

MURAL PAINTINGS IN WHADDON CHURCH.

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In the church of Whaddon, dedicated to St. Mary, were discovered a few years ago some of those mural paintings which were universally delineated on the interior walls of our churches in olden times. Tracings of these frescoes were exhibited at the annual meeting of the Society, held at Addington Manor House in 1866, and in order to preserve a faithful record of the discovery, I have compiled a short account for the Society's publication. These paintings are of great interest, not only on account of their state, and the circumstance that they entirely owe their preservation to their being covered with limewash previous to the Reformation, but also because one of them is a representation of a most striking and memorable event in English history, viz., "the martyrdom," "the righteous execution," or "the murder," as it is variously styled, of Thomas à Becket, in Canterbury Cathedral, on Tuesday, the 29th of December, 1170.

Although Becket's biographers were many, and their statements of the event hopelessly irreconcilable, still the whole of the facts have been substantially preserved. The most impartial, as well as minute and accurate account, is in Robertson's "Biography of Becket," and in Stanley's "Memorials of Canterbury." The four knights who committed the sanguinary deed were William de Tracy, Reginald Fitz-Urse, Richard de Brito, and Hugh de Moreville. Being inflamed by the king's appeal, "Will no one deliver me from this low-bred priest?" they returned to England for the purpose of seizing the primate, and being further excited on landing and hearing of his violent proceedings on Christmas

Day, they hastened to Canterbury, and found him with his clergy in his private room. Admitted into his presence, they charged him with exciting disturbances and disobeying the king; and demanded that he should absolve the bishops whom he had excommunicated. Becket angrily replied that he could not. Threats were then used, when he rose and exclaimed, "You threaten me in vain." The knights then ordering his attendants not to allow him to escape, he replied, "I shall not escape." They hastened out to guard the entrance to the hall, and to cut off communication with the town. When they returned, they found the hall-door barred against them, and they endeavoured to force it open, but in vain. Robert de Broc, who was well acquainted with the palace, led them round by the orchard, and they succeeded in forcing an entrance through a window. In the meantime the monks, partly by persuasion, and partly by force, brought the archbishop, at the hour of vespers, into the church as a place of safety. They reached the lower north transept when it was announced that armed men were bursting into the monastery. All was in confusion. His attendants now fled, with the exception of four. The prelate, refusing to enter any hiding-place, was urged to go into the choir, and he was unwillingly hurried up one of the two flights of steps which led to it. At this moment the knights entered the transept, when one of them shouted out, "Where is Thomas à Becket, the traitor to the King?" No answer was returned. Fitz-Urse then exclaimed, "Where is the archbishop?" He instantly turned round, and confronting his enemies, replied, "Reginald, here I am; no traitor, but the archbishop and priest of God; what do you wish?" He descended again to the transept, and took up his station between the central pillar and the wall, which still forms the south-west corner of the chapel of St. Benedict. The knights gathered round him, and demanded the absolution of the excommunicated prelates. "I cannot do more than I have done," he replied. Fitz-Urse exclaimed, "You shall die; I will tear your heart out." "In the name of Christ," he replied, "and in defence of the Church, I am ready to die, but I forbid you, in the name of Almighty God, to hurt any of my religious clergy or people."

Tracy with his sword now aimed a blow at his head ; but his faithful attendant, Edward Grim, raised his arm to intercept it, but it descended on the prelate's head. The monk's arm was broken. Fitz-Urse then struck him on his bleeding head, when he raised his clasped hands, and wiping off the blood, exclaimed, "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." Tracy struck the third blow, which brought him on his knees. Richard de Brito gave a tremendous stroke, which severed the crown of the head from the skull, and the sword descended with such violence on the marble pavement that it was broken. His brains were then forced out, and scattered over the pavement by Hugh of Horsea, who exclaimed, "Let us go, he will rise no more." Thus fell Thomas à Becket, and that part of his cathedral in which he perished was walled off and called the *martyrdom*.

In the representation of this murder in Whaddon Church, the painting of Becket, with the exception of the feet, has been destroyed ; but the figures of the four warriors, with the several devices on their shields and surcoats, have been well preserved.

The foremost figure on the left hand, no doubt, represents William de Tracy, who is called the "Primus Percussor." The second is Reginald Fitz-Urse, whose shield is emblazoned with his well-known arms, the bear. The last figure on the right hand is unquestionably Hugh de Moreville, who was the only knight that struck no blow, but guarded the entrance of the transept, and who is always represented with his sword still in its scabbard, and his hand upon the hilt. The third figure will, therefore, be Richard de Brito, or De Bret. The painting is surrounded by a border, and may be ascribed to the time of Edward III. It was probably executed under the direction of William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, whose hand is discernible in the alterations in the church, particularly the tower.

Three years after the murder of this beloved and popular martyr, the Pope authorized his invocation as a saint. He was regularly canonized, and the 29th of December was set apart as the feast of St. Thomas of Canterbury. The scene of his martyrdom became a place of pilgrimage to all nations ; and the riches offered at his shrine were beyond all parallel. These offerings



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The MURDER of THOMAS & BECKET
Mural painting in Whaddon Church. discovered in 1854.
B.



KING EDMUND



A BISHOP OR ABBOT

Mural painting in Whaddon Church. discovered in 1854

excited the jealousy and cupidity of Henry VIII., who, having destroyed his magnificent and gorgeous shrine, issued, on November 16, 1538, a proclamation for the destruction of all memorials of him. Numerous as were the paintings and statues in our ecclesiastical edifices, it is a matter of much surprise that not a single statue, and but very few paintings, escaped this order for their destruction. Among the few representations of the massacre that have been preserved in this country are the following, viz., a painting on a panel, now greatly defaced, at the head of the tomb of Henry IV., in Canterbury Cathedral; mural paintings in the churches of St. John, Winchester, discovered A.D. 1853, and which have been assigned to about 1280; Stoke D'Aubernoun, Surrey, discovered 1852; Brereton, Cheshire; the Holy Cross, Stratford-on-Avon, date 1498; Preston, Sussex; and Burlingham St. Edmunds, Eaton, Norfolk. In the British Museum is a MS. Reg. (known as Queen Mary's Psalter) 2 B. VII., and MS. Claud. D. 2, early part of the fourteenth cent., which contains a complete series of outline sketches in the lower margin of the pages illustrative of the events of his life. Also in Harleian MS. 5102, early thirteenth cent., is a representation at folio 32 of the death, and folio 17 of the burial of Becket.

Above the painting of the murder of Becket are portions of other figures, but they have been destroyed by the lowering of the side wall of the chancel. Below the painting of Becket are three skeletons, and a green tree, with a legend underneath, but illegible. There are also two paintings, one on each side, in the splay of the window in the south wall of the chancel. One represents King Edmund, and the other a bishop or abbot with his right hand in the attitude of benediction, and the left hand holding the pastoral staff. If this latter figure is intended for Thomas à Becket, the painting is not so elaborately executed as the representation of him in Stoke Charity Church, Hants, discovered in 1845, an account of which is given in the "Journal of the British Archaeological Association," vol. x., page 74. These two latter paintings have been much injured by children.