bottom centre left compartment, in full and rich pontificals, wearing the triple papal tiara and carrying in his gloved right hand a large gold key, welcomes four nude figures whose station in life is indicated by their headgear (Fig. 84). The four figures reading from left to right are a king, a bishop, a cardinal and a queen, their hands clasped in prayer. St Peter is shown with short grey hair and a short grey beard. The other male figures have brown hair in a long bob. The female has long brown hair. The bottom extreme left compartment, the upper part of which is missing because of the hole for the stove pipe, is occupied by the Heavenly City, depicted as a grey castle-like building with two open doorways approached by steps and a number of windows of varying design. Two full length nude figures are being helped up the steps by an angel. The figure on the left is shown from the back, its associated angel dressed in a red robe. The figure on the right is in profile, though only one hand and the tip of the left wing of the associated angel are visible (Fig. 85).

At the bottom of the painting, two text-bearing boards have been nailed. These were not part of the painting originally, being found *below* the rood beam at the 1892 refurbishment of the chancel. When Keyser examined it (Keyser 1894, 122), the text read:

Let every soule Submyt himselfe unto the authoryteye of the hygher powers for there is no power but of God The/ Powers that be are ordeyned of God but they that resest or are against the ordinance of God shall receyve to them selves utter/damnation For rulers are not fearfull to them that do good but to them that do evyll for he is the mynister of God.

The words 'Let every soule' were written in red paint but they are now indecipherable, there being only a few traces of red remaining. The remainder of the text is in black paint and is barely legible, commencing with the word 'Submyt'. It fits an Elizabethan context.<sup>5</sup> Close examination shows that this text appears to have been written over another text, identified in 1951 during attempts to preserve the Elizabethan text.<sup>6</sup>

There are minor discrepancies between my observations and those of Ashby (1980, 363) and Keyser (1894, 122ff), but some of these may be merely a matter of interpretation of colour. Neither author comments on the dress of the Virgin Mary other than its colour. Both authors suggest that the words likely to have been written on the scrolls in Christ's right hand and in the upper right compartment are 'Venite Benedicti' ('Come ye Blessed') and 'Discedite Maledicti' ('Depart ye Cursed') respectively, wording which has been noted on other Doom paintings (Ashby 1980, 377, Rouse 1962,96f). The Wenhaston Doom's salient features are its completeness, with all the elements of the Last Judgement present, its association with a carved rood group of crucifix flanked by the figures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist and the fact of its being painted on a wooden tympanum, a combination which makes it unique, as will be shown later.

#### DESIGN, STYLE AND DATE OF THE WENHASTON DOOM

In spite of changes in architecture, techniques and ideology the basic elements of the Last Judgement have remained constant throughout the five centuries over which depictions have been made. Twelfth-century friezes gradually gave way to a zonal hierarchical plan in the 15th

century, with the emphasis on Judge rather than Judgement. With this change, the rood or crucifix and rood screen became an essential part of church furnishings. The format which best meets the requirements for a Doom painting based on a hierarchical plan with its rood is a triangle, which, in effect, is what the chancel arch is. For iconographic reasons as well as for immediacy of impact that was the site of most Doom paintings. Of 182 such paintings recorded by Ashby, 117 were in that position (Ashby 1980, 21). Depending on the space available, the rood with its accompanying figures could have been suspended from the roof of the chancel

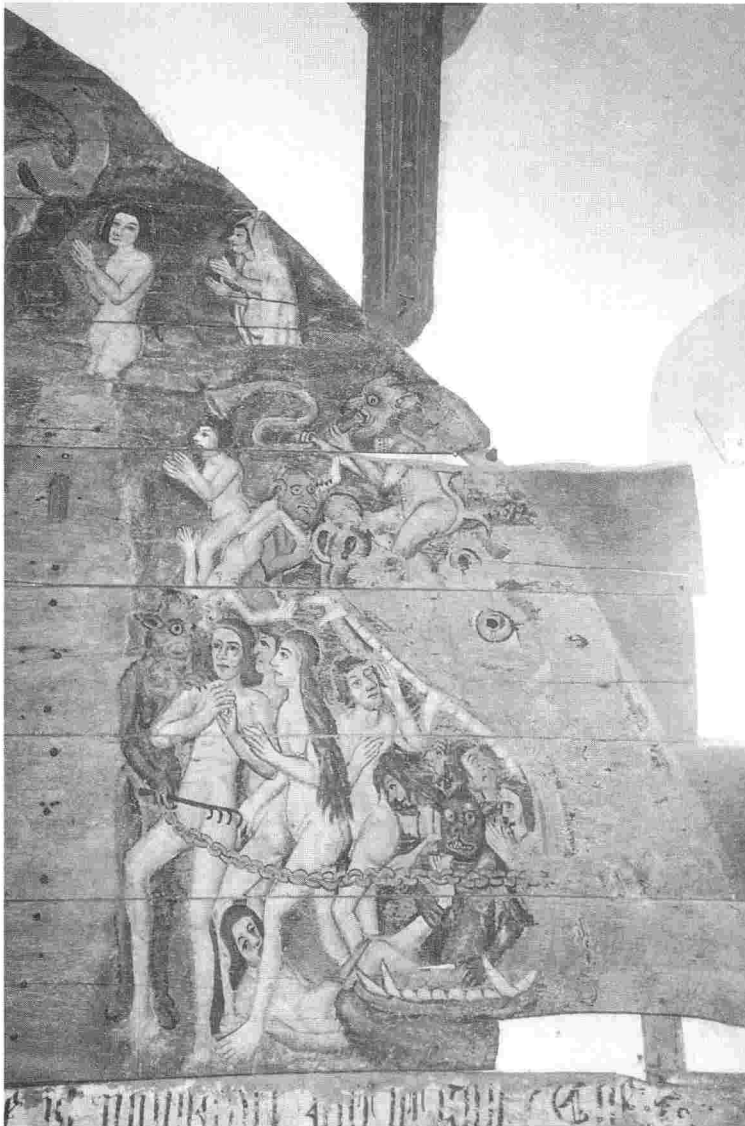


FIG. 82 – Bottom right compartment of the Doom: Hell's mouth crammed with damned souls, herded by devils  
(photo: author).

arch or mounted on the candle (rood) beam or the parapet of the rood loft, with the Doom painting on the wall above.

Lack of space, the probable reason at St Peter's, Wenhaston, or perhaps a desire to emphasise the complementary messages of Doom and rood, as may have been the reason at the Chapel of the Guild of the Holy Cross, Stratford-upon-Avon (Warwickshire), sometimes meant that the Doom and the rood were combined in one composition, the painting forming a background for the carved rood group. Keyser identified three Doom paintings in association with a rood group: St Michael's at St Albans (Herts.), which was partly painted on a tympanum and partly on the wall above but is now only known from an engraving; Poslingford, Suffolk, which was also painted on a tympanum but which has now been destroyed; and a wall painting at Stratford-upon-Avon, mentioned above (Keyser 1894, 127). Ashby was able to contribute eight others surviving from sixty-five 15th- and 16th-century Doooms to which the Wenhaston Doom belongs. Only two of these are painted on a tympanum. That at Dauntsey (Wilts.) is now so poorly preserved that it is almost impossible to discern with any certainty where the rood group might have been, and it does not include the weighing of deeds. The North Leigh (Oxon.) Doom has only two panels depicting St Peter with saved souls and damned souls being hauled into Hell. A few other Doom paintings on tympana are not associated with rood groups.

The presence of the rood group poses a problem for the designer of the painting. There is a potential loss of symmetry and balance, and a decision has to be made whether or not Christ as Judge is represented by the Crucifix or is depicted as part of the Doom. In the latter case, the positioning of the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist as the supplicants, usually placed on either side of Christ, and the Heavenly City, which in 15th- and 16th-century Doooms without a rood group is usually below Christ, has to be changed. A number of solutions occur, from omission of some of the elements of the Last Judgement as at Poslingford (Jarvis 1894, 241) to painting on adjacent walls, as was done at Stratford-upon-Avon. At St Peter's, Wenhaston, the painter places Christ on a rainbow in the top left, a solution seen also at St Michael's at St Albans (Herts.), though the position of the supplicants is different, those at St Michael's being placed on either side of the stem of the cross.

The Wenhaston painter's positioning of Christ and the two supplicants in the upper and outer compartments, making the area occupied by the coloured figures roughly equal, resolves the potential lack of symmetry. Further emphasis on balance and symmetry is given by placing a trumpeting angel, unfortunately mostly lost because of the hole on the left of the painting, opposite the devil with the serpent-like instrument, and by positioning the Heavenly City and Hell at opposite extremities at the bottom. The central positioning and similar large scale of the richly-garbed figures of St Michael and St Peter as the two main proponents of the act of Judgement serve further to maintain the overall balance whilst confirming the hierarchical zoning of the Doom. The general lack of clutter, with relatively few though well-defined figures against a unifying background of olive green, makes for clarity and directness and underpins the unequivocal message.

These aims are also carried through stylistically, though the style has been much criticised. Pevsner opines that it is 'distressingly rustic' (Pevsner 1975, 478). 'Spirited but rather crude' (Ashby 1980, 374) and 'artistically without merit' (Borenus and Tristram 1926, 42) have been other verdicts. Undoubtedly, the painting cannot be compared in artistic quality either to the best rood screen paintings in Suffolk or to the work of the Norwich glaziers who were certainly active in north-east Suffolk at the end of the 15th century (Lewis 1947, 42). It is also true that drawing became less refined from the beginning of the 15th century as the International Gothic style and East Anglian manuscript illumination waned. Figures became rather dumpy and were outlined in thick black lines, the drawing perhaps influenced by printing and blockbooks dependent on woodcuts and engravings which were widely distributed throughout northern Europe by the end of the 15th century. Even so, considerable variation in figural style both locally and nationally can be shown.



At Wenhaston, the figure drawing conforms to that of the 15th and 16th centuries in having black outlines, but the figures are slender, with well-rounded bellies. The legs of the figures are disproportionately long, and the feet unusually large. The drawing is for the most part careful and refined, facial features clearly demarcated to indicate differing expressions and the flesh tints delicately applied. These characteristics are particularly apparent in the figures in the four bottom panels of the painting and contrast with the cruder drawing of the figures of Christ, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. Christ's arms in particular are disproportionate to the body both in length and in their relative placing on the torso. The drawing of the Wenhaston figures, except for those three, is unlike the dumpy rather squat figures which are more characteristic of English figure drawing of this time. There seem to be no exact parallels either in Suffolk or nationally in the material which I have seen. Destruction and damage have taken their toll and of the six Suffolk Dooms listed by Ashby one has been extensively restored; two are in poor



FIG. 83 – Centre lower right compartment of the Doom: St Michael, clothed as an angel, carrying a long sword, weighs deeds. A large devil on the right carries an unrolled scroll (*photo: author*)

condition and difficult to make out; a fourth is fragmentary. The figure drawing at Stoke-by-Clare and Stanningfield<sup>7</sup> is quite different from the Wenhaston figures.

The Wenhaston figures are more closely allied to the concepts of figure drawing in northern Europe in the 15th century, which are well illustrated in the works of Netherlandish painters, especially Roger van der Weyden and Memlinc. Other links with Netherlandish painting are suggested by the figure shown from behind ascending the steps to the Heavenly City, seen in the Roger van der Weyden and Memlinc Last Judgement paintings, for which I have been unable to find a parallel in English Doom paintings.

Moreover there are no examples of St Michael shown with scales as part of an English Doom painting, though Ashby notes five such depictions painted separately from a Doom painting. By contrast, Netherlandish painters influenced by Roger van der Weyden include the act of weighing by St Michael in their Last Judgement painting. Not least among these artists is Memlinc who depicted St Michael as part angel and part warrior. It is interesting that the Wenhaston painter drew attention to St Michael's warrior role by the emblem of the long sword but clad him in the robes and wings of an angel, in contrast to his common depiction in armour in England in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

The use of striking contrasts of red and blue together, particularly favoured by Memlinc, as by the Wenhaston painter, is also suggestive of a link with the Low Countries, as is the detail of the circlet on St Michael's head which is identical to that of van Eyck's Angel of the Annunciation.<sup>8</sup> Though this evidence is circumstantial, the affinities are unmistakable.

A further possible connection with the Netherlands is to be seen in the depiction of the Virgin Mary's dress (Fig. 86). Usually the dress is simple with no detail which might allow possible dating or placing. The Wenhaston painter shows the dress as having a bodice fitting comfortably to the waist. The sleeves are well fitting and the cuff is turned back to show the lining of the dress. Beneath the dress is a white undergarment or 'piece', the top of which can be seen at the squared neck. This was introduced into women's dress from the mid-1480s (Scott 1986, 78). The bodice and skirt have decorative trimming. These features strongly suggest a Franco-Flemish style. A very similar dress which is Flemish, though the head dress on the figure is undoubtedly English, is depicted on the 1524 funerary brass of Letti Terri now displayed in the Church Museum, Norwich.

It is recognised that dating from brasses, especially provincial, can be misleading, since there may be a lag between the introduction of a style and its adoption. A date of 1520 has been suggested for the dress of the Virgin Mary, a suggestion re-inforced by the patterning of St Peter's cope and the hairstyles of the male figures, including St Peter.<sup>9</sup> This date contrasts with that of 1480 suggested by Eve Baker (C.C.C. Wenhaston file). Keyser suggested that stylistically the painting was not earlier than 1500 and may have been completed and placed in its position only a very short time before the sweeping changes effected by the Reformation (Keyser 1894, 129).

The stylistic features of the Wenhaston Doom indicate that there were two painters. One was responsible for painting the upper right and left panels and the figures in the panel at the end of the right arm of the cross. The other painted the main figure groups at the bottom of the painting. This painter has also made an attempt at perspective in the shading of the masonry of the Heavenly City and in the placing of the figures in the group of saved souls with St Peter and those climbing the steps of the Heavenly City to suggest that they are standing in different planes.

The differences in the state of preservation of the texts in the painting may also point to two painters. The scrolls in the upper left and right panels were devoid of text when Keyser saw them in 1892, though that on the scroll held by the large devil in the bottom centre right panel is still easily discernible. It is possible that two different paints were used, the more able painter who painted the groups at the bottom using the more durable paint. Whether or not the

painting was completed by another painter following the dismissal or death of one cannot be known.

What is clear is that, far from this being a crude and rustic painting, one of the painters approached his task intelligently and with a considerable degree of skill. Whether or not he was Flemish,<sup>10</sup> he seems to have been familiar not only with the fashions of the last quarter of the 15th century but with the works of Netherlandish painters and possibly Memlinc's Last Judgement completed in 1473. In design, style and execution, the painter has taken care to transmit with clarity and directness the choice open to mankind and 'so fynally to be oon of the Numbre at the dredefull day of dome that shall stond and be oon of his right hand' (Richmond 1981, 244).

### THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE WENHASTON DOOM

If the narrative of the Last Judgement and the point of the story were to be grasped by the viewer, artist and/or patron were required to use apt and familiar symbols. The more familiar and direct the symbols used, the more likely was the message to be received by a community with differing degrees of learning, experience and intelligence. In the Wenhaston Doom, the symbols used parallel the directness of the design.

The raguly cross of the crucifix (resembling a tree with lopped branches) to which the Doom painting forms the background is one such piece of imagery. A counterpart is to be seen on the 15th-century screen at Southwold in the ragged stock of a tree from which arises a straight stem which the prophet Baruch holds. It is at once a reminder of Christ's genealogy as springing from the Tree of Jesse (Isaiah, 11) and of Christ's redemptive suffering by which He claims the right to judge mankind and confer eternal salvation.

The display of Christ's wounds further emphasises that suffering, but these were also believed to be a sign to the elect of Christ's love and mercy at his second coming. The cult of the five wounds was particularly strong in the late Middle Ages (Duffy 1992, 246). Though only three were painted in the Wenhaston Doom, they are the most prominent and are depicted as bleeding, so the imagery is unmistakable.

The rainbow on which Christ is seated was introduced into the iconography of the Doom in the 13th century, possibly to accommodate a change of view of Christ to a more accessible and human figure (Ashby 1980, 64). However, there is a biblical source for the representation (Ezekiel, 1:26,28), which was widespread and a powerful image of hope.

The Virgin Mary's role, both as the suffering mother of Christ standing beside the crucifix in the rood group and as the intercessor for the souls of sinners in the upper left panel of the painting, has been made clear and direct in the Wenhaston Doom. In the role of suffering mother, she would have been accompanied by John the Evangelist on the other side of the crucifix. In her role of intercessor, she is accompanied by John the Baptist, who was believed to intercede for those who lived before Christ was born. John the Baptist's message was for repentance and his austere and solitary life which is its outward manifestation is alluded to by the painter of the Wenhaston Doom in the rough garment in which the figure is clad.

Two features of the Resurrection as depicted in the Wenhaston Doom deserve mention. The first is what appears to be a donor figure in the panel below the intercessors. Keyser has suggested that the donor was a canon of the Augustinian priory at Blythburgh (Keyser 1894, 126). This seems unlikely, since the number of brethren seems always to have been small (Watling 1894, 426) and their wealth was almost certainly exceeded by that of more prosperous lay members of the community. The inclusion of a resurrecting soul amongst the damned in the bottom left panel is also an unusual feature in English Doom paintings.

General resurrection is followed by Judgement based on the balance of good and evil deeds. In the Wenhaston Doom, this is graphically shown as the act of weighing by St Michael. It is an

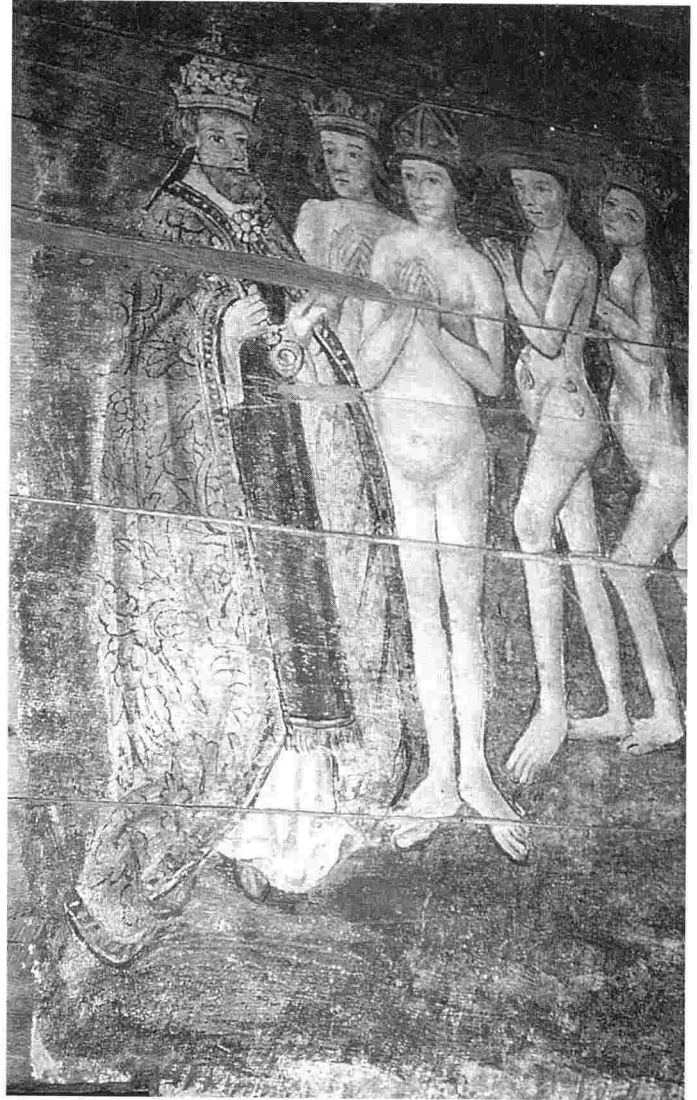


FIG. 84 – Centre lower left compartment of the Doom: St Peter welcomes a king, a bishop, a cardinal and a queen to the Kingdom of Heaven (*photo: author*).

act of ancient tradition and a potent symbol of assessing actions and determining destiny. Concepts of Greek and Roman law with the allegorical figure of Justice, and biblical (Daniel, 27) and classical (Rieu 1950, 146) literary sources, all help to define the importance of Judgement in mankind's affairs.

The weighing in Christian iconography is of deeds, not souls, good being weighed on the viewer's left. The good and evil deeds of one person may appear as two figures, one in each scale pan, sometimes differently coloured to signify good and bad. The Wenhaston painter left the viewer in no doubt as to what was being weighed, placing two small devils in the scale pan to the viewer's right which are insufficient to outweigh a larger human figure in the left, perhaps indicating that a single merit can annul many sins.

The inclusion of the weighing and St Michael's role in it became increasingly rare by the end of the 15th century and had virtually disappeared by the beginning of the 16th century in English paintings. Ashby's findings have been remarked upon (see above) as has the usual

depiction of St Michael in armour as the champion of Heaven. By contrast, the Wenhaston painter conflates all the roles of St Michael: as the defender of Heaven, symbolised by the long sword; as herald of the Last Judgement and guider of souls in the guise of an angel; and as the instrument of Judgement, with the symbolic scales. In one striking image are distilled the fundamental beliefs of the time about St Michael and Judgement Day.

The scene of the weighing may include other figures, such as that of the Virgin, who may be shown helping to tilt the scales. The Wenhaston painter included the figure of a large black devil, equally dominant pictorially to the figure of St Michael. Strictly translated, those words which are legible on the scroll which this devil carries are nonsense. There is an intriguing parallel between this depiction and that of Titivillus, a widely popular character in European literature and drama and frequently depicted in art. He is first encountered by name in the 14th century but is recognisable in unnamed demons in the 13th. His duties include recording whispers, lies and idle talk, especially in church. In the play *Mankind* he introduces himself as 'Ego sum dominatium domine' (Lester 1981. *Mankind*, line 475). In the Last Judgement play of the Towneley plays (England 1897, XXX, 375), he is greeted as the first devil's own officer and carries his scroll to the Judgement throne. He introduces himself in gibberish Latin as follows: 'Mi name is Tutivillus, my horne is blawen, ffragmina verborum/colligit horum, Belzabub algorum/belial belium doliorum'.

The prominence of this devil, his size and the deformed Latin on the scroll which he carries, even though it could not possibly be seen from the body of the church, argue for a deliberate

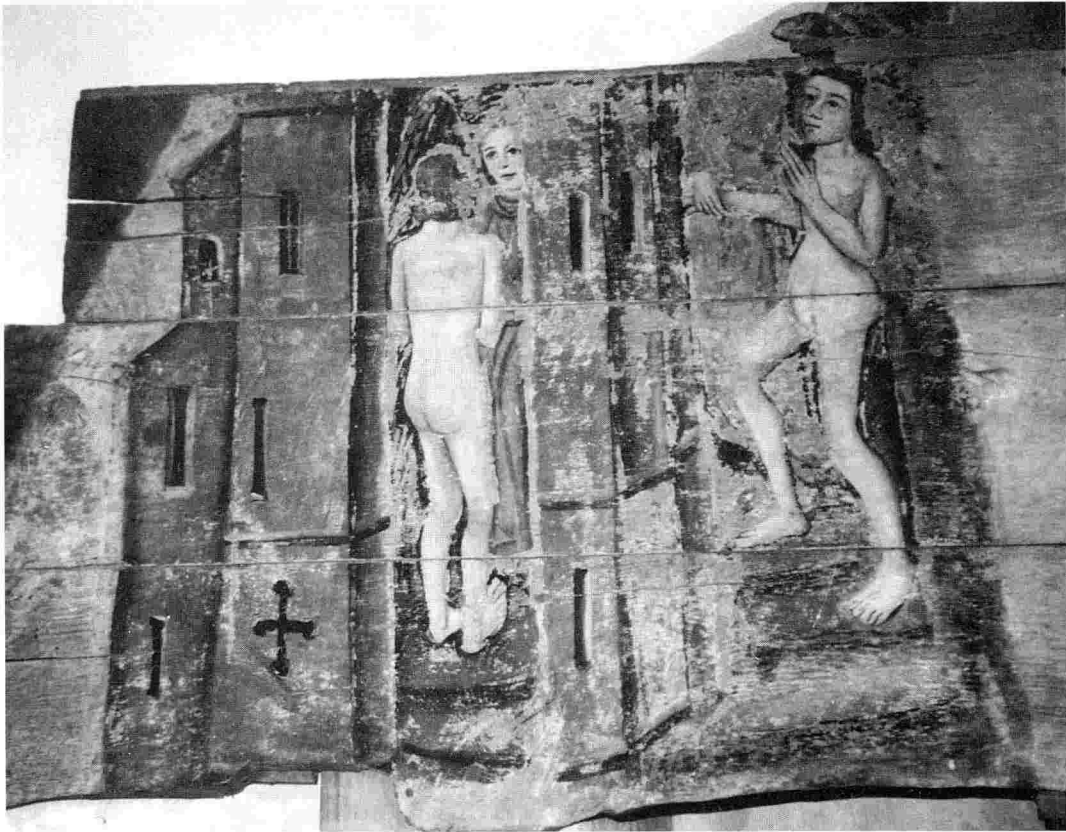


Fig 85 – Bottom left compartment of the Doom: saved souls ascend the steps to the Heavenly City, welcomed by an angel (photo: author).

representation on the part of the artist and/or patron. As the best known devil apart from Satan himself is Titivillus, it is at least possible that the figure represents him, though the figure may be that of Satan and the Latin on the scroll garbled from ignorance.

The destiny of the resurrected is thus decided, the saved to be conducted to the Heavenly City by St Peter, identified by his papal robes and triple tiara as the first earthly leader of the Church. His emblem the keys indicates his role as Christ's representative on earth. The lavishness of the depiction suggests an affirmation of the resplendency and importance of the Catholic Church on the part of the donor at a time when its precepts and practices were being increasingly questioned.

The presence of a bishop and a cardinal among the group of saved souls might also suggest the importance of the Catholic clerical hierarchy to the donor. Ashby (1980, 170–78) provides a breakdown of the social classes most frequently depicted among the damned and the saved. Crowned figures and the clergy reflect the importance of Church and State in society and in general appear among the saved though a not inconsiderable number appear among the damned. Both royalty and the aristocracy, including powerful magnates of the Church, were condemned in literature and song for pride, corruption and vice. The Wenhaston patron opted for prudence in giving Crown and Church equal places among the saved.

Of the two saved souls climbing the steps to the Heavenly City, one turns his back on an earthly world to enter an eternal paradise. The other figure looks out at the viewer, as does the angel, in a gesture at once inviting and persuasive of the still-existing possibility of redemption.

There is no mistaking that the depiction of Hell and its denizens presents a dramatic and horrifying picture of the failure to make the choice of the 'goode way' (Benson 1987, 'The Parson's Tale', line 75). The iconography of Hell in the Wenhaston Doom conforms to that of other Last Judgement scenes. The picture of Hell's mouth and the torments within would have been familiar to the congregation through sermons, verbal narrative, drama and pictures in books, as well as sculpture and murals in churches and stained glass.<sup>11</sup> The depiction of devils and Hell's mouth may be as varied as the individual artist's skill, experience and imagination will allow whilst having regard for the scriptural basis.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly the positioning of Hell's mouth at the bottom right of the painting or under the stage in a dramatic production implies a descent into it. This downward motion is emphasised by the herding and dragging of the damned into Hell. The manner in which the damned are transported into Hell in the Wenhaston Doom, though dramatic, is seen in other Doom paintings. However, the identity of the damned is nowhere indicated in the Wenhaston painting though this was not uncommon in other Dooms either by scrolls held by the damned or by dress or what the figures carry or do.<sup>13</sup>

The basic iconography of the Wenhaston Doom has much in common with other depictions of the Last Judgement, but there are some unusual features, such as the inclusion of St Michael and the act of weighing, the positioning of a resurrecting figure among the figures associated with Hell, and what appears to be a donor figure in the middle right panel. The simplicity and readability of the symbols associated with each of the groups of figures involved in the Last Judgement combine with the clarity of design to make the Wenhaston Doom as striking and direct now as it would have been to the early 16th-century Wenhaston community.

## DISCUSSION

The description of the painting, the arguments adduced to support the contention that one of the painters was Flemish, and the use of expensive materials,<sup>14</sup> indicate that this was an important work for the community of Wenhaston. The insertion of a small window in the south wall of the nave above the south-east window probably about the time of the painting of the Doom to provide extra illumination also attests to its importance. There can be little doubt that



both artist and donor, through the iconography and the directness of depiction of the Last Judgement, intended the message to be seen and to be understood. The implications are that Wenhaston in the early 16th century was both pious and relatively prosperous.

The fortunes of Wenhaston had prospered in parallel with those of Walberswick whose own fortunes had flourished at the expense of the port of Dunwich. Second only in importance to London as a port in the late 12th century, paying an annual fee-farm of £108 to the Crown (Buckley 1992, 1), Dunwich by the early 16th century had become a victim of the ever-changing coastline of Suffolk. The town had largely collapsed into the sea and its prosperity as a port had been assumed by Walberswick. Ties with the Low Countries, reflecting national political associations as well as wider trade in dairy produce, wool and finished cloth, made for a flourishing and prosperous community. Fishing was an important source of wealth as was the agriculture of the wood-pasture region of north Suffolk. Wenhaston flourished by its proximity to Walberswick.

The wealth of these communities was reflected in the extent of corporate and individual patronage, which was directed mainly to the fabric of the village and its church. Some ninety per cent of wills included bequests to the parish church (MacCulloch 1986, 140), whilst other gifts were made during the lifetime of the donors.<sup>15</sup>

The picture is thus established of a community well able financially to support the arts including drama. A survey of plays and players between 1330 and 1642 (Galloway and Watson 1980) indicates the pervasiveness of dramatic and related activities in Suffolk, as elsewhere in East Anglia, though the available sources (mainly accounts books and court rolls) do not show



FIG. 86 – Close-up of upper right compartment of the Doom: details of the Virgin Mary's dress (photo: author).

what was played or where. Nor is there any way of knowing what was meant by the word 'game' which occurs frequently in the accounts.<sup>16</sup>

It is known that the N-Town plays, made in the 1460s and similar in general pattern though differing in content from the northern Mystery cycles, were circulating in Suffolk and Norfolk in the latter half of the 15th century. The plays *Mankind*, *Castle of Perseverance* and *Mary Magdalene* all had strong East Anglian connections (Beadle 1977, 190) and had descriptions of Heaven, Hell and the devil, though they contain no details of costume. It is possible that plays such as these were the source of the Wenhaston painter's ideas for the depiction of the devil's costume, Hell's mouth and the Heavenly City.

There is strong correlation between the descriptions of Heaven and Hell in the staging of plays and their positioning in Doom paintings which the Wenhaston painter may also have adopted. Indeed, a Doom may be seen as a morality play in another medium, just as a play may be seen as a popular vehicle for sermonising. The late 15th century also saw the advent of publishing with increasing ownership of devotional books. The later Middle Ages thus saw interaction between all art forms and the pulpit open to a wider community, and a more widespread distribution of religious imagery than ever before.

Henry VIII's attack on the precepts and practices of the Catholic Church following his excommunication and his assumption in 1534 of the role of protector and Supreme Head of the Church in England signalled the end of much of this imagery in churches and monasteries. The order initiating the suppression of the smaller monasteries in 1536 was followed between 1537 and 1540 by the dissolution of all the others. The consequent iconoclasm was extended to parish churches by the order of 1547. Wholesale destruction of roods, carvings and paintings was carried out though stained glass windows seem to have been spared, probably because of their practical use.<sup>17</sup>

It was probably at this time that the wooden crucifix and its attendant figures attached to the Doom painting on the tympanum filling in the chancel arch at St Peter, Wenhaston were pulled down. The tympanum remained in place and was whitewashed over. Elizabeth I on her accession decreed that the site of the rood should henceforth be occupied by the Royal Arms accompanied by appropriate texts, such as those painted on the two boards at the bottom of the Wenhaston Doom as it is now displayed. Interestingly, she did not order the removal of rood screens, even though the rood lofts were doomed by her decree (Vallance 1936, 80). The arms of later monarchs were subsequently displayed in the same position as those of Elizabeth, as D.E. Davy noted when he visited St Peter's in 1808 (see above), leaving traces of embedded pigment in the painting beneath. The fact that the rood loft was still in place at that time may suggest a less than absolute commitment on the part of the Wenhaston community to the decrees of Elizabeth I and may also account for the covering up of the Doom painting rather than its defacing or destruction.

Thus the attack on church art started by Henry VIII and continued during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I was the means by which the Wenhaston Doom has been preserved, under its layers of whitewash. Its uncovering in 1892 provided the Revd J.B. Clare with an opportunity to raise funds for the refurbishment of his church.<sup>18</sup> The painting continues to attract visitors and, it is hoped, their contributions to the church fabric. Most importantly, it provides a potent visual link with the beliefs and daily lives of the early 16th-century community in Wenhaston.

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kindly provided the reference to John Townysend's will and a copy of the Walberswick churchwardens' accounts. The Revd Mark Hutchinson, Vicar of St Peter, Wenhaston loaned copies of the booklets by the Revd J.B. Clare and Janet Becker.

## NOTES

- 1 John Townysend's will is in S.R.O.I., 1C/AA2/3.f.84. The structure of the rood screen at St Peter is likely to have been similar to that of screens elsewhere in Suffolk, like those at Southwold and Bramfield. The rood loft was formed with floor joists supported on the head of the screen and a beam. Parapets ran the length of the loft, each topped by a beam. That on the nave side in East Anglia was known as the candlebeam, elsewhere as the rood beam.
- 2 Medieval wall and panel paintings did not always remain unaltered. The Penn Doom is in fact two paintings, one on top of the other, dating from 1400 and 1500 respectively (Rouse 1962, 97). The Salisbury Doom was repainted in oils after its uncovering and removal of whitewash in 1881, and there are numerous other examples (Edwards 1989, 469).
- 3 A devil with additional faces on belly and knees is seen in St Cuthbert's window, York Minster dated c. 1430 (Crewe 1987, 58, fig. 42).
- 4 I am grateful to Mr David O'Connor for providing this translation.
- 5 At Tivetshall (Norfolk) on the tympanum of St Margaret's church is an identical text in association with the arms of Elizabeth I and the inscription 'God save our Quene'. Like the text in Wenhaston, the first part seems to have been written in differently coloured paint (Phillips 1973, fig. 28). The text is taken directly from Romans xiii, 1 and 2 in the Geneva Bible published in 1560 (C.C.C. Wenhaston file; letter from Janet Becker).
- 6 The attempts to preserve the Elizabethan text by waxing had been made by Janet Becker. She seems to have been active in the care of Suffolk churches from the 1930s to the early 1960s. The waxing revealed the latter half of the sentence 'Hys name hyght Jo. . . App . . .'. The findings were confirmed by infra-red photography (C.C.C. Wenhaston file).
- 7 A reproduction of the Stanningfield Doom is in the Panel Painting Archives at the Courtauld Institute, London.
- 8 Reproductions of The Annunciation by Jan van Eyck, completed 1420-1432, and the Last Judgement altarpiece of Roger van der Weyden c. 1451 appear in Panofsky 1971, II, figs. 253 and 326 respectively). Memlinc's Last Judgement triptych was completed about 1473 and is in the Marienkirche, Danzig.
- 9 I am grateful to Dr Aileen Ribeiro, head of the History of Dress Department, Courtauld Institute of Art, London and to Ms Jennifer Harris, the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, for their comments on and assistance in dating the dress of the Virgin Mary, and the hairstyles of the male figures.
- 10 People from the Low Countries had been active in East Anglia since the arrival of Flemish weavers in the mid-14th century and continued to make a contribution to both the economy and the cultural life of the area. 'Gyls the dewchewan' was master of Robert Godyng's boat at Walberswick (Walberswick churchwardens' accounts; Lewis 1947, 241). The most direct Flemish influence is seen in the Norfolk screen paintings.
- 11 The sermons could be most vivid, such as that of Richard Alkerton, preaching at St Mary Spital, London in 1406:

And sodeinly thei shul be cast down into helle with the devil and his aungelis and the gates of helle schul be schut for evermore that thei go nevere out. And ther thei schul [be] bulyd in fyr and brymstone withouten ende. Venomous worms and naddris schul gnawe alle here membris withouten seessyng, and the worm of conscience . . . shall gnawe the soule . . . (Owst 1966, 522).

Last Judgement depictions were executed in many media. The frieze on the west front of Lincoln Cathedral and the stained glass in the church of St Mary, Fairford (Glos.) are two examples.

- 12 Matthew 12, 40.
- 13 At the chapel of the Guild of the Holy Cross, Stratford-upon-Avon (Warwickshire), the figures destined for Hell carry scrolls inscribed with the names of the Seven Deadly Sins. In the Dooms at St Michael's in St Albans (Herts.); Brooke (Norfolk); Coughton (Northants.); and the west window of St Mary's, Fairford (Glos.), a female figure with an ale-can is carried into Hell on the shoulders of a devil. At Bacton (Suff.), a female figure waving an ale-can whilst pulling down her dress is wheeled into Hell in a wheelbarrow by a devil.
- 14 Vermilion was introduced into rural painting towards the end of the 14th century (Ashby 1980, 114). It was an expensive paint, as were mixed colours, like orange and pink and *terre verte*, all of which were used extensively in the Wenhaston painting.
- 15 In 1496 the Walberswick churchwardens' accounts record the receipt of 10s. from 'a gatheryng in the town of the wyvyns for a glas wyndown' (Lewis 1947, 256).

- 16 Walberswick churchwardens' accounts record payment 'for bred and drynk quen Wenhaston (Wenhaston) game was schowyd here iijd' (Lewis 1947, 68).
- 17 Wenhaston churchwardens' accounts record in 1643 that 5s. was 'Layde out to the men wch cam to breake downe pictures in the glasse windowes'. (Becker 1923). This coincided with Dowsing's iconoclastic activities in Suffolk.
- 18 It was in support of these fund-raising activities that the Revd J.B. Clare published his booklets on Wenhaston and Bulcamp. *The Times*, Saturday 17 Nov. 1894 printed an extract from the booklet and with it an appeal for donations for church restorations.

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*Abbreviations*

- C.C.C. Council for the Care of Churches.  
 S.R.O.I. Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich Branch.