

WALL PAINTINGS IN RADNAGE CHURCH, BUCKS.

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It is as long ago as 1936 since Professor Tristram and I were engaged on the investigation and uncovering of wall paintings in Radnage Church, and I find that no adequate record of what was then found has been published.

Work was done under considerable difficulties owing to the remoteness of the church, lack of funds, and the poor condition of the plaster and its general dampness. Results were not all that might have been expected; but sufficient was found to make a valuable addition to the mural paintings of Buckinghamshire, and these should certainly be recorded.

The Historical Monuments Commission mention certain vestiges of paintings visible in 1912¹: subsequently, the Rector, the Rev. B. J. Corder, uncovered further work, and this was described and illustrated in the Society's Journal in 1935.² After the investigations of Professor Tristram and myself in 1936, a short article on the main discoveries appeared in *The Times*³; and the present account amplifies and supplements all these.

The chancel, central tower, and part of the nave at Radnage were built about 1200, and some remains of the very simple decorative scheme of this period were found in the tower. The wall surfaces appear to have been covered with a simple masonry pattern of single lines in red ochre on a cream plaster ground. This seems to have been varied on the inner (west) face of the east wall above the arch, where remains of an elaborate decoration in purplish-red with pinkish-grey filling were found. The design consists of wide, stiff stems and large round-lobed leaves, but is only a little more than a foot square. (Plate 10*b*.)

The deep window-splays at the first stage of the tower retained their original decoration in a fairly complete state. That on the north had a deep border of yellow with double masonry lines in red just inside the arch, followed by a band of chevron or zigzag ornament in red and pink on white following the line of the arch; and, at the shoulder or spring, running horizontally across the splay of the window (Plate 12). The remainder of the splay is filled with graduated single masonry lines in red. The south window (more fragmentary) has a similar arrangement, except that the ornamental inner band consists of a wavy line of white on a deep red ground instead of the chevron motif (Plate 13). These window-treatments may be compared with one at Great Canfield, Essex.⁴

On the ground-floor stage, on the more easterly part of the north and south walls, were found two unusually large consecration crosses, the circles, and segments for the curved arms, being scratched in the plaster by compass point. It is uncertain whether these are part of the original scheme or from the later decoration of the chancel. They have the usual red filling, and are surrounded by the single-line masonry pattern.

Two different schemes of masonry pattern are found in the chancel—one with single masonry lines, and one with single horizontal but double-line vertical joints in a deep purple-red, and a narrow wavy border in pink and white fairly high up, about 11 feet from the floor (Plates 10*a* and *c*). It will be recalled that almost the whole of the chancel at Haddenham is decorated in a similar simple scheme of masonry lines with a little scrollwork, of thirteenth-century date.

The most important painting is found on the splays of the three eastern lancets, where there is a good series of figures of probably the second quarter of the thirteenth century, which seem to belong to a secondary scheme of decoration undertaken perhaps thirty or forty years after the original masonry lining.

On the splays of the centre light is shown the Annunciation, with the Virgin on the north side and the angel on the south, both standing under rather flat-arched trefoiled canopies. Below them is a spirited running foliated scroll in red, black, and white on a pink ground, which was also carried over the sill of the window. At the apex is a Majesty, with angels swinging censers on each side, the whole on a rich red background, and having some blue colour as well—a rarity in this area.

There is a figure on each splay of the north light; but the defacement in the sixteenth century was vigorously carried out, and cow-dung was mixed with the lime-wash, which has destroyed much of the detail and somewhat discoloured the pigments. The figures are without haloes, 3 feet to 3 feet 6 inches in height, and one appears to be wearing a hat. On the whole, the evidence suggests that these may be Old Testament prophets—Moses, Aaron, or Elijah could stand for the Old Dispensation. It is not unusual for Prophets and Apostles to be shown in pairs in MSS., usually holding scrolls with sentences from the Creed and Old Testament prophecies, as in Brit. Mus. Royal MS. 2B VII (Queen Mary's Psalter), and Brit. Mus. MS. Arundel 83 (the Psalter of Robert de Lisle). Only the north splay of the south lancet retains painting, the other side having been destroyed during the under-pinning and rebuilding of this south-east corner of the chancel many years ago. The figure is tinsured and has a halo, and may represent St. Peter. All the figures are vigorously and competently drawn, and there is still a sense of fine design and rich colour. Work of this period is rare in Buckinghamshire, and these survivals are all the more important.

The nave presents a remarkable assortment of painting from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth; but owing to the poor quality of the plaster and the damp and porous condition of the rubble walls, very little remains at all intact, and the whole is something of a patchwork.

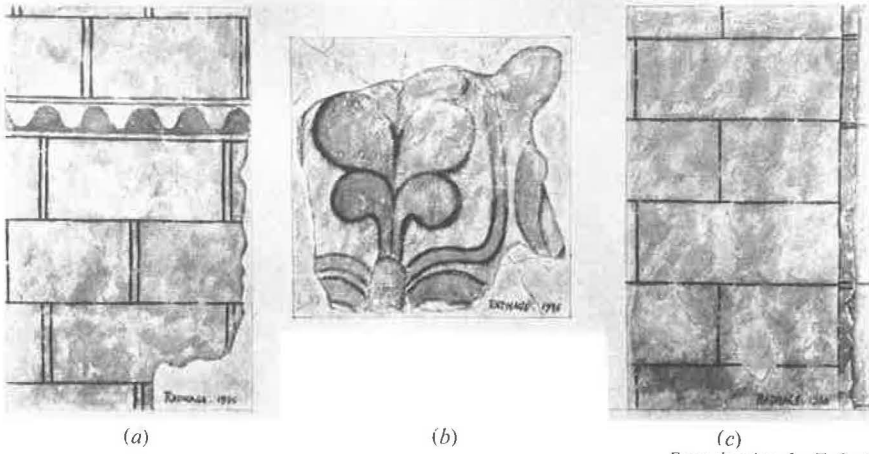
It was expected that there would be some remains of a Doom over the chancel arch; but in fact no figure-painting was found in this position, the decoration once again being of the most severely simple character. The single-line masonry pattern covers the background, but has sexfoil flowers in pink in one of the lower rows. The arch is outlined by a running scroll of uncommon detail; and at the apex is a tree composed of scroll foliage in a deep red with touches of brown (Plate 11). It is possible that this is purely ornamental; but remembering its isolation and prominent position, and the generally didactic purpose of medieval church painting and the prevalence of all kinds of symbolism, it seems likely that this ornament may well represent the Tree of Life, or, since it has seven main stems, the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The dating of this tree and scroll presents some difficulties. It appears to be of the thirteenth

century in general; but there are some features which suggest a repainting or modification in the fourteenth century, especially in the case of the scroll. The tree is extremely similar to one of the trees in the *Psychomachia* series at Claverley, Shropshire, attributed to about 1200.⁵ This painting was largely obscured by a post-Reformation text—the Commandments (see Text No. 16, *post*)—part of which has been preserved. The uncovering also revealed, on the south side of the wall, the original entrance from the Tower on to the rood loft, in a similar position to that in which an opening was found in the East wall of the nave at Little Missenden.

As has been said, the poor and patchy condition of the plaster in the nave has rendered the survival of medieval painting in any state of completeness almost out of the question. Some remains were, however, found, the most important of which is the fragment of the upper part of a St. Christopher on the north wall. This has been terribly mutilated, and was covered in places by hair-plaster half an inch thick. Only the Christ Child, blessing with the right hand, orb in the left, the head of the Saint, and the top of his flowering staff remain. The Child was on the Saint's right shoulder, the staff held in the Saint's left hand, wide of the figure (Fig. 1).



FIG. 1. RADNAGE, BUCKS. St. Christopher on North wall of nave, 15th century



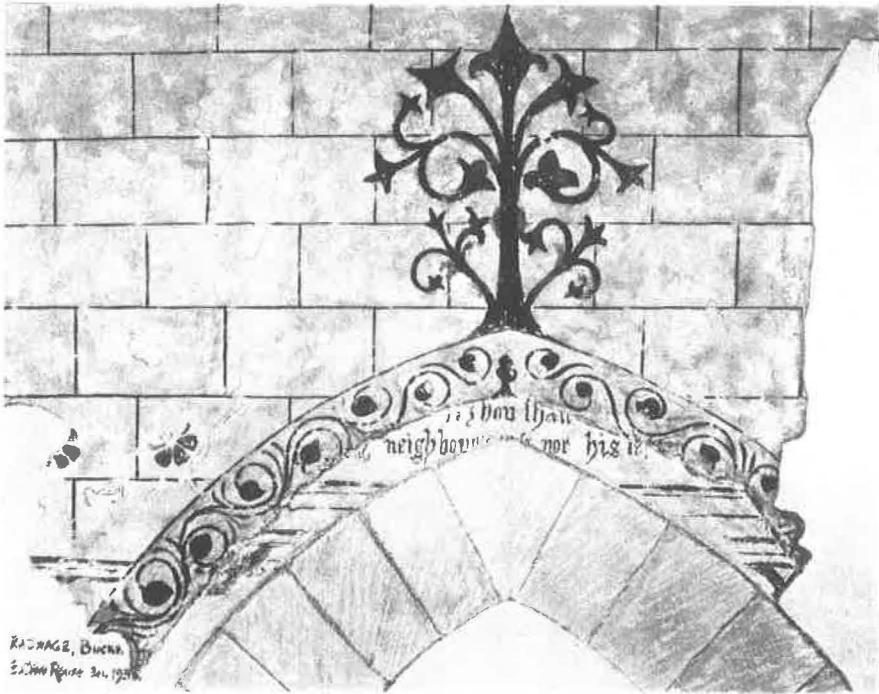
(a)

(b)

(c)

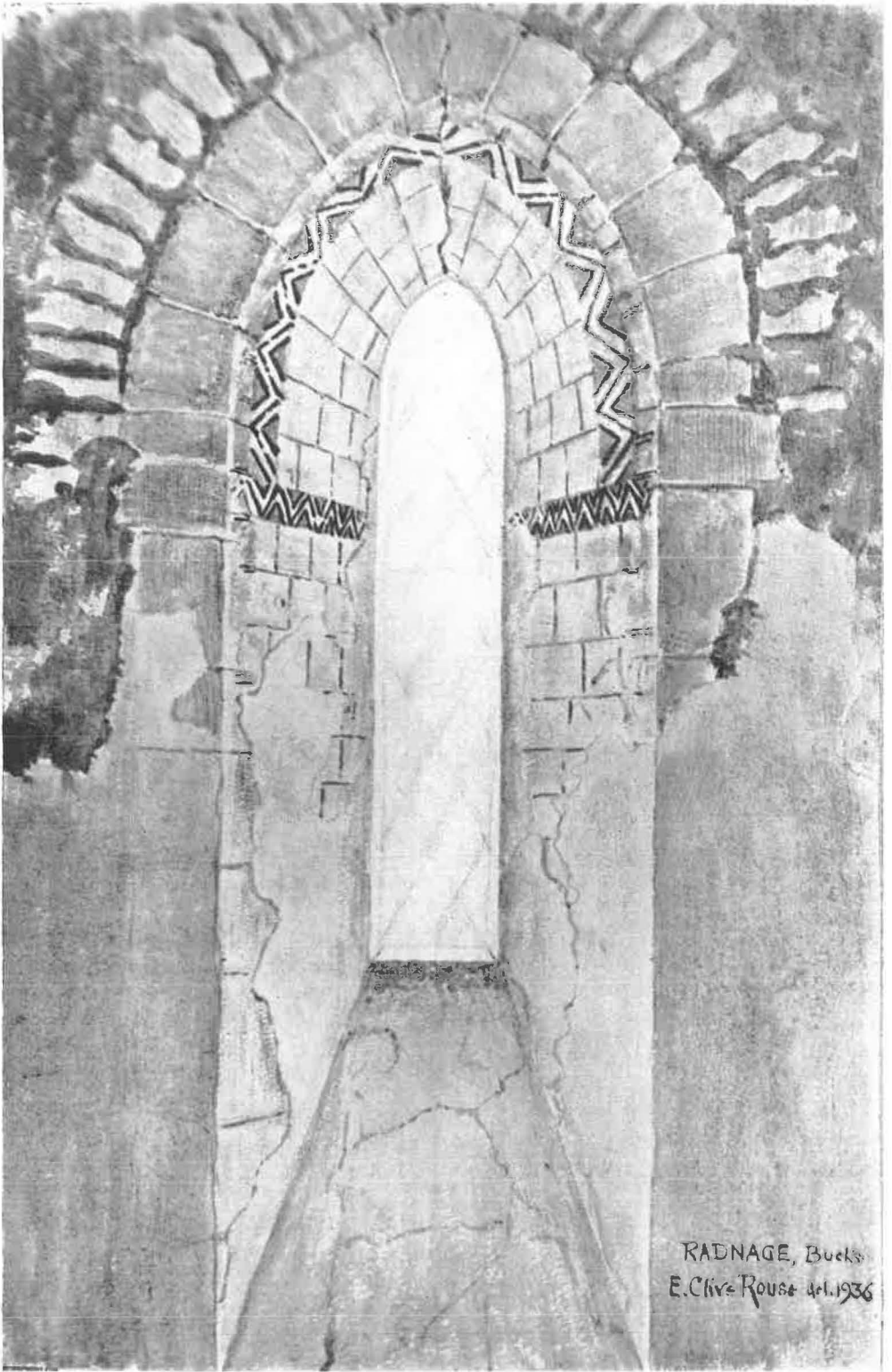
From drawings by E. C. R.

PLATE 10. RADNAGE, BUCKS. Details of masonry patterns and foliage in chancel and tower



From a drawing by E. C. R.

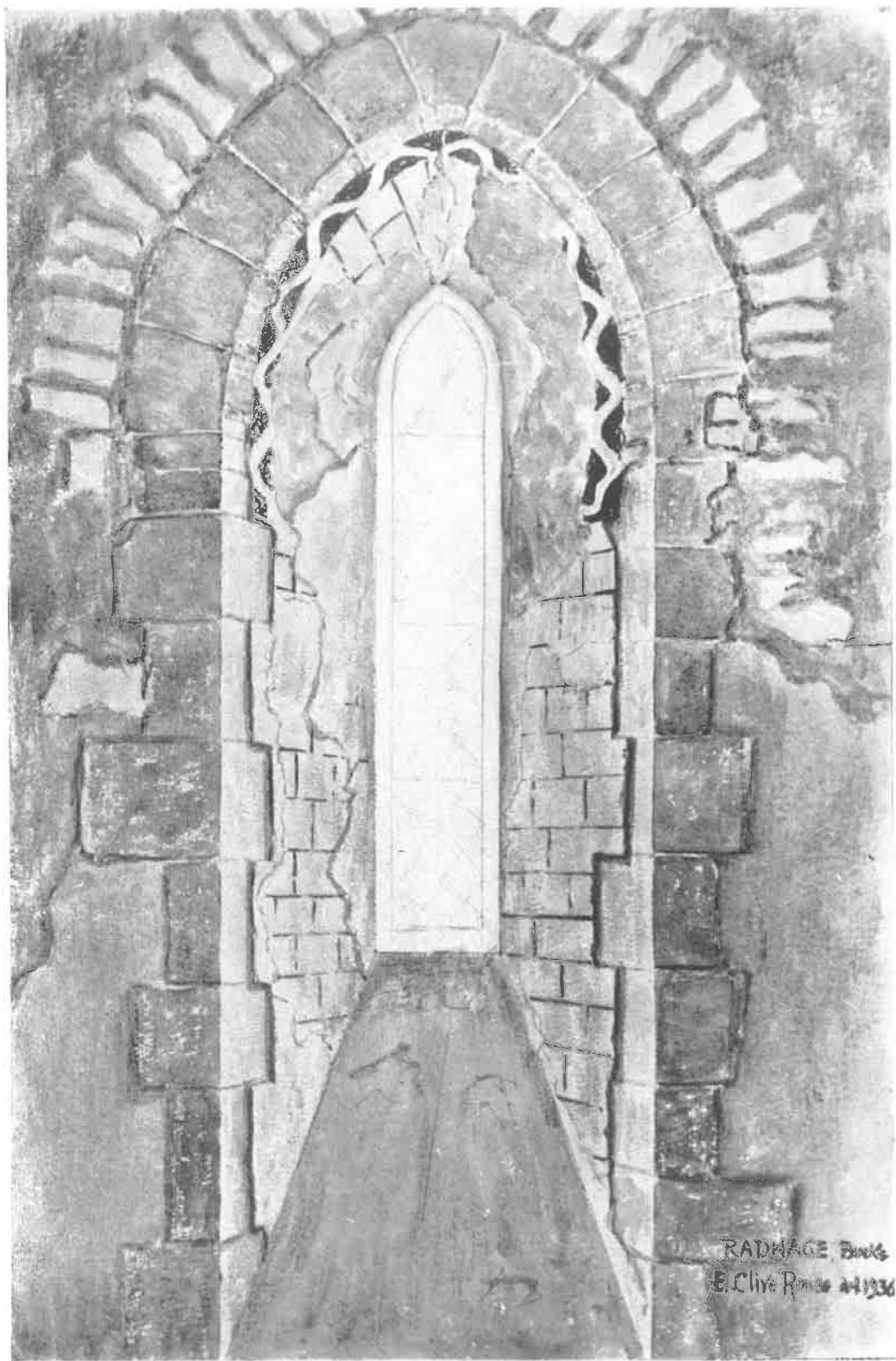
PLATE 11. RADNAGE, BUCKS. Painted decoration above the chancel arch



RADNAGE, Bucks.
E. Clive Rouse 4.1.1936

From a drawing by E. C. R.

PLATE 12. RADNAGE, BUCKS. Painted decoration of North window of tower, c. 1200



From a drawing by E. C. R.

PLATE 13. RADNAGE, BUCKS. Painted decoration of South window of tower, c. 1200

The whole is painted on an exceptionally rich purple-red background, once elaborately diapered or brocaded in black and pale mauve, which makes one regret all the more the destruction of the rest. The work is of mid or late fifteenth-century date, and is probably contemporary with the fine nave roof, since it fits exactly so as to be framed in one of the bays. This discovery brings the total of Buckinghamshire wall paintings of St. Christopher, extant or recorded, to ten. This is an increase on the six given by Whaite,⁶ and modifies the list given by Salmon,⁷ who makes a total of eleven for the county, but puts in four instead of two at Little Hampden and omits Chesham Bois, Radnage, and Little Kimble. This may be a convenient opportunity to give all the examples as known to date. Bledlow, Chesham, Chesham Bois (destroyed), Little Hampden (2), Little Horwood, Little Kimble, Little Missenden, Radnage, Winslow. To these might be added North Marston and Padbury, where indications suggest that there may be or have been paintings of St. Christopher. Both places should be investigated. The Chesham example has now almost disappeared; while Horwood, Kimble, Radnage, and one of those at Hampden are fragmentary.

The rest of the nave, as has been already stated, is a patchwork of plaster and whitewash of all dates, and provides, next to Little Missenden,⁸ the most remarkable and extensive series of post-Reformation texts and ornamental frames in Buckinghamshire.

Far too little attention has been paid to these in general, and to the whole appearance of churches in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. The Rev. G. Montagu Benton has done much work on the subject with special reference to Essex,⁹ and I have myself written something on the matter in general terms.¹⁰ At Sherrington, Wilts., in the parish church of St. Michael and All Angels, a complete scheme of post-Reformation painting was found in the aisleless nave. It was of early seventeenth-century date, and has been fully recorded by Mr. W. H. Yeatman-Biggs in the *Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, vol. L, pp. 63-5.

The visitation of Radnage in 1637 enjoins,¹¹ amongst other things, '... *the church to be new painted, and the 10 commdts. to be placed over the Commn. Table.* ...' Much of the 'wrytyng' or 'sentencing' of the church, as it was called, was probably done then; but there are many texts both before and after 1637. The list, as complete as the fragmentary condition of the paintings allows it to be, is as follows:

Nave.

1. *S. wall, E. of S. door*: In a plain frame representing moulded wood. The Creed. Eighteenth century.

2. *Above S. door*: More elaborate frame, hanging by a ribbon or bow; unidentified text in blackletter. Mid-seventeenth century.

3. *W. of S. door*: Another and earlier frame; and traces of other texts and frames.

4 and 5. *W. wall, S. side*: Very elaborate frame, with a second one beneath it, both containing blackletter texts, sixteenth or seventeenth century, but indecipherable except for the commencement of one—'O Lord . . .', possibly a Psalm.

6, 7, and 8. *W. wall, N. side*: Frames of three periods partly superimposed. One contains the text Exodus xx. 24, or part of it. ('An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.') Is this a hint to local farmers?

9. *N. wall, W. end, from W. to E.*: Traces of colour, mostly black and yellow at the top, which may be remains of medieval subjects, or connected with the frame of Nos. 11 and 12 below.

10. Framed text, Haggai i. 4 ('Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses and this house lie waste?'). This is perhaps a text put up on the 1637 instructions to 'new paint the church', which, from the indications of the decay of seats, rails, pulpit cover, etc., in the Visitation record, was evidently in a bad way. A good deal of meaning can often be discerned in the choice of texts, as in this case and in the instances below. At Little Missenden the lusty young bell-ringers were obviously aimed at in the texts placed in the tower, namely, Eccles. xi. 9, xii. 1; and Prov. xxi. 17.

11 and 12. Several texts in blackletter, possibly more than the two now identifiable, in one large area of writing. It is on the lowest level of plaster, and probably represents the original 'sentencing' of the church at the Reformation, either under the Act of 1547 (Edward VI) or 1559 (Elizabeth). The passages chosen are not without significance—1 Timothy ii. 1-5 ('I exhort therefore that first of all . . .', etc.). The references to kings and all in authority are interesting, and also the verse '. . . who will have all men to be saved and come unto a knowledge of the truth', in contrast, of course, to the 'Popish and superstitious' doctrines then superseded. This suggestion is even more marked in the other text that can be deciphered, namely, Habakkuk ii. 18-20 ('What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it: the molten image, and a teacher of lies, that the maker of his work trusteth therein to make dumb idols?' . . . etc.).

13. Very elaborate frame with strapwork and bird on a swag at the top. Blackletter text, Isaiah lv. 6 ('Seek ye the Lord while he may be found' . . . etc.). Seventeenth century.

14. *E. of N. door*: Large frame, similar to No. 1, with the Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Commandments. Eighteenth century, destroying the lower part of the fifteenth-century St. Christopher. (Indicated in Fig. 1.)

15. *E. of window*: Small framed text, very indistinct, but identified as another Lord's Prayer. Seventeenth century.

16. *E. wall, above chancel arch*: Traces of the Commandments, in large plain, lined frame. Blackletter, sixteenth or seventeenth century.

This is an altogether remarkable set; and, taken in conjunction with the medieval work, provides evidence (fragmentary though much of it is) of painting from the early thirteenth century until the eighteenth.

¹ *R.C.H.M., Bucks.*, S. vol., p. 275.

² *Records of Bucks.*, vol. XIII, pp. 143 and 144.

³ *The Times*, 26th October, 1936.

⁴ See J. C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings*, fig. 11, p. 41.

⁵ See J. C. Wall, *op. cit.*, fig. 18, p. 50, and E. W. Tristram, *English Medieval Wall Painting*, pp. 111, 112, and plate 72a.

⁶ H. C. Whaite, *St. Christopher in English Medieval Wall Painting*, 1929.

⁷ John Salmon, "St. Christopher in English Medieval Art and Life," *Journ. of British Arch. Assn.*, 1936, p. 106.

⁸ *Records of Bucks.*, vol. XII, pp. 308-14, 320-23, 404.

⁹ *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, vol. XXIII, pt. 2.

¹⁰ *Lincolnshire Historian*, No. 1, 1947, pp. 8-14.

¹¹ *Records of Bucks.*, vol. VI, p. 249.