

The Hildersham Wall Paintings



Nativity Scenes



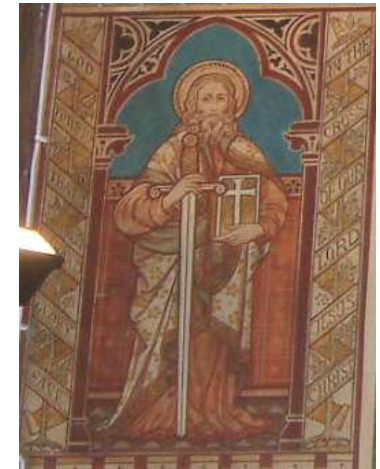
Old Testament



Palm Sunday



St Paul



The gospel writers

**The Woman
at the well**



In the days when these paintings first appeared, Bible stories were better known than today. The purpose of these notes is to give a little flavour of what each is about in the hope that it will inspire visitors to read to read some of the stories behind them.

The South Wall

We begin just to the left of the organ arch where we find six figures.

First of these is Moses, the dominant figure of the Old Testament, and especially the first five books, which include the story of Abraham & Melchisedek (in the South-east corner of the chancel). Here he is shown holding a tablet with the figures 1-10 in roman numerals, representing the 10 commandments. Even today many would regard these rules as the best summary we have of how we should live in relation to God and to others – although Jesus' even briefer summary (love God with all your being, and your neighbour as yourself) has recently taken its place in our Communion service. Moses also features in two other paintings – one of the manna and the other of water coming out of the rock. Both remind us of his leadership of the people of God in the desert – and of how God can meet our needs at moments in life that seem as hopeless.

Second comes David, shown holding a harp. King David, as he became, was uniquely equipped to write the great song book we called the Psalms. They reflect the way he experienced almost every kind of human emotion – great triumphs, horrific tragedies, closeness to nature, pageantry and city life, confidence in God, bewilderment. Even the later Psalms written by others found in him their inspiration.

Third, identified by the picture of the lamb he his holding, comes Isaiah. Isaiah traditionally comes first of the prophets in our Old Testaments. The book bearing his name spans the period of history from the impending disaster of invasion and exile through to reflections on its aftermath. For Christians a particular contribution is the idea of suffering on behalf of others, that helped prepare for the idea of Christ's suffering. That is why on Good Friday we traditionally read from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah words that probably inspired this painting.

Common Prayer and along the north wall at the middle level is an adaptation of part of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron.6:19-20), no doubt seen as a fitting tribute when these wall-paintings were unveiled.

As we move towards the east end of the north wall, on either side of the vestry door we find, first, a scene reflecting the manna in the desert shown on the south side and no doubt intended to remind us that the Jesus who rode in triumph into Jerusalem (shown above) is also the bread of life (Jn.6:35, 48) who came down from heaven to give eternal life (Jn.6:49-51). The last scene shows Jesus at Jacob's Well, talking to the Samaritan woman (Jn.4:4-26) and blessing her, signifying that Jesus came to earth not just to call Israel back to God but to enable all people to share in the wonderful gift of God's grace which Jesus personified.

Framing the East Window, with its intricate pattern of the tree of Jesse, is a scene from Revelation. At the bottom of the left hand side is an interpretation of the resurrection of Christ. He is clearly shown bearing the stigmata (the marks of the nails in his hands and feet) whilst below him is the empty tomb, guarded by an Angel, with a rather dazed-looking guard beside it. On the right hand side, we see Christ's ascension – his footprints are still on the rock, as the remaining 11 disciples and Mary look on in wonder. Angels above both scenes (as well as further Angels on the window reveals holding respectively a fish (featured on several occasions in the Gospels as well as being the cryptogram for Christianity), a palm of peace, a sword (indicating judgement) and a banner featuring the Cross of St George) lead the eye up to the lamb at the apex of the window, symbolising Jesus as the unblemished sacrifice (Rev. 5:6,12).

Text by Jim Mynors & Richard Wilson,
Photos by Andrew Westwood-Bate

At the higher level between the windows are pictures depicting the four evangelists (Matthew, holding a treasure box and pen signifying his former work as a tax collector; Mark, symbolised by the lion; Luke, by the bull; and John by the eagle). St Peter, holds the key to heaven with the cockerel in the background to remind us how Peter disowned Jesus immediately before his trial.

In the two panels below (see back page of this guide), we find a continuation of a theme found in the Old Testament scenes on the south side of the Chancel, namely the important part played by women in the Bible. The first scene is of the Nativity, showing Mary holding Jesus, with Joseph beside her, whilst shepherds are behind and in front. The shepherd behind is carrying a lamb on his shoulders, a reminder of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (Mt.18:12-14; Jn.10:14) while the shepherd in front has brought a lamb with its legs tied together as if in sacrifice, reminding us that Jesus gave up his life for us on the Cross. Angels appear above and, in the background, a woman is carrying a basket of fruit, symbolising the legal requirement in Jewish law to give the firstfruits of the harvest to God. Moving to the next panel, we again see Mary holding Jesus with Joseph beside her, as the three Magi do homage and offer their gifts to the Christ child.

Running the length of the north wall, level with the top of the windows, is a quotation from Matthew's Gospel (21:9) itself taken from Psalm 118 (v.26) "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest". This recalls the crowd's chant as they welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem in triumph on the Sunday before his crucifixion, a scene reflected in the last panel at the higher level, where Jesus is seen seated on the donkey carrying him into the city. He is followed by the twelve disciples and preceded by members of the crowd carrying palm branches while an Elder waits to welcome Jesus at the city gates.

The second window, again of three saints, reminds us of the importance of women in the early Church. Agnes, martyred for her refusal of marriage as she deemed service to Christ to be more important; Cecilia, patron saint of musicians (because of her devotion to Christ it is alleged that she refused to consummate her marriage and devoted her time to singing hymns instead, which cost her life); and Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine under whom Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Below the window are two verses from the Litany in the 1662 Book of

Then comes Esther. Hildersham must be one of the few places where she and Ruth were so prominently portrayed in Victorian times. Yet both are now attracting great interest. Esther is shown here as a Queen – a role she acquired by the unusual route of a beauty contest in ancient Persia. But her life was one full of hazards, especially when it fell to her to prevent her people, the exiled Jews, from genocide. It shows how even in such times women could have a key role in the history of God's people and demonstrate resourcefulness equal to men

Elijah – identifiable by the raven beside him – was one of the earlier prophets. As such, no book is named after him though he had a key role at the time of the Kings. Elijah models for us the courage to speak out – against tyrannical rulers and corrupt government inspired by corrupt religion. His story is one of great faith against apparently overwhelming opposition. If we feel things in our day have gone badly downhill, and seem hopeless – the story of Elijah can strengthen our resolve to see things restored.

Ruth can be recognised by the sheaf of corn she holds. Yet her story starts with a time of famine. Worse than that it is at first one of great personal tragedy with multiple bereavement. And Ruth is a foreigner – from Moab. Yet the Old Testament records how she attaches herself to the people of Israel, finds a new home and faith, and eventually becomes an ancestor of King David and so of Jesus. In this day of debate about the role of women and the relationship between different ethnic groups, Ruth is as relevant as ever. Not surprisingly a flood of studies of her story and Esther's have recently appeared. St Ethelreda is to the west of other figures – as one associated with Ely & the founding of its cathedral she links biblical times and our own.

The North Wall

As we move across to the North wall, so we change from characters and stories in the Jewish Scriptures to figures and scenes in the New Testament.

The first lower panel begins the story of St Paul. Saul, as he was then known, was born in Tarsus in what is now eastern Turkey. He was a Jew and at some point he went to live in Jerusalem with his sister in order to pursue his studies in the Jewish faith. The Jewish authorities persecuted the early Christians and Saul was at the forefront of the action. Acts 7:58-8:1 tells us that Saul was the ringleader in the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Later Saul travelled from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute Christians there, but on the way he was struck blind by a bright light and heard Jesus calling him to repentance. This scene is depicted in the panel before you, with Saul in the unlikely dress of a Roman Centurion and his companions dressed as Roman soldiers. Saul embraced the Christian faith as a result of this experience and changed his name in order to emphasise its significance.

In the panel above, we again see St Paul, but this time symbolised by the sword that he is holding to indicate the manner of his death and the book to remind us of the gospel that he preached. After becoming a Christian, Paul was a tireless worker in spreading the Good News of Christ, undertaking three long missionary journeys through Asia Minor, the Turkey of today, and into Greece. Even though the Roman Empire had a good system of roads, much of Paul's travels would have been on foot and we know from his letters that he endured considerable suffering in the process. As he journeyed, Paul preached the Gospel both to the Jews dispersed throughout the region and to Gentiles (non Jews), establishing churches wherever he stayed. His letters to those churches, and to individuals, form a major part of the New Testament and provide valuable insights into life as it was then, as well as a detailed account of Paul's teaching. Because he had embraced the Christian faith, Paul had made many enemies among the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and they sought to have him killed on his last visit to that City, probably around 57CE. Paul was rescued by the Roman authorities but put in prison to await trial on charges brought against him by the Jewish hierarchy. Though a Jew by birth, Paul was also a Roman citizen, which entitled him to a trial before the Emperor in Rome. He was taken there by sea – a voyage involving shipwreck and real danger. We are not sure what happened next, but it is

probable that Paul was placed under house arrest but then released. He was re-arrested later, however, during Nero's persecution of Christians, and was martyred in Rome at the same time as St Peter, probably around 68CE; Paul was beheaded, the penalty for a Roman citizen, but Peter was crucified as a common criminal. The quotation "God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians (6:14).

The two windows on the north side of the Chancel are both dedicated to the Holy Trinity and on each window reveal you will find a symbol of the Trinity with an inscription in Latin emphasising the separate identity of each member of the Trinity and at the same time their unity. The inscription around the edge reads "Pater non est Filius non est Spiritus Sanctus non est Pater" ('The Father is not the Son; the Son is not the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is not the Father'), whilst reading to the centre is "Pater est Deus; Filius est Deus; Spiritus Sanctus est Deus" ('The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God'). Each window depicts three Saints. In the first, Alban, a Roman citizen and the first Christian martyr in England, is shown holding a sword which indicates the manner of his execution, as in the case of St Paul. Next to him is Stephen, the first Christian martyr, holding a pile of stones, again to indicate how he died. The last of the three is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who was martyred by crucifixion, evidenced by the cross in this window.