

ST. GEORGE

From: Historical and Antiquarian Notes, Gawsworth Church, Nr Macclesfield, Cheshire. Ancient Mural Paintings. By Joseph F A Lynch dated 1879.

The next subject is the legend forming the text for the painting of St George who was held in high honour in this country from an early period. This legend, as in the former instance, is fully developed in the picture. The same authority says:- “He was a tribune and came to Lybia, to a town called Silene, near which was a pond infested by a monster, which had many times driven an armed host back that had come to destroy him. He even approached the walls of the city, and with his exhalations poisoned all who came near. Sheep were cast to him to satisfy his voracity; when these were done, the sons and daughters of the people were devoured, and the lot fell on the Princess. The king covered his child in royal robes and sent her forth to meet the Dragon.



St George, riding past and seeing the maiden in tears, and the monster rising from the marsh to devour her, advanced spear in hand to meet him. Commending himself to God, he transfixed the Dragon, and bid the Princess pass the girdle round it and fear nothing, when this was done the Monster followed like a docile child. When they had brought it into the town, the people fled before it, St George recalled them, bidding them put fear aside, when the King and all his people were baptized, and George smote off the head of the monster.”

This subject was very popular with the early painters and sculptors, and found a conspicuous place in our Cathedrals and Old parish churches. The Normans had the figure of St George and the Dragon frequently carved on the tympanum of the doorways of the numerous edifices they erected.

The Gawsworth painting presents us the saint armed cap-à-pie, and mounted on horseback. He wields a large sword with his right hand, while with his left he thrusts a spear into the mouth of the Dragon, from which flows a stream of blood. The visor of St George is up, and exposes his face, there is imparted to the figure an air of prowess and courage. The armour was painted in gold colour, but the chain mail surrounding the neck and parts of the helmet were gilt, as were also the

spur, seen on the right foot, the handle of the sword, and the shoes of the horse, showing three nails in each. The artist has endeavoured to give the horse a degree of dash and power, but little can be said for its proportions; the bridle, etc., are of an ornamental character, in red; the saddle is constructed so as to give security to the rider; the colour of the horse was a cream white. The Dragon has a decidedly loathsome appearance, crouching beneath the overwhelming attack, and in turn its head unexpectedly received the point of the spear in its mouth, and in the struggle coils its tail round the hind leg of the horse in an agony of despair, extending the claws convulsively; it has wings, and is painted a dark brown colour. The foreground is filled with an effort to illustrate vegetation of a weak uncertain character, and bespattered with drops of blood. The Princess occupies what we may call the middle distance, she is kneeling, with the right hand raised in alarm, and is accompanied by a lamb, which is looking up at her. The costume of the Princess is regal, having an inner garment of a gold colour, over which falls another of ermine, an ornament surrounds her neck, to this is attached a cross; and she wears a crown which was gilded. The whole of the ground was washed in with a tone of green colour, as in the other painting, and is also ornamented with a few dwarf-like trees. At the top of the picture, on the left, there are a few ships, beyond which is a building having several towers. On the right is the castle, from the battlements of which the king and queen – the parents of the princess – are looking down on the scene below in the greatest dismay. They both wear crowns which were gilt, their garments being red. The king extends his right arm as if greatly agitated. The building has several towers, which are diversified by colour. Below, on the ground and near the king, is the figure of a man taking aim with a bow and arrow at a bird. The castle seems strongly fortified, and near the entrance is a subject that has proved very difficult to connect in any way with the narrative on which the painting is based. It is a kind of gallows having two uprights with forked ends to receive a cross beam, to which a rope is attached and a man hanging. From a very lengthened research I find that this is the only instance known, any interpretation of it is very difficult. And the only possible explanation I can suggest is that the artist introduced it merely as, perhaps, illustrating the power of the king to punish by death and, in the case of the archer, his power of defence.

It is worthy of remark how both these paintings illustrate the carrying out of the disposition manifested in the royal records of the thirteenth century for using green in a preponderating manner, and it is interesting also to note that the quaint old verse I have quoted in an earlier part relative to the colouring, is fully sustained in the castle in this picture, the towers being painted red. This painting was surrounded by a similar band of colour to the St Christopher.

The whole work in the St. George was in a better state of preservation than the other; and in both instances the various objects were heavily outlined with black. The sky colour had decayed as in the St. Christopher, nevertheless, I could detect a more careful execution in the work throughout.

Underneath these paintings I discovered the remains of a line of shields on the wall, and which originally contained coats of arms and an inscription in colour and gold. From small fragments I found on other parts it was clearly continued round the whole building, forming not only an interesting record, but a most effective band of ornament.