



F.W. Fairbank, Jr., F.S.A., sculp.

LEGEND OF ST. CHRISTOPHER.  
 From a Mural Engraving in Shorewell Church, Isle of Wight.

J.A. Barton, del.

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MURAL PAINTINGS RECENTLY DISCOVERED  
AT SHORWELL, ISLE OF WIGHT, AND  
GREAT WALTHAM, ESSEX.

WE are indebted to our corresponding members, Messrs. Dennett and J. A. Barton, of the Isle of Wight, for the communication of notes and drawings of the interesting distemper paintings discovered at Shorwell in April last. The first-named gentleman gave us the earliest information of the fact; the latter added copious notes of the discovery, and accompanied them with a faithful copy of one of the paintings, traced and coloured from the original, and from which the accompanying plate has been engraved on a reduced scale. The original painting measures eleven feet in width, and six and a half in height. It was painted on the wall over the north door of the church; and upon the removal of the white-wash, which had coated it for centuries, it appeared, together with others, almost in its pristine freshness. Mr. Barton remarks: "By peculiarities of costume, they are clearly of the time of Richard II or Henry IV, perhaps somewhat earlier, the colours almost as fresh as the first hour they were laid on; so that, coupled with the peculiarly happy preservation of a large portion of the most important details, they offer an example of the state of art at that period, which is of great value and importance."

The painting which is here engraved, depicts the history of St. Christopher. In Caxton's edition of the *Golden Legend*, printed in 1483, and translated by him from Jacobus

de Voragine, we have the history of St. Christopher thus related: "Christofre was of the lygnage of the Cananees. And he was of a right grete stature, and had a terryble and ferdful chere and countenance; and he was xii. cubytes of lengthe." He was in the service of the king, but "it cam in his mynde that he wold seche the grettest prince that was in the world, and hym wold he serve and obeye." Accordingly, he travels until he comes to one sovereign who is renowned as the greatest in the world, and in his service he stays until "upon a tyme a mynstral song tofore hym a song in which he named ofte the devyll. And the kyng, which was a crysten man, whan he herd hym name the devyll, made anon the sign of the crosse in his vysage," which induces Christopher to ask the reason for such an act; and on learning that it is done to protect him from the devil, concludes that the devil is mightier far than he, and leaves him, saying: "I commend the to God, for I wyl goo seche hym for to be my lord and I his servaunt." In journeying over the desert he meets with a great company of knights, and one of them, "a knyght cruel and horrible," accosts him, and tells him he is the person he seeks: they journey on till they come to a cross, and the devil in sore affright leaves the direct road, and regains it by a roundabout way. This excites Christopher's curiosity, who at last obtains the true reason for the fear his companions evince; he then exclaims: "I have laboured in vain, and I will serve the no longer; goo thy waye thenne, for I wyl goo seche Ihu Criste." He travels into a desert and meets a hermit, who instructs him in Christianity, and ultimately places him beside a river where many perish, to bear over travellers harmless, because he is of gigantic stature and strength: "Thenne went Cristofer to this ryver; he made there his habitacle for hym, and bar a grete pool in his hand in stede of a staf, by which he susteyned hym in the water, and bare over all manner of peple wythout cesyng; and there he abode thus doying many dayes," until as he slept in his bed one night he heard the voice of a child calling him, "whiche prayed hym goodly to bere hym over the water; and thenne Christofre lyft up the childe on his sholdres, and toke his staffe and entred in to the ryver for to passe; and the water of the ryver aroos, and swellyd more and more, and the chyld was

heavy as lead; and alway as he went ferther the water encreased and grewe more, and the chyld more and more wexyd hevvy, in so mucche that Christofre had grete anguyssse, and was aferd to be drowned. And when he had escaped with grete payne, and passyd the water and sette the chylde a-grounde, he sayd to the chyld: 'Chylde, thou hast put me in grete peryl, thou wayest alle moste as I had alle the world upon me; I myght bere no greter burden.' And the child answered: 'Crystofre, mervayle the nothyng, for thou hast not only born alle the worlde upon the, but thou hast born hym that created and made all the world upon thy sholdres. I am the Cryste, the kyng to whom thou servest in thys werke.'" And as token of the truth, he tells him that if he sets his staff in the earth by his house, it shall grow: "and when he aroos in the morn he fond his staff lyke a palmyer, beryng flours, leves, and dates." Christopher now travels to Lycia, and converts many by exhibiting this miracle, until the king condemns him to death; and after many torments, which are ineffectual, "he commaunded that he shold be bound to a strong stake, and that he shold be through shoten wyth arowes wyth xl. knyghtes archers; but none of the knyghtes myght attayne hym. For the arowes henge in th'ayer about nyghe hym wythout touchyng. Thenne the king wende he had be through shoten wyth the arowes of the knyghtes, and addressed hym for to goo to hym, and one of the arowes retorned sodenly fro the ayer, and smote hym in the eye and blynded hym." Christopher tells him he may recover his sight by mixing his blood with clay, and so anointing his eye therewith; which after the decapitation of the saint he does, and recovers to vindicate God and the martyr.

It will be seen that this monkish legend is faithfully depicted in the Shorwell painting, which is especially curious for this reason. Figures of Christopher are not uncommon, either painted on walls or on glass in churches.<sup>1</sup> It was a popular superstition, common to all Catholic coun-

<sup>1</sup> We may instance the painted glass in West Wickham church, Kent, and in All Saints, North-street, York, both engraved in Weale's "Quarterly papers on Architecture." A figure of St. Christopher is painted over the north door of Feering church, Essex, and in Croydon church, Surrey. It occurs on

a brass in Wyke church, Hants. A single continental example may be cited: on the wall of a house beside the principal gate of Treves (the Roman *Porta Nigra*), a similar colossal figure of the saint is painted. I have seen a finger-ring with the saint engraved on it.

tries, which induced people to believe that the day on which they should see a figure of the saint they should neither meet with a violent death, nor die without confession. Erasmus alludes to this general belief in his *Praise of Folly*; and it is not unlikely that the squire in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, wore

“A Cristofre on his brest, of silver shene”

for the same reason. One of the earliest wood engravings known to exist, and which bears date 1423, was fabricated for a cheap sale, and contains the same promise of preservation from violent death in two Latin rhyming lines beneath it. All these various figures of the saint are constructed on one model, and have a certain conventional *pose* visible in them all. The name of Christopher (*Christophorus*) is derived from this carrying of Christ; and that of his friend the monk is given in some legends.

The left side of the picture, where the story begins, is the most defaced. The upper portion appears to represent the journey of Christopher in the desert or wilderness with his evil companions. Beneath, Christopher appears to be taking his leave of them; taking his stand by the cross, he lifts his right hand in a repellent manner, and with his left grasps the uprooted tree which he is to use in fording the dangerous stream. The cross behind him is elegant in design; and the figure of the Redeemer on its summit delicately and minutely executed. On a promontory above is placed a beacon; and nearer to the cross is seated a figure busily employed with his angle; his success is perfect, for he has caught a fish as large as himself. There is a noble defiance of perspective in this portion of the painting; for the tree beside this figure, and the ship before him, bear no proportion to his own size, or to each other. The grand central group represents a colossal figure of the saint, who is habited in a brown tunic, open in front from the waist downwards, and having loose sleeves lined with white. Over this is thrown a mantle lined with green, and having a pattern stencilled all over it. Around the saint's head is a twisted band of linen, similar to those placed on the head of Saracens in early heraldic sculpture. The infant Saviour is habited in a green dress, and bears a globe surmounted by a cross in the

left hand, the right being uplifted in benediction; from his mouth issue the words *Ego sum Alpha et ω*. On the other side of this group is a ship fully armed, with a man in the top-castle; a boat below, filled with men, is rowing to land. A group of fish are swimming around the feet of the saint, among which we may distinguish pike, turbot, and salmon. The monk who was the spiritual adviser of Christopher occupies the upper portion of the land on the right side of the picture. He is issuing from the door of his hermitage with a lanthorn in his hand, to assist St. Christopher through the darkness of the memorable night when he carried the Saviour over the waters. The little hermitage is clearly depicted, with the embanked trees beside it, the bell over the door, and the cross on the gable. At the bottom is St. Christopher stripped and bound to a tree: the body of the saint is not clearly defined, owing to the decay of the painting, but the heads of the arrows with which his body is filled appear on all sides. An archer on each side is shooting more. A flight of these arrows make their way upwards towards the king, who is looking on, with his sword-bearer beside him; and one of the arrows enters his eye and deprives him of sight, in accordance with the legendary story already related.

Mr. Barton adds: "This painting is a valuable and curious relic of the age in which it was executed, and I should not scruple to say, that its parallel does not exist anywhere in so perfect a state. Some injury it has experienced doubtless, but this has arisen from the action of the whitewash, which has faded and dimmed the colouring in parts; but as a whole, it is a perfect and beautiful relic of art. And yet this is far beneath the second painting, over the south door, which appears to me to be a work of great pretensions to art, and that of a decided and high character for the age of its production. It represents the Last Judgment; and in the portion exposed to view, there are a multitude of figures, proper to each subject, painted with great force of character and distinctness of design; and finished with a skill and care which bespeak no mean powers in the artist: there is much of that peculiar mixture of the grotesque and the terrible in parts of it, which is witnessed in so many of the productions of the past ages, and the colouring is very full and rich." Mr. Den-

nett describes the picture in a few words : " On one side, people are breaking from their coffins, and ascending by a circuitous road to heaven. On the other side, an angel, who guards this road, stops many and throws them head foremost to the bottom. The lower part is very much obliterated, so that no flames can be made out, but doubtless they had occupied this place."

It was the intention of Mr. Barton to complete drawings of this interesting picture, in a similar manner to that in which he had executed that of St. Christopher; but after an unavoidable absence of four days, owing to ill-health, the painting had been ruthlessly destroyed, and the wall plastered over. The only record of this interesting and curious mural picture, is the brief notice now given.<sup>1</sup> This rapid destruction of a valuable memento of early art cannot be too much deplored. It could only have resulted from an ignorance of its value. As materials for the history of painting in England during the Middle Ages, all these fragments of mural paintings are of much importance, and the desirableness of procuring copies of them when discovered cannot be too strongly enforced. It is not because they may appear fragmentary and perishable, or uncouth to an eye unaccustomed to their peculiarities, that they are to be condemned to destruction, as unworthy of notice. The persons employed to clean walls of whitewash are no competent authorities; nor does the experience of many clergymen enable them to pass a fair judgment. As links in the chain of our art-history, every fragment is of value; and in no instance should they be allowed to be wantonly destroyed until copies have been made, and records kept. The mental tastes of our forefathers, exerted on the holiest subjects, should be a sacred bequest not lightly treated by their descendants, much less irreverently destroyed!

In a different spirit, and with a feeling that offers a noble example to others, the Rev. J. H. Dyer, vicar of Great Waltham, near Chelmsford, Essex, on the discovery

<sup>1</sup> A similar subject — "The Last Judgment"—is painted over the chancel arch of St. Michael's church, Coventry. From the head dresses worn by the ladies, it would appear to have been executed in the reign of Henry

VI. It is carefully preserved, and has been judiciously restored in defective places, so that it is now one of the finest and most perfect mural paintings in any English church, and is a curious example of medieval art.

of distemper paintings in that church, immediately despatched a note to the editor of *The Times*, and invited an inspection of them. I obeyed the invitation, and visited the church the next day. But for such an announcement, the discovery would have been unknown, except in the immediate neighbourhood, and the paintings so unexpectedly discovered might have been again hidden from sight, or destroyed. The church was undergoing repair, and preparatory to colouring the walls, it was thought advisable to scrape them, and in so doing various remains of painting had been discovered; and a very perfect one over the arch which separates the nave from the chancel, and which is here engraved.



This painting occupies a space of about nine feet in height by fifteen in width. The figures are the size of life, and the principal one—the Redeemer—is of colossal proportions, and occupies the centre. He is seated on a rainbow, and is clothed in a red garment, having white under clothing. He is exhibiting the wounds by which he has gained our redemption; and angels above are hymning praises to the trumpet and lute. The sun and moon are above his head. On the right of the Saviour is a group of six crowned female figures; the foremost of which is regally attired, and has a nimbus round the head. This group is in a fair state of preservation, but that on the other side is not; it consists of the same number of male figures, in attitudes of adoration; and their costume and

the general style of the drawing appear to fix the date of the picture to the latter end of the fourteenth century. Various interpretations have been given to this subject, but the most probable one is that which considers it to represent the Redeemer, after his ascension, seated triumphantly in heaven, surrounded by saints and angels. It is painted in distemper, in flat tints, with bold black outlines, and is situated immediately over the place where the rood-loft formerly stood; and a staircase leading to it, with an opening above, still exists in the wall to the left of the picture. Beneath the carved beam are traces, in the angles formed by the chancel-arch, of other figures. On the left a draped figure holds scales. This may have represented St. Michael weighing souls. On the right another figure rides on a white horse. Fragments of other figures are visible in various parts of the church, as well as symbols of the evangelists, and inscriptions; and where these do not occur, the walls have been painted with a deep tint of a chocolate colour, upon which flowers and stars have been stencilled.

In a similar way the church of Shorwell had been entirely covered with painting. Mr. Barton says: "The cleaning of accumulated coats of whitewash from the columns and arches of the nave and aisles, made it apparent that they had once been painted with gay and brilliant colours; the shafts being of a rich red tint, and the capitals of an amber hue, whilst the arches had been outlined or traced as it were with the same colours, and doubtless the roof had originally been adorned in the same manner. The windows, with their tracery and every vacant space, had been filled with beautiful and well executed designs; most of which, I have every reason to believe, had been executed in that mode which has of late years been named *stencilling*. 'There is nothing new under the sun'; an example of this work will be seen on the mantle of St. Christopher, and is a curious corroboration of the old proverb."

Medieval authors frequently allude to the decoration of halls and palaces with similar mural paintings; and in Barclay's eclogue of *The Cytezen and Uplondyshman*, supposed by Warton to have been written about the year 1514, is the following curious and detailed notice of one formerly existing on the walls of Ely cathedral, and which

represented the Nativity, and the adoration of the Magi. One of the characters, named Faustus, says :

“ I sawe them myselfe well paynted on the wall,  
 Late gasyng upon our chyrche cathedrall ;  
 I sawe grete wethers in pecture, and small lambes,  
 Dauncynge, some slepyng, some sowkyng of theyr dammes ;  
 And some on the grounde me semed lyenge styll,  
 Than sawe I horsemen, at pendant of an hyll ;  
 And the thre kynges with all theyr company,  
 Theyr crownes glywerynge, bryght and oryently,  
 With theyr presentes and gyftes mystycall ;  
 All this behelde I in pecture on the wall.”

Which his companion Amyntas thus corroborates :

“ Lately myselfe to se that pecture was,  
 I sawe the manger, I sawe the oxe and asse,  
 I well remembred the people in my mynde,  
 Me thynke yet I se the blacke facys of Ynde.  
 Me thynke yet I se the herdes and the kynges,  
 And in what maner were ordred theyr offrynges.”

Paintings in distemper on the walls of churches, representing the same subject, were not uncommon ; and in Smith's *Antiquities of Westminster*, may be seen copies of one formerly existing in St. Stephen's chapel there. The adoration of the Magi is painted on the walls of the Guesten Hall, adjoining Worcester cathedral, and is apparently a work of the fourteenth century. So many of our old churches exhibit fragments of similar paintings, of which many are yet hidden beneath whitewash, that this species of church decoration appears to have been universal before the reformation.

F. W. FAIRHOLT.