

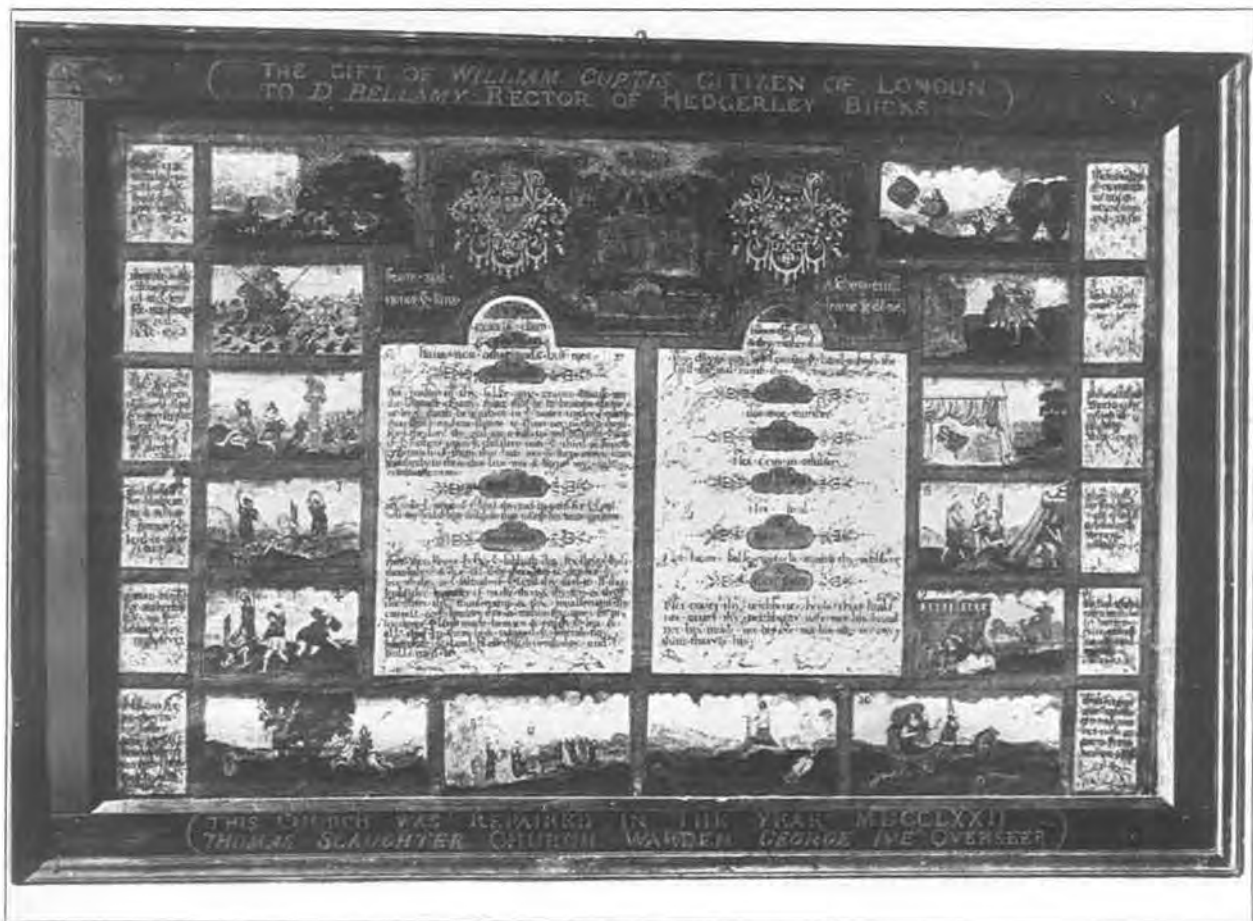
A 17TH CENTURY PAINTING IN HEDGERLEY CHURCH

By CLIVE ROUSE

The Church of St. Mary at Hedgerley, described as an independent Chapel from 1290, as far back as records of it can be traced,¹ has been twice re-built, no doubt owing to the fact that the hillside on which it stands is of clay, and full of springs, causing settlement of the fabric. The present building dates from 1851, but retains a number of fittings from the older churches (See *Commission on Historical Monuments, Bucks.*, vol. I, p. 192). Among them is an unusual oil painting, formerly hanging in the Vestry, and now on the north wall of the tower. Its frame bears an inscription stating that the picture was "the gift of William Curtis, Citizen of London, to D. Bellamy, Rector of Hedgerley, Bucks.;" and also that "this Church was repaired in the year MDCCLXXII" (1772), Thomas Slaughter being Church-warden, and George Ive overseer at the time. It is listed by the Commission; but beyond the fact that it was a table of the Commandments surrounded by numerous small scenes "probably 17th century," very little could be made of it owing to its dirty condition, and the accumulation of layers of opaque decayed varnish. The Rector, the Rev. F. Urch, asked me to undertake the work of cleaning and preserving this painting; and the results seem worth recording.

The work is executed in oil on canvas and measures 5 feet 4½ inches by 3 feet 4½ inches; 6 feet 2 inches by 4 feet 2 inches with the frame. It is a table of the Commandments surrounded by Biblical scenes depicting the fate of those who broke them, four scenes from the life of Moses allied to the Commandments theme, and several other texts and symbols.

¹ *Victoria County Histy.* I., 287, quoting Lincoln Episcopal Register Rolls of Gravesend A° 7.



HEDGERLEY CHURCH
 Painting of the Commandments dated 1864.
 (Photograph, D. C. Sutherland)

In the course of cleaning, it became apparent that the frame was not of 1772, but was actually contemporary with the painting itself, and had been painted black and varnished to receive the inscription quoted above. This inscription was naturally retained, as it is in itself of interest; but the other parts of the frame were cleaned, revealing cherubs' heads with wings, in the corners, and other typical late 17th century decoration or ornament in the centre of each side. This had been in gold, black and brown.

The picture itself is arranged with the actual wording of the Commandments, Exodus XX, in two tables in the centre, each number and heading having delicate embellishments at the side of a small gold panel, the latter having been painted over at some time in a dull brown colour. The background is veined in pink and light red on a cream ground to represent marble; and an amusing personal touch was revealed during the cleaning of this portion of the picture. The artist evidently got tired of his aimless veining and marbling, and introduced a small head in outline, in the manner of a "puzzle picture"—possibly a caricature of himself. This is to be found at the left-hand side of the right panel.

At the top is the Hebrew symbol of Jehovah, in a rayed sun in gold with black outline, and below it is an open book, also in gold and black, with the shortened form of the Commandments on its pages ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," . . . etc.): and below again, a small panel with a rather unusual text, Proverbs 13, 13, "Whoso despiseth the Word shall be destroyed; but he that feareth the Commandment shall be rewarded." On each side of this is a crown surmounting a small heart-shaped cartouche, surrounded by elaborate festoon work in cream colour. All this is set off by a rich yellow-red background. These little cartouches had originally been gold, but each had been over-painted in dull brown, as had all the gold portions of the picture—probably done in 1772 to cover up the parts where the original 17th century gold had

perished, in order to furbish it up for the gift to the Rev. D. Bellamy! It was suspected that these cartouches might contain initials or a date; consequently, the later paint was removed, and the numbers 16 in black were revealed on one side, and 64 on the other—1664. This is extremely interesting, as an additional text, "Feare God, Honour ye King," appears on the red background immediately below, and shows the popular influence of the recent Restoration of the Monarchy, in the person of Charles II only four years previously in 1660, still prevalent.

To left and right at the top are respectively the scene of Moses and the burning bush ("Moses commanded to pull of his shoes for ye place was holy, Exodus 3, 2)," and Moses receiving the Commandments in Mount Sinai. In the former scene, the fire is vigorously represented with flames of red and gold, while lambs gambol in the foreground. In the latter are charming groups of Israelites and their tents in the Wilderness. At the bottom are two other scenes connected with the life of Moses, but not described in the margin as the others are. They represent Moses striking water from the rock at Meribah (Numbers 20, 8), and Moses taken by God into Mount Nebo, Pisgah, and shown the Promised Land, but dying before he gets there (Deuteronomy 34, 4-5). It is amusing to see the naïve way in which the artist overcame the difficulty of representing this last scene by simply putting the figure of Moses twice in the same picture, once on the mountain top, and lying on the ground at the foot!

Finally, there comes a series of ten little scenes, each having a Bible reference and description in black on a marble panel in the margin, showing the fate of various characters who broke respective Commandments. They are as follows:—

1. "Pharaoh and his chariots drowned in ye sea for not knowing God. Exodus 5, 2." A charming scene, this, with conventional waves, and the King throwing up his hands in despair, riding in a gorgeous chariot drawn by two horses.



Top, Moses and the Burning Bush, and illustrations of the fate of those who broke Commandments 1 to 5.

HEDGERLEY PAINTING



Top, Moses receiving the Tables of the Law on Sinai; below, examples of transgressing Commandments, 6-10

2. "Three thousand of ye children of Israel slain for worshipping ye golden calfe in ye wilderness. Exodus 32, 27." The original gold of the calf and its pillar have been restored by removing the overlying paint.

3. "One stoned for blaspheming and taking ye name of ye Lord in uaine. Leuit. 24, 14."

4. "A man stoned for gathering stiks on ye Sabbath day. Numbers 15, 32." This is another case where the two parts of the story are treated in one scene: the man is seen gathering his sticks on one side of the picture; while on the other he is tied to a stake and being stoned.

5. "Absalom for not obeying his father hung by ye head and thrust through ye body by Ahab. 2 Samuel, 18, 9." An ambitious scene, this, and quite successful. The oak tree is well painted. Absalom's horse with golden saddle-cloth, is running away, while Ahab approaches on a white charger.

6. "Joab killeth Amasa. 2 Samuel, 20, 9." The feature of this scene is the wonderful golden building on the left.

7. "Phineas killeth Zimri and Cozby in ye act of adultery. Numbers 25, 8." The tent and surrounding landscape are charmingly rendered.

8. "Achan stoned for stealing ye wedg of gold and Babylonish garment. Joshua 7, 25." Again the cause and effect are shown in one scene. Achan, being seen in the act of hiding the gold under the floor of his tent on the right, and being stoned on the left.

9. "Wicked Iesabel eaten with dogs for bearing false witness against good Naboth. I. Kings, 21, 9." The wall of Jezreel is elaborately shown; but one would not care to specify the breed of dog seen in the act of devouring Jezebel!

10. "Ahab for coueting Naboth's uineyard was shot with an arrow from Heauen. I. Kings 21, 4." Some delightful dogs are seen running by the chariot in order to fulfil the prophesy of Ahab's blood being licked by dogs.

Each panel is outlined in red and black, possibly a later over-painting and separated by styles that were originally gold, but were painted over with brown in the 18th century as described, probably to save the expense of re-gilding. A certain amount of the later paint has been removed to show the original arrangement. The work is crude in drawing, but is characterised by a straightforward sense of realism, and a naïveté that is quite charming. The general sense of design and colour, and the handling of paint, especially in the clouds and trees, is admirable. There is a wide range of colour: blue is only sparingly used, but is good when it appears. Green is not very prominent, but in several of the scenes there is quite a lot on close inspection. The drawing of the trees is an interesting development of the crude style found in the wall paintings at Amersham, about 60 years earlier, but has not yet reached the excellence of the late 17th century panel paintings at the Manor Farm, Hughenden. The lettering is poor, much of it being in a kind of mongrel black letter—a curious survival.

Seventeenth century texts on the walls of Churches, replacing the mediæval wall-paintings in most instances, are common; and the development and elaboration of their frames make an interesting study. The Commandments, Lord's Prayer and Creed are, of course, the favourite—one might almost say universal, texts. (See the Chancel arch at Chalfont St. Giles). But such an elaborate pictorial treatment of the Commandments theme, and in the unusual medium of oil on canvas is quite a rarity, and worthy of a detailed record.