

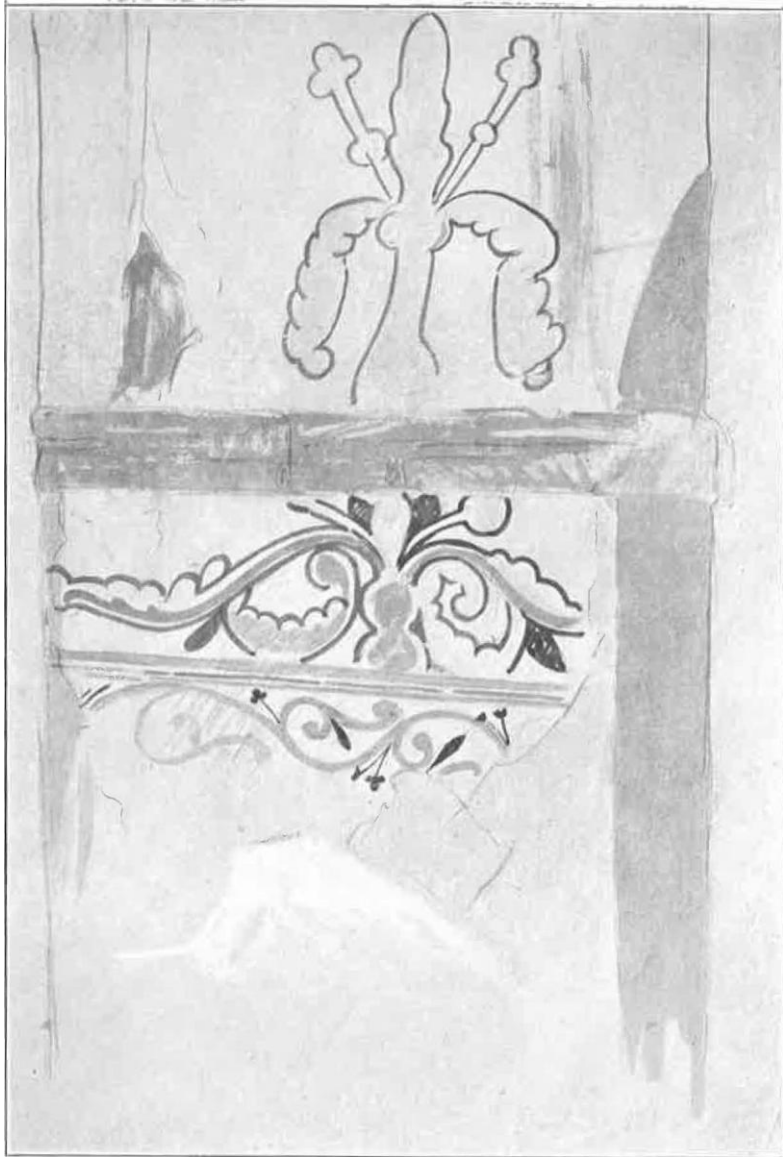
LITTLE MISSENDEN WALL PAINTINGS

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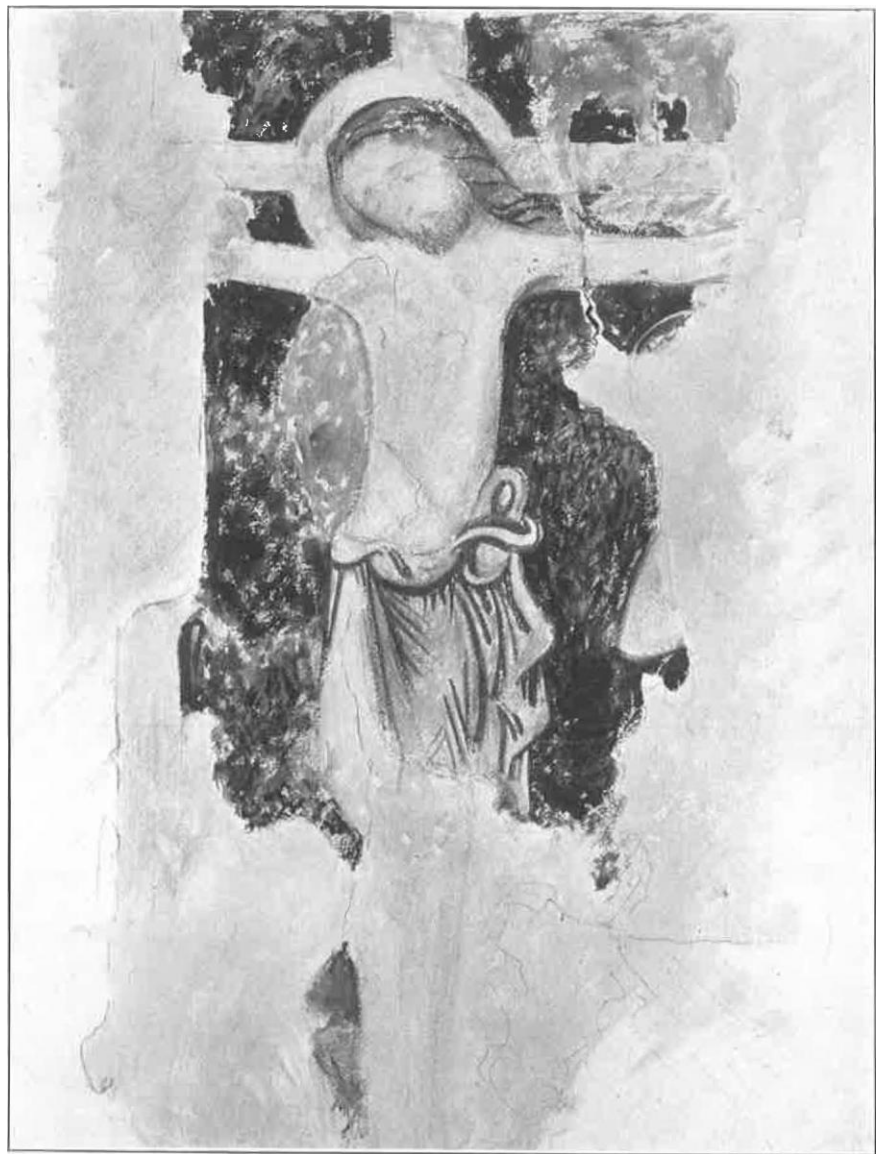
In the early part of 1931 traces of wall painting were discovered in the church of Little Missenden by the Vicar, the Rev. H. W. Davis.

During the cleaning of the walls traces of painting were found on the north wall of the nave, around a large board recording Charities, opposite the doorway in the south aisle. On the removal of this board there were indications that a figure of St. Christopher was concealed by lime-wash. I was called in to complete the exposing of this subject, to preserve it, and to make further explorations. The work was carried out with the valuable practical assistance of Mr. Davis, and an interesting series of subjects revealed. As the search proceeded it became apparent that a rough attempt had been made previously to expose the paintings. In large areas the lime-wash covering the walls had been removed, and with it much of the painting, hence the mutilated condition of some of the subjects as they now appear. Subsequently the walls had been lime-washed over again. In all probability this was done within the last sixty years.

In the nave were discovered remains of more than one scheme of painting. The first appears to have been executed C. 1200, or early in the thirteenth century; a dado band of running foliated scroll ornament in yellow ochre, with buds and trefoils in red springing from the joints, evidently encircled the walls about five feet from the floor level. Remaining portions occur principally on the north wall at the feet of the figure of St. Christopher; on the chancel arch,



Dado band and ornament on chancel arch
C. 1200



Crucifixion on E. side of W. arch of N. arcade
C. 1250

where it is surmounted by a pattern consisting of large leaves and buds, also in red and in yellow ochre; and at the west end of the south wall, where the scroll is in black and slightly different in character.

The south wall, it was found, had been treated mercilessly at the previous uncovering, and slight indications only of two or three schemes of different dates could be found. These traces showed that there was once here a band of subjects displayed in the bays of a painted arcade having semi-circular arches adorned with a wavy ornament, and with large cinquefoils in the spandrels between the arches. One subject, of which scarcely anything remained, in the general disposition of the figures suggested the Betrayal, with St. Peter cutting off the ear of Malchus. At West Chiltington, in Surrey, there is a contemporary rendering of the same subject in an arcade of a similar nature. In the spandrel between the arches below this subject there is a small head of a soldier in a reclining attitude, in all probability belonging to a Resurrection. Slight though the evidence is, it may be inferred that the remains are part of a Passion cycle executed in the early part of the thirteenth century, or C. 1250. On the soffit of the westernmost arch of the arcade in the north side were found a fragment of an Annunciation on the western side, and a larger fragment of a Crucifixion on the eastern side. The figure of Christ, in pale pink loin cloth, with boldly drawn folds in red, is strongly silhouetted on a dark red ground. On the left is a fragment of the mantle of a figure of the Virgin, and on the right is part of the arm and nimbus of a figure of St. John. These paintings appear to have been executed C. 1250, at the same time as the work on the south wall, and traces of contemporary colour in the other arches support the theory that the nave was decorated with a full scheme of painting at this date.

About the year 1300 a series comprising the figure of St. Christopher, mentioned above, and a Life of St. Catherine of Alexandria, were added on the north wall. Whether they replaced earlier paintings in the same position it was found impossible to determine, as no trace of earlier work appeared. The figure of St. Christopher, not having been exposed previously, is in a good state of preservation. Of gigantic stature, the saint is clad in a pale cream tunic reaching halfway down his legs, which are otherwise bare, and a pale purple pink mantle lined with vair and edged with black. The mantle, drawn up over his left arm, falls in intricate folds. The saint is depicted with yellow hair and beard lined in red, and bears an orange-red nimbus. He stands upright regarding the Divine Child, who sits clasped in the crook of his left arm. The Child, a diminutive figure clothed in an orange-red tunic, bears a pale pink nimbus bordered with double lines in red. He blesses with the right hand and carries in the left the orb of the universe. St. Christopher stands in water heaped up around his feet and legs, and containing fishes amongst which an eel and pike are recognisable.

The painting is of great interest as it is almost complete, a state that is generally but too rare in representations of this saint. These are almost invariably on so large a scale that, inevitably, parts have been damaged. Moreover, paintings of St. Christopher are by no means common at the period, for it was not until the fifteenth century that the cult of St. Christopher attained the apex of its popularity.

The subjects relating to the life of St. Catherine are painted in a row of six rectangular compartments on the wall to the east of the St. Christopher and in the spandrels of the arches beneath. They begin in the first compartment at the west and are as follows:—



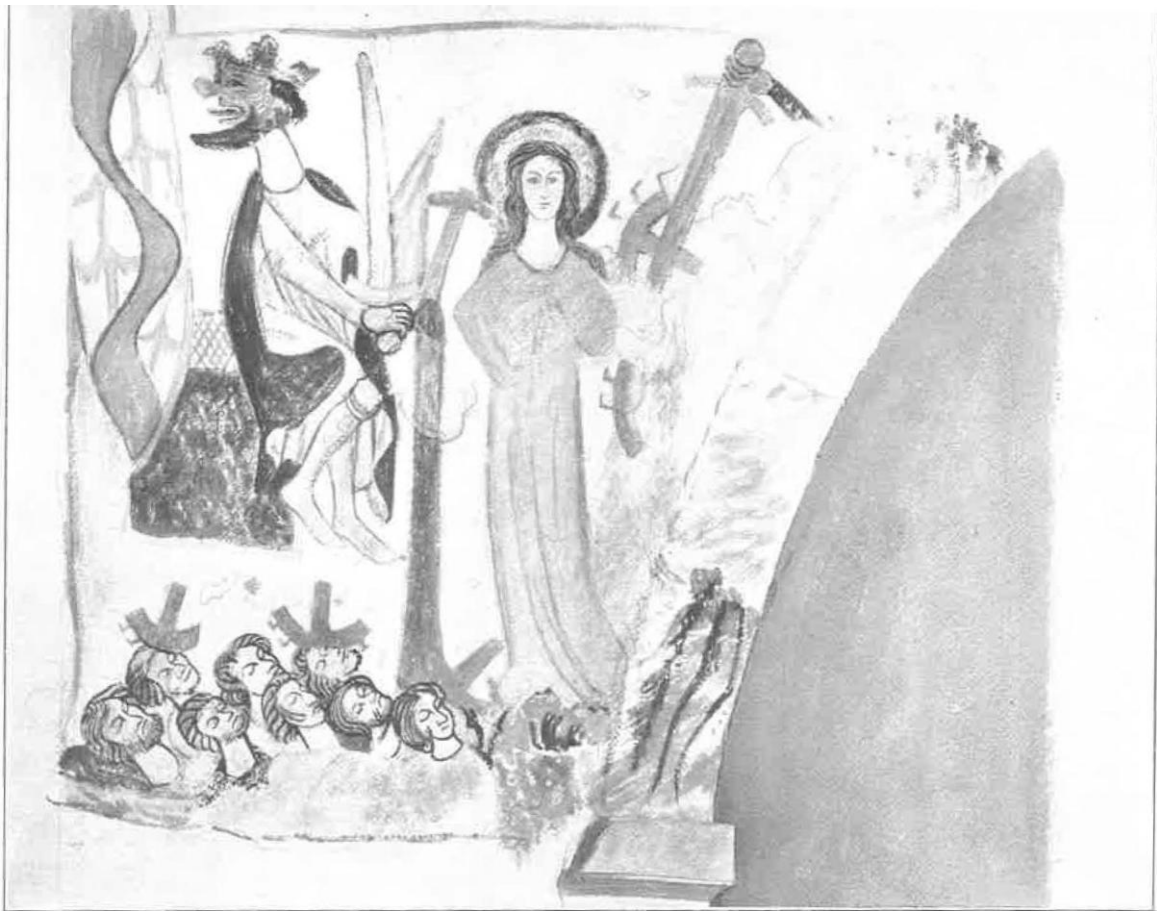
St. Christopher: on N. wall of nave
C. 1300
with earlier dado band at base



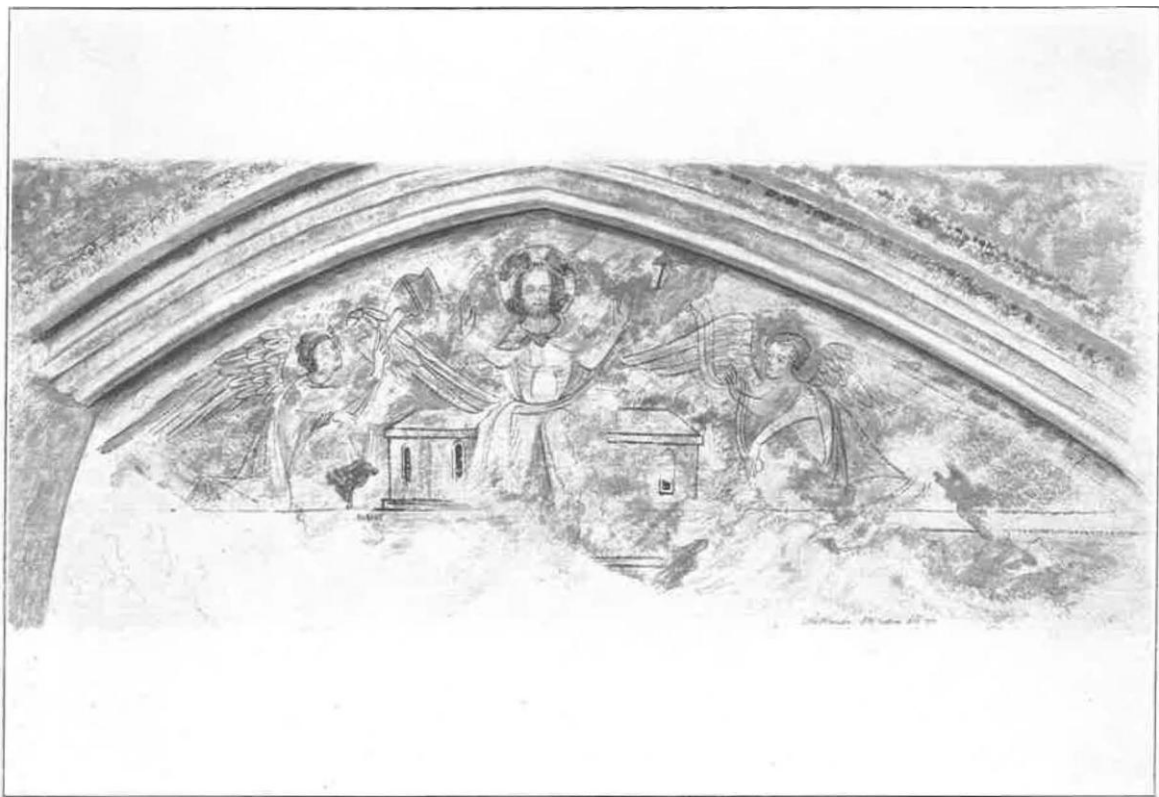
*S*t. Catherine before the Emperor Maxentius with the Philosophers: on N. wall of nave
C. 1300

1. St. Catherine before the Emperor Maxentius. The Emperor, crowned, is seated on a red throne, having a cushion covered with a fret pattern, also in red. He is clad in a cream tunic and a pale pink mantle lined with vair. He has yellow hair and beard. Facing east, his arms are raised in vigorous action and his lips parted as though in heated discussion. On the right stands St. Catherine, a dignified reposeful figure, crowned and veiled, bearing a red nimbus, and clad in a long red tunic and white mantle. The arms and hands are missing.
2. St. Catherine and the philosophers before the Emperor Maxentius. The Emperor is depicted as in the last subject, except that he wears gloves, carries a sword in his left hand, and raises his right hand as though in judgment. St. Catherine stands in front of him, also depicted as in the last subject, but facing frontally and with both hands and arms raised as though expostulating. Supporting her on the right are five figures of philosophers, clad in red and white tunics, all tonsured, and one bearded. Their gestures suggest approval of the saint's action.
3. The scourging of St. Catherine. Slight traces of torturers wielding whips are all that remains of the subject, but they suffice to place its identification beyond question.
4. 5 and 6 are too indistinct for identification.
5. In all probability the subjects were:—St. Catherine being sent to prison; visited by the Empress in prison; and again before the Emperor. This terminates the series of rectangular panels.

7. The breaking of the wheel. This subject, which is comparatively well preserved, lies between the lower part of the figure of St. Christopher and the middle arch of the arcade. In the centre of this space stands St. Catherine, uncrowned, her hair falling on her shoulders, her hands clasped before her. She is clad in a long pink tunic, but has no mantle, and she bears a nimbus with a deep red border. At the left of her figure is the upright shaft that supported the wheel, one spoke and part of the rim of which alone are attached to it. The remaining fragments are scattered about the composition. An arm, with the hand holding a sword, is on the right, and is part of the figure of the destroying angel. The Emperor appears as in the other subjects, crowned, seated on a throne and carrying a sword. The painter has portrayed him with a malicious cast of countenance, long nose and protruding tongue, his head turned away in rage and mortification at the destruction of the instrument of torture. At the base of the painting are the heads and shoulders of dead spectators, some men and some women, who have been struck by flying portions of the broken wheel, on the rim of which appear vicious looking hooks. On the right is the fragmentary figure of one of the slain tormentors.
8. The Martyrdom. This subject, lying between the second and third arches, is indistinct. Slight traces of the figure of St. Catherine are visible, with one of the headsmen. The hand of God emerges from above.
9. The Burial on Mount Sinai. Still less remains of this subject, a few horizontal lines of the bier alone being visible.



St. Catherine, subject no. 7
the breaking of the wheel; on N. wall of nave
C. 1300



Christ in Judgment: in tomb recess of N. chapel

Late 14th century

These paintings provide still further evidence of the popularity of this saint, who is so frequently represented in wall paintings from the twelfth to the end of the fifteenth century. Some seven miles off in the Church of Little Kimble there may also have been a Life of St. Catherine of slightly later date. One subject, the Burial on Mount Sinai, is still clearly recognisable.

On the east wall of the nave above the chancel arch were found traces of a Last Judgment of somewhat later date, C. 1400. There are slight indications of the figure of Christ in the centre, with an angel on His right; of two figures on the north, one bearing a nimbus bordered with a pattern of half-circles; and, on the south, of some small figures in the jaws of Hell.

In the chapel on the north side of the chancel remains were found on the north and west walls of a scheme of painting executed in the second half of the thirteenth century. On the north wall there is part of a dado-band of zig-zag ornament, with fragments of painted drapery below and remains of what were probably Infancy subjects above. One of these, the Angel appearing to the Shepherds, is clear enough to be identified. Part of the tall figure of an Angel bearing a scroll may be seen, a dog, and small figures, which I take to be the Shepherds' boys, as the Shepherds themselves undoubtedly would have been larger. The contour of the arch in the western wall is defined with a band of red ochre three-quarters-of-an-inch wide, and the wall around the arch is covered with a scroll pattern with large five-petalled roses.

At Sarratt, in Hertfordshire, a few miles away, there is a series of Infancy subjects on the east wall of the south aisle, executed at about the same period as those mentioned above.

At the back of an arched tomb recess at the west end of the north wall was found a painting which appears to have been executed late in the fourteenth century. The subject is Christ in Judgment, with censuring angels. In the centre a figure of Christ is seated on a wide throne, the front of which is adorned with representations of narrow round-headed windows, in black on a white ground. He bears a scarlet nimbus with a white cross, and is clad in a red mantle fastened at the neck with a red morse. His hands are raised displaying the wounds, and the mantle is arranged so as to show the wound in His side. On each side of Him is an angel with outspread wings, genuflecting and swinging a censer. They are clad in alb and orange-pink mantle. The background is greenish-blue. The subject is terminated at the base by a horizontal band, below which there are traces of colour. There is not sufficient evidence to indicate the original nature of this part of the work. It was probably heraldic, in conformity with the custom of tomb painting of the period. The mouldings of the arch are picked out in yellow and red ochre.

This completes an account of the pre-Reformation wall paintings which were found. A large number of interesting seventeenth and eighteenth century texts were revealed on the walls, and also a royal coat of arms of about 1600 above the chancel arch.