

THE DOOM OR LAST JUDGEMENT

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

The Last Judgement, or, in mediaeval language, "The Doom," forms the subject of the third painting, and is of peculiar interest. Although there have been discovered at various times mural paintings under somewhat similar circumstances, this important subject is of very rare occurrence, and since the time of its discovery has attracted much attention. As I have stated, it occupied the space between the east window and the south wall, which is now partly covered by the change made in one of the tombs since 1851.



The subject is divided into three parts – heaven, earth and hell. The latter division was clearly defaced by the erection of the tomb to the last Sir Edward Fitton, in the sixteenth century. It may perhaps be said with some justice, that this subject would appeal to the minds of the people in a more direct manner than the other two we have examined. Of this there is little doubt.

It occupied the most prominent site in the church, being at the east end, and thus continually before the spectator, so that in the words of Venerable Bede – "Having the strictness of the Last Judgement before their eyes, they should be cautioned to examine themselves with a more narrow scrutiny." The site generally selected for this subject was over the chancel arch in our old churches, and the fact of this arch being dispensed with at Gawsworth would appear to necessitate its being painted at the east end; and I am of opinion that before the alterations I have named in a previous part a painting of this important subject was executed above the old chancel arch.

There were many features in "The Doom" proving that it was of a later date and must have been executed by another artist. This was particularly to be seen in the style and the effort in several instances to give the effect of light and shade by blending the colours while wet, the only instance of this in the other paintings being in the St. George, where an evident attempt had been made in the manipulation of the dragon. I experienced great difficulty in uncovering this work, but was repaid by being enabled to secure the greater part. The artist did the best he could with the space at his command and its peculiar form, differing so much from the general site selected over the chancel arch, which enabled the painter to arrange the composition with much greater effect by placing the important subjects of hell and heaven more in accordance with the text to the left and right. This could not be done in the present instance, and obliged the three leading divisions of the painting to be placed under each other. In the first or upper division (the top of which extended to the roof) we have the figure of Our Lord seated on a rainbow. He is in the act of holding up His arms and exposing the wounds in His hands and side. He is clothed in a red mantle, His feet resting on the terrestrial globe. The head is surrounded by an elaborate cruciform nimbus, having a red cross with trefoil terminals, resting on a halo which was gilded; the band connecting the mantle round the neck was also in gold.



The head is surrounded by an elaborate cruciform nimbus, having a red cross with trefoil terminals, resting on a halo which was gilded; the band connecting the mantle round the neck was also in gold. The head of Our Lord has all the traditional characteristics adopted from the earliest times. Without entering at too great a length on the interesting subject of the personal appearance of our Lord, we have to notice that in all representations of him in Christian art from an early period the artists clearly followed an acknowledged type, no matter how rude the production. We find in this country in the tenth century that the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anslem, has left an account, written by Publius Lentulus, pro-consul of Judea, who caused our Lord to be brought before him, while he wrote a personal description of Him to be sent to the Roman Senate, and which says: - "A man of stately stature, dignified in appearance, with a countenance inspiring veneration, and which those who look upon it may love as well as fear. His hair is rather dark and

glossy, falls down in curls below his shoulders, and is parted in the middle after the manner of the Nazarenes; the forehead is smooth and remarkably serene; the face without mark or spot, and agreeably ruddy; the nose and mouth are faultless; the beard thick and reddish, of the colour of the hair, not long, but divided; the eyes bright of a varied colour." This, we shall see, is the character of the head in the Gawsorth painting. On either side of our Lord is the figure of an angel with extended wings, blowing trumpets of considerable length reaching to the earth; attached to these are two bannerets, the one on the left of our Lord containing the five wounds, and the one on the right the emblems for the passion, such as the ladder, cross, pillar etc., drops of blood being scattered over the ground, which was a light colour, of each banneret. The whole of the ground colour of this division was blue, to illustrate the heavens, but I could not find any effect of clouds being attempted. The rainbow was treated with various colours, as was the globe on which the feet of our Lord rested, and was encircled with a broad band of gold. Above the heads of our Lord and the angels were the sun and moon, painted so as to illustrate the text that the former shall be turned the colour of blood and the latter to darkness. On the right of our Lord below is the figure of the Blessed Virgin, opposite being that of St John, and both with the hands closed in the act of supplication for the souls coming to Judgement. The drapery of the Virgin is blue, and that of St John a warm brown.

A dark line serves to separate this part from the second division – or Earth – the ground colour being green to the base of the whole painting; a number of figures are rising from their graves in various attitudes of astonishment, etc. On the left is Satan kneeling on one knee and looking upwards his left hand carrying a kind of forked sceptre; the right arm was defaced, but from its general character would appear to have held a scroll, probably recording the sins for which he demanded the souls of the condemned. The whole attitude is one of addressing our Lord. He is made to appear exceedingly ugly, and is painted black, or rather a dark grey. Opposite is the figure of St Peter, who looks sternly at Satan. He carries a cross, and is guarding the entrance to Heaven. A crowd of figures are entering, led by one wearing the Roman Tiara, close by whom are four other crowned heads. The entrance was made to appear impressive, and was gilded, as were also the crowns. A large number of the elect followed; but this part was too decayed. It will be noticed that the figure of Satan is painted of large proportions as compared with the rest, the object evidently being to impress the spectator with his satanic power and hideousness.

The lower part of the painting is occupied with the entrance to hell and the demons. Hell is painted as having the mouth of a huge monster with flames issuing from it. The demons differ in form and colour; but have all the usual accompaniments of horns, hoofs, tails etc. One is engaged in carrying a number, tied with a rope across his shoulder, and has wings. Two others are escorting apparently two females, with a certain air of hilarity, to their dreadful fate. Near to these is a demon, the lower part of whose body is in the earth. He appears to be addressing some one in the grave, and even welcoming its occupant to the regions below. Another is engaged with a long bar, at the entrance to hell, energetically thrusting down the condemned. But, perhaps, the most singular feature is the demon having a black head and red body, wheeling a barrow, in which is seated a figure in almost suppliant attitude. This is the only instance in which such a subject has been discovered, and has given rise to opinion of a speculative character. The painting is in general accord with established types of similar works discovered. Still we have to say that Gawsorth presents, in this respect, an originality, which is very perplexing, and in its elucidation I have indulged in many theories, which I must confess were not altogether satisfactory. A strange fact in connection with it, is the construction of the barrow bearing an exact resemblance to those now in use on the moss at no great distance from the church. To the vast number who inspected this painting after my discovery,

this remarkable fact was much commented on, and gave rise to many local versions with which archaeological research had little to do; but for humour, and a certain originality of thought, I can scarcely decline relating an anecdote, in which the question received a remarkable solution. One day, being engaged on the upper part of the painting, I observed a man enter the church, of humble station in life, accompanied by a friend. I had seen him in the building frequently before, appearing to be much interested in the discovery, but seemed particularly struck on the barrow. However, he entered the church on this occasion with an air of confidence and authority at having solved the mystery, He adjusted his spectacles very carefully, which I observed had all the character of a heirloom, and placed his friend in a good position before the painting, delivering himself in his native Cheshire dialect, as follows:

“Naw, Thumus, tha sees, aw con show thee what ou chap wi’ th’ barrow means; you mun know as th’ papists ith oud times wur very partikler abait fokes stealing out as belonged to any one else; yon barrow, tha’ knows, is one o’ tham as they usen up o’ th’ Moss, an that chap ith barrow stool it; nai, they always made foke, tha’ knows, mak restitution, an that chap forget, so yo known he deed abait doing as he out, an nai, yon chap I’ red’s wheeling him to hell ith barrow he stool.”

[Now Thomas, you see I can show you what our chap with the barrow means, you must know that the papists in the old times were very particular about folks stealing anything that did not belong to themselves. That barrow, you know, is one of those seen up on the Moss, and that chap stole the barrow. Now they always make folk, you know, make restitution, and that chap forgot. So, you know, he died without doing as he should, and now that chap in red is wheeling him to hell in the barrow he stole]

His friend appeared perfectly satisfied as well as considerably impressed with the deep learning of his guide. It may be interesting to notice in connection with this matter, the “Mystery Plays” enacted at Chester during the middle ages. The Last Judgement formed one of their most impressive subjects. We have records of their dialogues and the various performances. A number of actors were dressed and took the part of demons, the costumes being of different forms and colours. Hell was represented by a considerable structure, with the accompaniment of real fire, and there was an air of reality imparted to it which must have made a deep impression on the spectator. I draw attention to this matter as leading me to form the opinion, that the painters of the period would, without doubt, receive impressions from these representations forming – in fact – the type for them in the treatment of the various details in this subject, particularly with reference to the different forms of demon.

The arrangement of “The Doom” at Gawsworth, in the first and second divisions, is in perfect keeping with the established mode of treatment, but this was not always so in the third or lower part, where the inventiveness of the artist was allowed a greater scope provided he rendered hell and the demons as horrible as possible. Nevertheless, with all its imaginative effects there is nothing approaching to the introduction of a wheel barrow. Therefore as there is no authority whatever I can only conclude that it is one of those eccentricities inspired under the circumstances I have named at Chester, and that the painter may have thought it a good point to show that no obstacle the condemned might attempt can avail.

Near the base of the painting, and opposite the mouth of hell is a tree differing entirely in treatment from those in the St Christopher and St George, and in which we see a more decided effort to approach nature. This may be taken as a further proof of what I have stated, that this work was painted by another artist. The ground colours of the painting were executed in two large washes – blue in the upper division, divided simply by a black line from the lower part – the whole of which was covered with green. I noticed in the painting of the mouth of the monster at the

entrance to hell, and in some of the figures there was an evident effort to round the forms by the fusion of the tints, so as to obtain the effect of light and shade. As I have stated, vinegar was used by the tempera painters in England; but did not in any way prevent the quick drying or setting of the colours. Another medium was then introduced to assist them in obtaining command over the colours for shading, which was honey.

The part specially observable in this painting, where "hatching" is introduced, is at the end of the trumpets held by the angels. The flesh- colour in the three paintings was decayed and very indefinite. A somewhat square fissure will be noticed in the wall near the base. This was caused by the insertion of a pole to assist in carrying the scaffold while repairing the roof in 1851, and before the discovery of the paintings. A similar break occurs near the boat in the St Christopher. There is a difference, which is worthy of note, in the cruciform nimbi surrounding the head of Our Lord in "The Doom", and that of the child on the shoulder of St Christopher. In the former the cross is painted red on gold, and in the latter it is gold on red. The nimbi are of different forms, so as to distinguish the various sacred persons. In that of Our Lord the cross is introduced, which in his glorified state, is more elaborate in details. The nimbus in "the Doom" is circular, while that in the painting of St Christopher is of an oval or "vesica" shape. The nimbi surrounding the heads of the Virgin, St John and St Peter are simple broad circles. The artist endeavoured to impart a degree of dignity to the figures of the elect; but unfortunately this part was much decayed.

The discovery of this painting on the south side naturally led me to examine the corresponding space on the north side of the east window. I felt confident that another subject would have been painted here illustrating most probably the "Joys of the Blessed". My research was repaid by finding some slight remains of colour and gold. On the south side of the church I found the remains of indistinct outline, and one or two patches of dark colour. The subject seemed to have been a figure, with a painted canopy above the head. Another painting was clearly executed above the south porch, from the remains I found; but in these three instances it was impracticable to make anything out in a definite form. These evidences must at once establish the fact that the greater part of the wall surface was covered with paintings.