Chapter 4 - The Wall Paintings

The Chapel was once a riot of colour and imagery. In the 15th century the walls were painted with lots of pictures depicting the lives of various saints, as well as common and popular reflections on the afterlife…this seems strange now but was very usual for churches in those days. The changes that were brought about as part of the Reformation meant that images such as these were banned and were often destroyed completely. Whilst some of the Chapel’s paintings are lost for ever, we are very lucky in that some remained hidden under layers of paint and limewash for centuries until they were rediscovered. We are now working to conserve and record them so we can understand them better and help everyone know more about the Chapel’s history.

Ones you can see:

1. The Doom - above the Chancel arch

The Doom or Judgment shows what happens in the afterlife according to the Catholic belief of the time; Jesus sits on a rainbow in the centre above the outline of the cross (unfortunately the ceiling, which was installed later, is lower than the original and cuts him off at chest height, so his head is above the ceiling). Mary and St John the Baptist flank him on either side. On the left is the Kingdom of Heaven and all the souls rising from their graves to discover themselves going to Heaven. On the right are all the sinners being tortured by demons and being fed into the Mouth of Hell (this was depicted literally as a fanged serpentine creature which you can still make out in the painting). It was for the churchgoers to reflect on how they were living their lives.
2. Erthe upon Erthe poem - on the west wall to the left of the vestry doors

The poem depicted in this painting is called Earth upon Earth and occurs fairly frequently in the 15th century and later, into the 19th century. It was a favourite theme for Commonplace Books (collections of passages organised into books), and was frequently inserted on 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 earliest known texts of the poem date to the beginning of the 14th century and focus the attention on the inevitability of death and how we should all strive to lead a good life. It teaches that worldly goods should not distract us from our prayers and devotions and that we all end up equal in death and will be judged. It should be read as if the first “erthe” represents “man/woman” and the second “erthe” as “earth/dust”, with the point being that man and earth are the same thing, both created by God and that all men return to be dust eventually.

The painting can be seen in incredible detail today – as it is pictured above.
Fragmentary remains:

3. The Matyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket - on the west wall above the Erthe upon Erthe poem

*Image shows a Reproduction by T Fisher*

Saint Thomas Becket was a popular cultist figure of the Middle Ages. Murdered in 1170 by King Henry II’s knights, within Canterbury Cathedral, his death shocked Europe, quickly transformed into matyrdom and he was canonised in 1173. Becket was a former close personal friend of King Henry II but after becoming Archbishop of Canterbury as a result of his friend the King’s influence, took a stand against King Henry when he was trying to change laws that would mean the clergy would be subject to the law and trial in the crown’s courts rather than their own religious courts. After the murder, hordes of pilgrims transformed Canterbury Cathedral into a shrine. Four years later, in an act of penance, the king donned a sack-cloth walking barefoot through the streets of Canterbury while eighty monks flogged him with branches. King Henry capped his atonement by spending the night in the martyr’s crypt.

4. St George Slaying the Dragon - on the west wall above the organ case

*Image shows a Reproduction by T Fisher*

George of Lydda was a high ranking Roman soldier who was martyred in 303 c.e. 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.

The Crusaders brought back the myth of George Slaying the Dragon which became linked to his popular story; a dragon makes its nest at the spring that provides water for a city. Consequently, the citizens have to dislodge the dragon from its nest for a time, in order to collect water. To do so, each day they offer the dragon at first a sheep, and if no sheep can be found, then a maiden must go instead of the sheep. The victim is chosen
by drawing lots. One day, this happens to be the princess. The monarch begs for her life with no result. She is offered to the dragon, but there appears Saint George on his travels. He faces the dragon, protects himself with the sign of the cross, slays it and rescues the princess. The grateful citizens abandon their ancestral paganism and convert to Christianity.

In 1415 his feast day was officially elevated to a “festum duplex” (the highest rank of religious feast) which added to his popularity. When the Reformation in England severely curtailed the saints’ days in the calendar, Saint George's Day was among the holidays that continued to be observed.

5. St Modwena & St Ursula/St Edmund (the only surviving saints in the niches of the north and south walls, these two can be found closest to the west wall).

St Modwena (north wall)

Modwena was a nun in England, who founded Burton Abbey in Staffordshire in the 7th century. She was an Irish noblewoman by birth and founded the abbey on an island in the River Trent. Modwena spent seven years at the abbey with two other Irish nuns called Lazar and Althea, before the three embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome. Upon their return to England they built a church at Stapenhill in honour of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Modwena is reported to have performed many holy miracles at Burton Abbey, and to this day the well on the site is said have healing properties. After a time Modwena left Burton-upon-Trent and travelled to Scotland where she died in Langfortin, near Dundee, reportedly at the age of 130. Her body was returned to Burton-upon-Trent for burial.

St Edmund

Little factual evidence is known about Edmund but he is thought to have been a King of East Anglian origin and was first mentioned in an annal of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, written some years after his death. It is told that he was slain by the Danish vikings in battle after he refused the Danes' demand that he renounce Christ: the Danes beat him, shot him with arrows and then beheaded him, on the orders of Ivar the Boneless and his brother Ubba. According to one legend, his head was then thrown into the forest, but was found safe by searchers after they followed cries of "Here, Here, Here", they found the head being protected by a wolf. A coinage commemorating Edmund was minted and a popular cult emerged. His shrine at Bury St Edmunds was visited by many kings and during the Middle Ages, when Edmund was regarded as the patron saint of England, Bury and its magnificent abbey grew wealthy, but during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, his shrine was destroyed.
St Ursula (south wall)

Historians have attributed Ursula to various periods between 300 – 600AD, although it is generally agreed that Ursula was of Romano-British descent and that prior to her untimely demise she was betrothed to a man of high rank and was travelling to either be united with him or to undertake a pilgrimage prior to her marriage. Unfortunately Ursula and her travel companions – said to be anywhere between 11 and 11,000 virgin maidens – found themselves in the city of Cologne in Germany, where they were cruelly massacred for refusing to copulate with or marry the invading Huns, a nomadic race from Central Asia who conquered much of Europe in the fourth century. The virgin maidens were savagely beheaded, whilst Ursula their leader was said to have been shot by an arrow by the leader of the Huns.

Ones you cannot see/have been destroyed:

6. Legend of the True Cross - this was a series of 10 pictures covering the walls of the Chancel.

The Legend of the True Cross is based upon Jacobus de Voragine’s “Golden Legend”, a 13th century text that, amongst other things, recounts the miraculous story of the wood of Christ’s cross.

The story tells how Adam, on his son Seth to Archangel Michael, who gives him some seedlings from the tree original sin to be placed in his father’s mouth at the moment of his death. The tree that grows on the patriarch’s grave is chopped down by King Solomon and its wood, which could not be used for anything else, is thrown
across a stream to serve as a bridge.

The Queen of Sheba, on her journey to see Solomon and hear his words of wisdom, is about to cross the stream, when by a miracle she learns that the Saviour will be crucified on that wood. She kneels in devout adoration. When Solomon discovers the nature of the divine message received by the Queen of Sheba, he orders that the bridge be removed and the wood, which will cause the end of the kingdom of the Jews, be buried.

But the wood is found and, after a second premonitory message, becomes the instrument of the Passion.

Three centuries later, just before the battle of Ponte Milvio against Maxentius, Emperor Constantine is told in a dream, that he must fight in the name of the Cross to overcome his enemy.

After Constantine's victory, his mother Helena travels to Jerusalem to recover the miraculous wood. No one knows where the relic of the Cross is, except a Jew called Judas.

Judas is tortured in a well and confesses that he knows the temple where the three crosses of Calvary are hidden. Helena orders that the temple be destroyed; the three crosses are found and the True Cross is recognized because it causes the miraculous resurrection of a dead youth.

In the year 615, the Persian King Chosroes steals the wood, setting it up as an object of worship. The Eastern Emperor Heraclius wages war on the Persian King and, having defeated him, returns to Jerusalem with the Holy Wood. But a divine power prevents the emperor from making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. So, Heraclius, setting aside all pomp and magnificence, enters the city carrying the Cross in a gesture of humility, following Jesus Christ's example.

7. Life of Adam - stretches across the south wall of the Nave

*Images shows fragmentary remains uncovered in 2016*
The Danse Macabre or Dance of Death was a series of images depicting people from every station of life being led off by death. They were designed to remind people of the fragility of their lives and the vanities of earthly glories, and that the dance of death unites us all. The earliest known examples date to the early 15th century in France. Whilst much of the Guild Chapel painting has degenerated beyond the point of recognition, we can look at other examples to get an understanding of how it may have looked. We are hoping future conservation work will bring yet more insight into how this painting once looked.

The painting may show a chain of alternating dead and live dancers. From the highest ranks of the medieval hierarchy (usually pope and emperor) descending to its lowest (beggar, peasant, and child), each mortal’s hand is taken by a skeleton or an extremely decayed body. The apparent class distinction in almost all of these paintings is completely neutralized by Death as the ultimate equalizer, so that a sociocritical element is subtly inherent to the whole genre. Usually, a short dialogue is attached to each victim, in which Death is summoning him (or, more rarely, her) to dance and the summoned is moaning about impending death.
An example text might read as follows,

Death addresses the emperor:

Emperor, your sword won’t help you out
Sceptre and crown are worthless here
I’ve taken you by the hand
For you must come to my dance

Death calls the peasant to dance, who answers:

I had to work very much and very hard
The sweat was running down my skin
I’d like to escape death nonetheless
But here I won’t have any luck

The dance finishes (or sometimes starts) with a summary of the allegory’s main point:

"Who was the fool, who the wise [man],
who the beggar or the Emperor?
Whether rich or poor, [all are] equal in death."

(Anon: Vierzeiliger oberdeutscher Totentanz, Heidelberger Blockbuch, approx. 1460)

9. Whore of Babylon - behind the panelling on west wall (behind organ case)

Reproduction by T. Fisher

Images reproduced with the kind permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust