

## Chapter 4 - The Wall Paintings\*

The Guild Chapel was once a riot of colour and imagery. After it was rebuilt in the 15th century, the Chapel walls were covered with paintings of saints, bible stories and allegorical images reflecting on the afterlife and how to get into heaven. This may seem strange to us now – today the walls of most churches are plain – but in the medieval period most churches had brightly painted walls. However, the changes that were brought about as part of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century meant that images such as these were banned and were often destroyed completely. While some of the Chapel's paintings have been lost forever, we are lucky that most remained hidden under layers of paint and limewash for centuries until they were rediscovered.

Our paintings are internationally significant - we have an almost complete pre-Reformation painting scheme still in-situ, where the design was conceived and completed as one piece of work. It is a well thought-out and sophisticated scheme and we are now working to conserve and record the paintings so we can understand them better, and help everyone learn more about the Chapel's history.

### Medieval paintings you can still see:

The first two wall paintings we see below were cleaned and conserved in 2016. They are now much brighter and you can see more detail.

### The Day of Judgement or Doom – above the chancel arch



The Day of Judgement or Doom painting above the chancel arch

The Day of Judgement or Doom painting above the chancel arch shows what medieval Christians believed would happen at Christ's Second Coming and the Final Judgement. Jesus sits on a rainbow in the centre, looking down on the world (unfortunately the later plaster ceiling cuts him off at chest height so his head is currently hidden). The Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist flank him on either side.

Underneath are the dead rising from their graves, discovering if they are amongst the saved or the damned. Some are praying. Top left we see a group of people being welcomed at the gates of Heaven. Heaven itself is made up of palatial and ecclesiastical buildings. On the right is Hell, a castellated tower. Sinners are tortured by demons and fed into the Mouth of Hell. The Mouth of Hell is shown as a fanged serpent with its mouth open, swallowing people - maybe you can see its teeth?

This painting would have encouraged people to think about the ways in which they were living their lives, and the terrible things that awaited them in eternity if they sinned and were not good Christians.

### **Erthe-upon-Erthe** - on the west wall to the left of the vestry doors



The painting known as Erthe-upon-Erthe, lower west wall

The poem in this painting, Erthe-upon-Erthe, was well-known in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was a favourite theme for Commonplace Books (collections of texts organised into books), and was frequently inserted onto the spare leaves at the beginning or end of a manuscript, as well as being inscribed on walls and tombstones all over England and the south of Scotland.

The poem focuses on the inevitability of death and how we should all strive to lead a virtuous life. The virtues are represented by the feathered angel in the centre of the painting.

The text is Middle English, and the poem's power comes from the repetition of the word 'erthe' and its double meaning. The first 'erthe' represents 'man/woman' and the second 'erthe' means 'earth/dust'. That is, man and earth are the same thing, both created by God, and all mankind eventually returns to dust.

Here are the first 2 lines:

*Erthe oute of erthe ys wondrously wrought  
Erthe has gotyn upon erthe a dygnyte of noght*

So, although man is wonderfully made from earth, he lives a worthless life full of pride and vanity.

*Erthe goth upon erthe as glesteryng gold*

The poem reminds the viewer that worldly goods should not distract you from your prayers and devotions, and that everyone is equal in death and will be judged accordingly. Worldly concerns amount to nothing because, in the end, all that is left is a 'fowll stynke' as the body decomposes in its grave, all social trappings gone, surrounded by nothing but bones, skulls, and worms.

The message is reinforced by a second, shorter poem which points out that no-one would sin if they ever thought about the pain they would suffer in purgatory if they did. The two monk-like figures point to the poem, bringing it to our attention, while the corpse warns us 'I am what you will be...'

The painting is designed to instill fear into the viewer and make them reassess their behaviour, before it is too late. It has survived in incredible detail – you can even see the red worms on the corpse!

**The Martyrdom of St Thomas Becket** - on the upper west wall



Reproduction by the 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian Thomas Fisher

The painting of St Thomas Becket is fragmentary now, but you can still see some detail and we know what it would have looked like thanks to 19th century antiquarians such as Thomas Fisher.

St Thomas Becket was one of the most popular saints in the medieval period. He was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170 by King Henry II's knights. Becket had been a close friend of King Henry II, but after Becket became Archbishop of Canterbury, he and the King argued about whether the clergy should be subject to common law and tried in the crown's courts, or subject to Church law and tried in the Church's courts. Becket's death shocked Europe, and he was quickly transformed into a martyr and canonized after just 3 years in 1173. After the murder, a shrine to him was created in Canterbury Cathedral which was visited by hordes of pilgrims. Four years later, in an act of penance, King Henry donned a sack-cloth and walked barefoot through the streets of Canterbury while eighty monks flogged him. King Henry completed his atonement by spending the night in Becket's crypt.

**St George and the Dragon** – on the upper west wall above the organ console



Reproduction by the 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian Thomas Fisher

St George was another popular saint in the medieval period. His painting, like the painting of St Thomas Becket (see above), is fragmentary now but you can still see traces of the dragon with its curly tail.

George was a high-ranking Roman soldier who was martyred in 303 AD by Emperor Diocletian for refusing to make a sacrifice to the pagan gods. His reputation and reverence continued to grow and spread across the Middle East and Europe over the following centuries.

His story was immortalised in the legend of St George and the Dragon, and was brought back to Europe by returning Crusaders. In the story, a dragon makes its nest at the spring that provides water for a city meaning the citizens must dislodge the dragon from its nest in order to collect water. To do so, they first offer the dragon a sheep, but if no sheep can be found, then a maiden must go instead. The victim is chosen by drawing lots. One day, the Princess's name is drawn. Her father, the King, begs for her life but she is still offered to the dragon. Suddenly, George appears and challenges the dragon, while protecting himself with the sign of the cross. He slays the dragon and rescues the princess, and the grateful citizens convert to Christianity.

### **The saints in the niches between the windows**



Remnants of two saints in the niches on the north and south walls

Along the north and south walls of the nave, there were paintings in the niches between the windows. We are not sure what all of them were but we do know that opposite each other in the middle niches there were images of the Virgin Mary, and a crucifixion scene. In the niches at the far end of the nave, remnants of two female saints have survived and we think they are either St Modwena or St Gertrude of Nivelles, and St Ursula.

The saint on the left as you face the organ pipes is an abbess, dressed in a green cloak and holding a crozier, a symbol of her position and power. At the bottom is a name but the writing is illegible. At the Abbess's feet, there are two animals which could be a cat and mouse, which is why some people think this could be St Gertrude as she was a protector of rats and mice. Another suggestion is that she could be St Modwena, an Irish noblewoman by birth who became a nun and founded Burton Abbey in Staffordshire in the 7th century. However, Modwena is not traditionally associated with cat and mouse imagery.

On the other side of the chapel, on the north wall, is the saint we think is Ursula, a Romano-British saint. The story is that Ursula, a princess, set sail along with 11000 virginal handmaidens to join her future husband, the pagan governor Conan Meriadoc of Armorica. After a miraculous storm brought them over the sea in a single day to a Gaulish port, Ursula declared that, before her marriage, she would undertake a pilgrimage. On her journey to Cologne, Ursula and her handmaidens were besieged by Huns. Ursula was fatally shot by an arrow by the leader of the Huns while her handmaidens were all beheaded.

### **Paintings currently behind the 20<sup>th</sup> century paneling:**

**Dance of Death** – along the north wall of the nave

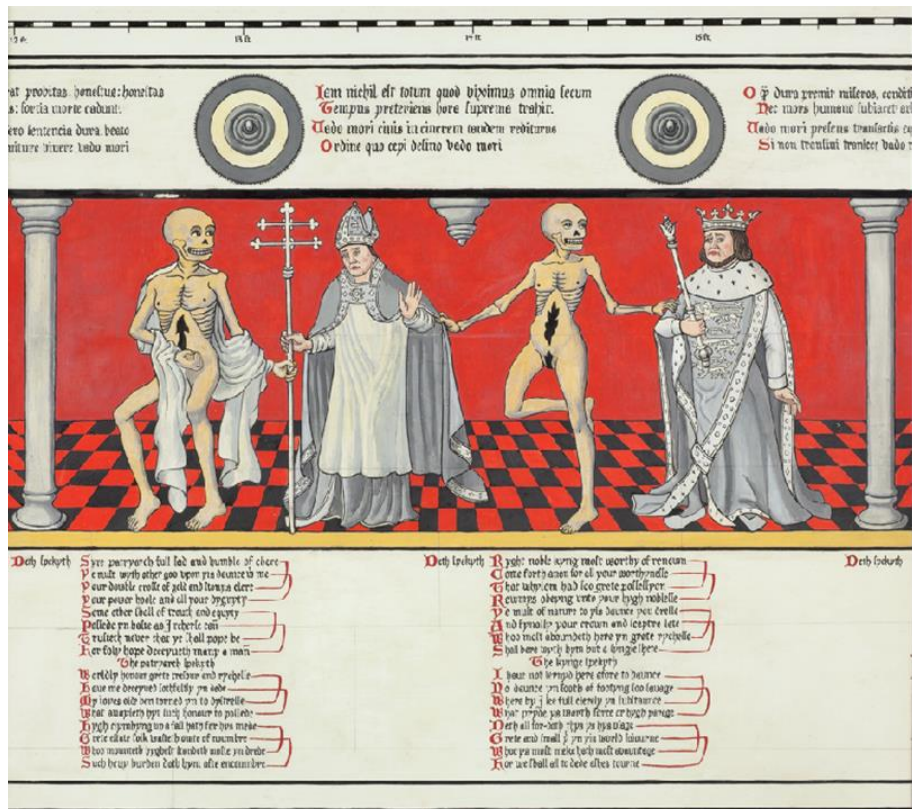


Reproduction of the Dance of Death by Wilfrid Puddephat

The *Danse Macabre* or Dance of Death was a series of images depicting people from all walks of life being led away by a cadaverous figure personifying death. Such images were designed to remind people of the fragility of life and the vanities of earthly glories, and that death unites us all. The earliest known examples date to the early 15th century in France. While much of the Guild Chapel painting is fragmentary now, enough remains for it to be identifiable, and by comparing it to other examples we can get an understanding of what it once looked like and the text that would have run alongside it.

In March 2022, as part of the 'Death Revealed' project, the panels that are currently covering the painting were temporarily removed for exploratory work and photographing of the walls, and we were able to take a good look at what has survived.

In the Guild Chapel, the painting shows a series of characters on two tiers, running the length of the wall, being led away by the figure of Death. These individuals range from the highest ranks of medieval society – a pope and emperor – through to its lowest – a labourer and a child. The apparent hierarchy is completely neutralized by Death who is the ultimate equalizer, so there is a socio-critical element inherent in this and other Dance of Death paintings.



Detail of the Dance of Death. Reproduction by Wilfrid Puddephat

The poem which runs underneath the pairs of figures is a version of a poem written by John Lydgate, a monk born around 1370. He translated the French *Danse Macabre*, and at the time our Dance was painted in the late 1490s, there was a similar image in the Pardon Churchyard at Old St Paul's in London, a place Hugh Clopton, who paid for the paintings, would have known well. The poem consists of a series of short dialogues between Death and each victim, in which Death summons them to dance and they reluctantly follow, moaning about their impending death.

The words of Death are often mocking and unpleasant. For example, Death addresses the gluttonous Abbot, whose weight makes him a target of ridicule because his vocation calls for abstinence:

*Sir Abbot and Priour with your brood hatt,  
To been abassht ye have a maner riht.  
Gret is your hed, your bely rounde and fatt;  
Ye must come daunce thouh ye be nat liht.*

And tells him

*Whoso is fattest to hym I have behiht,  
In his grave sonnest shal putrefie*

The Abbot does not want to give up his comfortable lifestyle but he realises that his wealth and status mean nothing and he should repent while he still can.





The Sergeant-of-Office, backing away from Death

Above is the Sergeant-of-Office who survives behind the panels. A Sergeant-of-Office or Sergeant-at-Arms was a royal officer who had the power of arrest. The skeleton, on the left, reaches for the Sergeant who backs away, resisting Death, his defence being he is an agent of the king. He says, rather pompously, 'How darst thou Deth, set on me arrest.' The Sergeant is trying to pull rank but Death outranks everyone.

Later, Death comes for the labourer, but his tone is more sympathetic as he appreciates the labourer has led a hard life:

*Thou, Labourer, which in sorwe and peyn  
Hast lad thi liff and in gret travaile,*

And the labourer responds rather poignantly:

*I have wisshid aftir Dethe ful oft,  
Althouh I wold have fleed hym now —*

The Stratford Dance appears to finish with a few lines from the author himself, John Lydgate, who tells us that he was helped with his translation of the *Danse Macabre* by a French clerk of his acquaintance:

*I found depycte onys on a wall  
Full notably as I reherse shall  
Of frensh clerke takyng acqueyntaunce  
I toke on me to translate all  
Owtt of frenshe machabrees daunce.*



Detail of possible representation of John Lydgate, and the associated text panel

We are hoping that further work to conserve and display remnants of this ambitious painting will be possible in the future.

### **The Life of Adam – along the south wall of the nave**



Detail from the Life of Adam showing two musicians, south wall

Along the south wall of the nave, we have the story of the life and death of Adam, his descendants, and the origin of the timber used in making the cross on which Jesus was crucified. When the panels were removed in 2022, we found that a great deal had survived,

including one or two surprises! Again, we are hoping to be able to permanently reveal more of the painting in the future, when we can share some of these discoveries with our visitors.

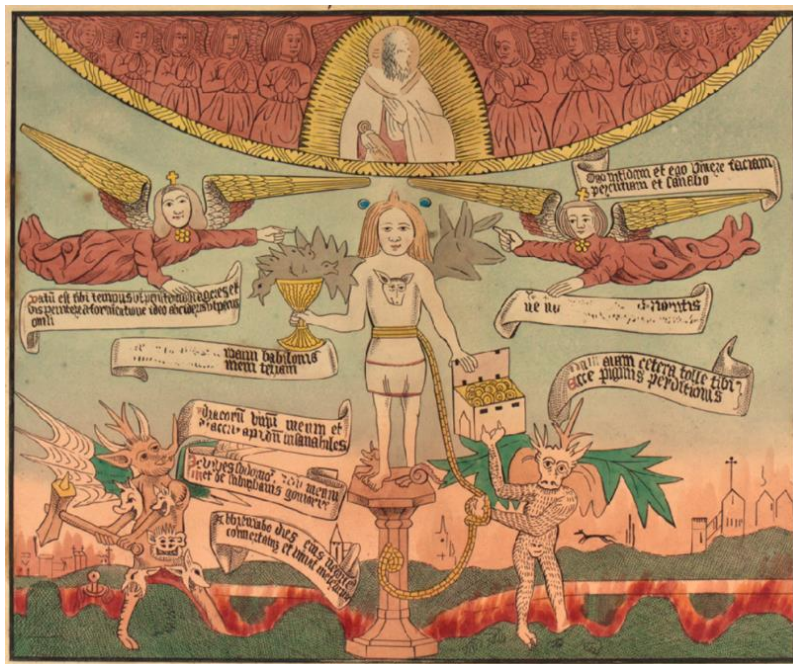
Like the Dance of Death, the scenes along the south wall would have been arranged in two horizontal tiers running the length of the nave, with text accompanying the images.

The Life of Adam cycle forms a preface to the Legend of the Holy Cross paintings that were once in the chancel (see below).



Detail showing Seth planting in Adam's dead body the seeds of the tree that grew to provide the wood for the Holy Cross

### Frauwelt/Whore of Babylon – lower west wall, behind the organ console



Reproduction by the 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian Thomas Fisher

Although this painting is currently still hidden behind paint and panels, there is a lot of interest amongst experts in revealing it again as it is so rare, and conservators are reasonably certain it remains intact under the Victorian paint.

In the past, the strange figure in the middle has been identified as the Whore of Babylon. This might be right, but Dr Miriam Gill, an art historian and specialist in medieval wall paintings, has suggested it could be an amalgamation of figures representing the Seven Deadly Sins, including a character known as *Frauwelt*, an allegorical female figure with animal attributes and motifs. (*Frauwelt* is German for world woman.) Like many of the paintings in the Guild Chapel, it seems to be about choosing the path of God and repenting your sins before it is too late.

## Lost paintings

### Legend of the Holy Cross – chancel walls



Reproductions by the 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian Thomas Fisher

The now lost cycle of paintings depicting the Legend of the Holy Cross that was once in the chancel continued the story begun in the Life of Adam painting (see above) of the timbers used in the crucifixion. The chancel paintings were a series of 10 images painted onto plaster, the only paintings in the chapel that we think were painted onto plaster rather than directly onto the stone walls. The story is based on an account of the True Cross in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a 13th century text which describes the lives of Christ and the saints.

The story starts with Adam on his deathbed, who sends his son Seth to the Garden of Eden to fetch the Oil of Mercy. Seth is greeted by an angel who gives him 3 seeds from the Tree of Life, and instructs him to place the seeds in his dead father's mouth (see Life of Adam above).

The tree that grows is chopped down by King Solomon to build his temple, but no matter how much it is cut it is still too big, and so it is thrown across a stream to serve as a bridge. This is where the paintings in the chancel take up the story.

The Queen of Sheba, on her journey to see King Solomon, is about to cross the stream when, by a miracle, she learns that the Saviour will be crucified on that very wood causing the end of the Kingdom of the Jews. When the Queen of Sheba tells Solomon this, he orders the bridge be removed and the wood buried. However, the wood is subsequently found and is used in the crucifixion as predicted.

Three centuries later in 312 AD, before the battle of Milvian Bridge, Emperor Constantine is told in a dream that he must fight in the name of the Cross to overcome his enemy. Constantine is victorious and afterwards his mother Helena travels to Jerusalem to recover the wood of the Holy Cross.

No one knows where the relic of the True Cross is, except a Jew called Judas. Judas is tortured and confesses that he knows the temple where the three crosses of Calvary are hidden. Helena orders that the temple be destroyed and the three crosses are found. The True Cross is recognized because it causes the miraculous resurrection of a dead girl.

In the year 615 AD, the Persian king, Khosrow, steals the wood, setting it up as an object of worship. The Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, wages war on Khosrow and, having defeated him, returns to Jerusalem with the Holy wood. A divine power prevents Heraclius from making a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and he sets aside all pomp and magnificence and enters the city carrying the Cross in a gesture of humility, following Jesus Christ's example.

## **Later painting schemes in the chapel**

### **The 17th century**

We have evidence that in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (possibly earlier), the nave was painted with a grey monochrome scheme composed of a series of rounded columns with square pedestals, with the spaces in between painted with fictive marbling.

### **The 18th century**

If you look around the Chapel you will see remains of red paint upon the walls. This is the remnants of a painted decorative scheme dating from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. This consisted of imitation marble columns with Corinthian capitals and a heavily moulded cornice. The panels between the columns were painted to look like red and pink marble, and the painted dado was made to look like timber.

## **Rediscovery and conservation**

### **The 19th century**

A major refurbishment of the Chapel was started in 1804. This was when the current plaster ceiling was installed, replacing the original 15<sup>th</sup> century timber roof. It was now that many of the medieval wall paintings were rediscovered and recorded by Thomas Fisher, and his records provide some of our best information about the paintings, including ones we can no longer see today.

Although there was some interest in the wall-paintings from the likes of Thomas Fisher and other antiquarians in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were covered up again and the walls painted white.

Unfortunately, the cycle of paintings in the chancel, the Legend of the Holy Cross (see above), were subsequently destroyed, and some of those in the nave were badly damaged

by the insertion of a wooden gallery along the west wall (where the organ pipes are now) to provide more seating in 1835.

At some point, probably around 1850, the Doom was overpainted with scrolls and covered with wooden prayer boards.



Prayer boards over the chancel arch

### **The 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The Day of Judgement or Doom, Dance of Death, and Life of Adam paintings were uncovered in the 1920's and conserved by Professor E W Tristram, who applied a wax coating – which was typical of the time – to prevent any more deterioration in the paint. Unfortunately, his efforts in the Chapel caused a great deal of damage as the wax solution he used prevented damp from escaping through the lime-plaster surface, and attracted dust and dirt which turned the painting brown.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The successful cleaning and conservation of the Doom and Erthe-upon-Erthe in 2016 were part of the 'Death Reawakened' project, supported by funding of £100000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project not only allowed for the conservation of the two paintings, it worked towards increasing the public's awareness and engagement with the Chapel so that it could be better appreciated and understood within the historical context of medieval Stratford-upon-Avon. The 'Death Revealed' project in March 2022 built on this earlier work – all the panels in the nave were temporarily removed so that we could see what else had survived and create a photographic record of it. Consideration is now being given as to how the paintings currently behind panels again can best be displayed in future.

***\*Volunteers at the Guild Chapel offer online and in-person talks on many aspects of the Guild Chapel, including the wall paintings. If you would like to know more, please visit: <https://www.guildchapel.co.uk/events>***

## Further reading

- Clifford Davidson (2008) *The Guild Chapel wall paintings at Stratford-upon-Avon* (New York: AMS Press)
- Kate Giles, Anthony Masinton and Geoff Arnott (2012) 'Visualising the Guild Chapel, Stratford upon Avon', *Internet Archaeology* 32: <https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue32/1/toc.html>
- Roger Rosewell (2014) *Medieval Wall Paintings* (Oxford: Shire Publications)