St Peter's Wall Paintings: different views

A treasure store of wall painting was revealed in the last century. At the time of the Reformation such sacred images were outlawed and many destroyed. Fortunately here in Hook Norton they were whitewashed over with a lime wash which acted as a protective.
John Wheatley[1]

Intrigued by the appearance of colourful shapes beneath the deteriorating lime wash inside the nave of St. Peter's, the Rector appointed in 1932, Ernest Nind, invited an expert from Oxford, Mr E.T. Long, to examine the walls of St Peter's. He reported in December 1938, as follows:

Over chancel arch is an extensive scheme of decoration, still for most part obscured by superimposed lime wash. So far as can be made out at present the painting is in good state of preservation.

It is of C15th date. A large male figure can be seen on the left & it is possible that the object portrayed is the Annunciation with the Angel on the left of the window and the BVM [2] on the right.

The colours are bright & there is no doubt that the painting should be exposed as it would add much to the beauty & interest of St Peter's.

All superimposed plaster should be removed, loose plaster consolidated & the whole treated with a special preservative which will fix & intensify the colours.

The cost of this necessary work would not exceed £10.

The painting to the left of the clerestorey window.
Photo: Donald Ratcliffe

[1] John Wheatley: "St Peter's Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire" (typescript, Village Museum and Archive).
[2] Blessed Virgin Mary

The southern half of the painting over the chancel arch.
To the right of the window stands St Paul, and below him an angel.
The mark left by the cross bar of the great rood or cross is visible above the point of the arch.

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On the south wall of the nave, between 1st & 2nd bays of the arcade, is an extensive scheme of decoration, mainly in red & in pink on a cream background with some yellow & black. At present it is impossible to say what the subject is in this case but there is no doubt that it is in every way worthy of being uncovered & treated.

The cost of this would not exceed £5, or £4 if done at the same time as the painting over the chancel arch.

It is probable that paintings exist in other parts of the Church & it would be worthwhile making an investigation of the plaster. This could be done without cost when the other paintings are treated.[3]

It was agreed Mr Long should undertake the work, and in a follow-up letter, Mr Long said he would endeavour to make a reduction in the estimate as Mr Nind was putting him up free of charge!

[3] E.T. Long, of 8, Keble Road, Oxford, to Rev. Mr Nind, at Hook Norton Rectory, 10th December 1938, copy in Village Archive.

The result of Long's work in uncovering the paintings was announced in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1940, in an article that discussed recently discovered church wall paintings, many of which depicted the Day of Judgement, or what was called a "Doom".

> *At Hook Norton slight traces of colour have been visible over the chancel arch for some years. Last June as a result of careful investigation a very striking scheme of decoration was revealed dating from the second half of the fifteenth century. In common with several other Cotswold churches Hook Norton has a large window in the east wall of the nave, which precludes the placing of the Doom in this position. The existing scheme was evidently executed to fit the available space and the result is most effective and decorative.*
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> *On either side of the window are figures of St. Peter and St. Paul and below two charming angels in apparelled albs and amices swinging censers, all set on a deep red ground with delicate scroll work in white. At the apex of the arch a blank space indicates the position of the cross beam of the Rood. On the south side of the nave a sadly mutilated representation of The Seven Deadly Sins came to light. At the bottom are shown the jaws of Hell, from which proceeds a large figure depicting Pride with representations of the other sins in the form of dragons proceeding from either side of the central figure. On the opposite wall are faint traces of what may have been a St. Christopher.*
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> *The discoveries at Broughton and Hook Norton form a valuable addition to the splendid series of wall paintings surviving in North Oxfordshire. Few districts if any, are richer in work of this sort, which includes examples at Bloxham (fifteenth century), Cropredy (fifteenth century), Horley, Hornton and South Newington (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), while at Croughton just over the Northamptonshire border is a magnificent early fourteenth-century series depicting the gospel story.*[4]

[4] E.T. Long, "Recently Discovered Wall Paintings in England: II," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 76 (1940), page 162.

Not everyone agrees with Long's judgements on the Hook Norton paintings. They think the window over the chancel arch was inserted *after* the painting and probably cut into it severely. The local historian Christopher Gill presented this very different interpretation in his very useful (and much copied) guide to St Peter's, probably written in the 1950s:

> *In recent times an attempt has been made to uncover the beautiful paintings which covered the walls before they were obliterated during the Reformation. When the window above the chancel arch was inserted during the 15th Century it can be seen that a portion of the arm of the painted figure on the left (St. Peter) was cut away. In his hands he holds his keys, one of which can be seen at the edge of the window. On the other side is depicted St. Paul holding the sword of the Spirit and underneath are two angels swinging censers. Despite the lack of heating in earlier times, the congregation must surely have benefited from the warm colours and scenes of these murals.*[5]

In 1982 a National Survey of Wall Painting agreed that the wall paintings in St Peter's were fourteenth-century. One slight problem with this earlier date is the fact that the painting shows the outline of the upper part of the Rood, or great Cross, which hung down from the chancel arch. The Rood was associated with the screen and loft that were built in the fifteenth century, and the painting therefore appears to have been done after.

St Peter:
Has the hand been chopped off by the insertion of the window?

More recently, John Wheatley, a local expert on St Peter's, prefers the earlier date: he writes that the "completeness" of the painting of the two saints was "compromised when the window of five lights was inserted. Not realised at the time, this cut away St Peter's arm although his keys can be seen at the edge. Happily St Paul's 'Sword of the Spirit' is still

[5] Christopher Wigg, *St Peter's Church, Hook Norton* (Gloucester, no date but after 1949), page 7.

visible."[6] But was it "not realised at the time"? Since the clerestory window above the chancel arch is generally agreed to be fifteenth-century, does not this interpretation require the lime washing to have taken place long before the Reformation condemned such images in churches? Is it not more likely that, if the painting preceded the window, it was cut into with full awareness of its existence?

The other problem relates to the painting on the south wall of the nave: what is it? Long thought it represented some of the Seven Deadly Sins, whereas the 1982 National Survey described it as a "Doom". John Wheatley reports that one expert on wall paintings informally expressed the view that the "fourteenth century fragment over the south arcade" represents The Harrowing of Hell rather than the figure of Pride in the Seven Deadly Sins. The "Harrowing of Hell" is the Middle English term for the triumphant descent of Christ into Hell between the time of his Crucifixion and his Resurrection (the "he descended into hell" of the Apostle's Creed) when he brought salvation to all the righteous who had died since the beginning of the world.

Fragment of painting on the south wall of the nave. Does it depict the Seven Deadly Sins or Christ's Harrowing of Hell?
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Which of these varying views do you think best explains the wall paintings?

The National Survey of Wall Painting in 1982 thought the paintings "in good condition", though the "doom painting" on the south wall of the nave was suffering from "from the wax preservative which E T Long told me he had used to preserve the paintings in this church." The experts agreed that more paintings remain to be uncovered: would it not be exciting to see what they are?

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[6] John Wheatley: "St Peter's Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire" (typescript, Village Museum and Archive).

References

John Wheatley: “St Peter’s Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire” (typescript, Village Museum and Archive).

E.T. Long, “Recently Discovered Wall Paintings in England: II,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 76 (1940), pages 156-162.

Christopher Wigg, *St Peter’s Church, Hook Norton* (Gloucester, n.d. but after 1949).