The Wall Paintings in The Lady Chapel
by Julie Adams, January 2017

For the past 52 months, one of the loveliest areas in the Cathedral has been closed to visitors whilst work has been carried out on the mortuary chests which normally rest on top of the screens on either side of the presbytery. The Lady Chapel is special in so many ways; in addition to the rare survival of the wall paintings that are the subject of this article, the Tudor stalls are the only pre-reformation stalls to have survived in a Lady Chapel anywhere in the country. The remains and copies of the grisaille wall paintings depict miracles and legends associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary; the only other similar series exists in Eton College Chapel. (A much earlier 13th century scheme was rediscovered comparatively recently in 1992, in a chapel dedicated to St Mary of Castro in the Agricola tower of Chester Castle, but these wall paintings are in a very different style.)

Background

Godfrey de Lucy was the initiator of the project to build the retroquire and eastern chapels, including the original Lady Chapel, and he died in 1204. Nearly three hundred years later, the compotus roll of 1496 mentions that work was in progress in the Lady Chapel and it is likely that this major refurbishment was carried out between the years of 1492 and 1501. New woodwork was created in a similar style to that in the chapel at The Vyne near Basingstoke, and using the same craftsmen. Large stained glass windows were inserted and we know from a contemporary account by Lieutenant Hammond who visited the Cathedral in 1635 [1] that the window on the north side was the story of The Revelation, the east was a Jesse tree, and the south side was the story of The Nativity. Decoration in the Lady Chapel includes the coats of arms or rebuses of Prior Hunton, Prior Silkstede, Bishop Courtenay, and Bishop Langton, shown in Figs 1 - 4. This suggests that the refurbishment was carried out over a period when all four held office in Winchester, that is before 1493 when Bishop Courtenay died, and after 1498 when Prior Hunton died.

Elizabeth of York, wife of Henry VII came to Winchester for the birth of her first born son, Prince Arthur, in 1486. Elizabeth's coat of arms appears on a painted stone frieze within the Lady Chapel, as do those of her husband, Henry VII and those of Prince Arthur, shown in figures 5, 6 and 7. It has commonly been assumed that money given by Elizabeth of York was used for the refurbishment of the Lady Chapel, but so far no written evidence has been found to prove that this was the case.

William of Waynflete had preceded Bishop Courtenay in Winchester. Throughout the 1430s Waynflete taught at Winchester College, but after being introduced to Henry VI, he
was taken into royal service and eventually became one of the first Provosts at Henry’s foundation, Eton College, in 1471. Wayneflete remained very loyal to Eton College, and was also a faithful executor to Henry VI. Records at Eton College tell of painters being in the College in 1479-80, and that the Provost and Fellows of the College were frequent visitors to William of Wayneflete to receive money from him. [2] It has been assumed from the evidence that the person who paid for the grisaille paintings at Eton was William of Wayneflete. Certainly there is no mention of money being paid from the college accounts for materials or painters’ wages until much later, indeed significantly, not until after the death of William of Wayneflete in 1486.

Thomas Silkstede succeeded Prior Hunton in Winchester in 1498; his portrait is included as a donor figure in the Lady Chapel paintings at Winchester, and can be found above the piscina to the south of the altar. (Fig 8) The paintings are thought to date from c.1500.
They are not on such a lavish scale as the series at Eton but many of the same subjects have been illustrated. (See chart on page 5) The two sequences are in a similar style, mostly monotone and thought to have had a Flemish influence.

At the time of the Reformation in 1538, The Blessed Virgin Mary could no longer be revered in the way she had been in The Roman Catholic Church. Religious images, sculptures and paintings, were removed from churches, and Saints’ faces were obliterated in stained glass windows, as shown in figure 9. Lady Chapels were no longer viable in The Church of England. Consequently, the wall paintings were scraped (particularly on the south side of the chapel), covered with thick paint, and white-washed. At some stage the altar was removed, and the chapel became known as the Morning Chapel, as morning prayer was said here.

Paintings Revealed

Towards the end of the 18th century, a catholic priest, the Reverend John Milner took an interest in the history of the Cathedral. He was well known for his book on Winchester entitled *The History Civil and Ecclesiastical, and Survey of the Antiquities of Winchester*, [3] first published in 1798, but before that, his colleague, John Carter, an architect, had made careful drawings of what was visible in 1784 and together they published a paper, *Specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting*. In that Milner describes how the paintings on the walls of The Lady Chapel had become visible after years of being covered with whitewash. He wrote “I do not find any person who can remember when the whitewash first began to fall off though many may recollect the paintings being much less visible than they are at present.”

A copy of John Carter’s drawings was placed in the Lady Chapel so that visitors could interpret the paintings, and the paintings were clearly portrayed in Britton’s engraving of 1817. (Fig 10)
The paintings were not in a good state of repair, and the subject matter was certainly not in favour. Prior to the rise of the Oxford Movement in the middle of the 19th century, Churches of England looked very plain and bare. Late in that century there was an undertaking for our Lady Chapel to be tidied up; the floor was renewed, and many damaged carvings on the ends of the pews were replaced by Thomas and Co. It was reported in the Hampshire Chronicle in 1901, that the walls were about to be covered with fabric which meant that the paintings would no longer be visible. (Fig 11)

The fabric covering lasted just one generation, and in 1929 the decision was taken to remove it and to invite Professor Tristram, the country’s expert, to work on the paintings. Subsequently he was asked to reproduce the paintings on boards hinged over the wall paintings, and in 1934 the first batch of panels was dedicated and paid for by Lady Northbrook in memory of her husband. There is a small plaque to commemorate this, and the second batch of paintings was dedicated in 1936.

The Cult of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary has a limited number of mentions in the New Testament, but during the 5th century her importance was greatly elevated. She began to be known by the title “Mother of God”, and the special veneration due to her was given the term hyperdulia, which was less than the veneration due to God, but greater than that given to other saints and the angels. The cult of The Virgin Mary grew throughout the medieval period. Not only were many churches dedicated to her, but images proliferated; sculptures of Mary were very familiar, particularly representations of The Virgin and Child, but also other scenes from her life. The Lady Chapel at Ely has sculptures all around of the life and miracles of the Virgin and dates to the middle of the 14th century. The prayer book known as Queen Mary’s Psalter, originally dating from c.1310-1320, but given to Mary Tudor in 1553, also has many examples of illustrations of Mary’s miracles. The Marian miracles appear to have become a less popular subject after the 14th century so it is noteworthy that they were the theme of the two cycles at Eton and Winchester.

In Winchester Cathedral we are fortunate to have the remnants of a series of stained glass images, depicting the Joys of Mary in the tracery of the windows in the north and south presbytery aisles.
As at Eton, the Lady Chapel wall paintings are arranged in two tiers on both the north and south sides of the chapel, although our images are much smaller than those at Eton. The subject matter came from two sources.

In around 1260, Jacobus de Voragine compiled a number of hagiographies (biographies of saints) which was known as the Legenda Aurea or Legenda Sanctorum. This Golden Legend was very widely read in Europe and over 800 manuscript copies of the work survive. It was one of the first books to be printed by William Caxton in the English language and extracts are still being published today as a Penguin Classic.

The other source is the Speculum Historiale by Vincent of Beauvais who died in 1244.

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* The 16 titles which are asterisked also appear in the scheme at Eton College Chapel, but not in the same relative position.

In 1929 M R James and E W Tristram wrote a treatise on the wall paintings at Eton and Winchester which was published in the XVIIth Volume of The Walpole Society. This was before either of the two painting schemes had been restored, but the article looks at similarities between them. The drawings of the Winchester paintings made by John Carter in 1784 (Figs 12 and 13) were reproduced within the article, and they must have been an extremely useful resource for Professor Tristram when he came to recreate the images on the hinged boards.

These drawings show that in 1784, much of the subject matter was decipherable, but the eastern paintings on the north side were particularly badly deteriorated.
Fig 12  Carter's Drawings of the wall paintings on the north

Fig 13 Carter's Drawings of the wall paintings on the south

 Thumbnails showing Professor Tristram's reconstructions

Scene with a knight

North door now closed off

Fig 14 North wall of Lady Chapel

Fig 15 South wall of Lady Chapel
The top panel to the east end of the north wall was too badly damaged for Professor Tristram to be able to reconstruct it accurately, although he has included a well clad leg, and part of another figure. Some of the scenes have descriptive writing in Latin below them and most appropriately, on the image of the Pious Painter, there is the assignation “E W TRISTRAM fecit”. (See Fig 21) Professor Tristram wrote about the Lady Chapel paintings in one of the earliest volumes of The Cathedral Record in 1933. [4]

The Panels in More Detail

The only Biblical subject included is the Annunciation, (Fig 16), found above the north door, which is no longer functional. This is a very traditional representation with the Angel Gabriel on the left and Mary on the right. A vase containing lilies, one of the emblems of Mary, is placed between them and a dove flies overhead. This photograph clearly shows part of the coloured stone frieze above the Annunciation and Prior Thomas Hunton’s rebus in the spandrels above the door. The typical red and green paint which was so prevalent in the Tudor period is also apparent, and gives a contrast to the grisaille of the paintings.

Stories on The North Wall

The Thief Ebbo
(north wall Panel 1a)

The thief Ebbo was convicted to be hanged but he prayed to the Virgin Mary and she saved him from death.
St John of Damascus
(north wall panel 2a)

St John of Damascus was brought up in Syria. A false witness sent forged documents to the Caliph suggesting that John was involved in a plot to assassinate the Caliph. The Caliph ordered that his right hand should be cut off. John prayed fervently in front of an icon of The Virgin Mary and miraculously his hand was restored.

Fig 20 St John of Damascus

The Pious Painter
(north wall panel 1b)

Whilst an artist was painting an image of the Virgin Mary in a church, his ladder was taken away, but The Virgin Mary held on to him so that he did not fall.

(Note the name of E W TRISTRAM below the ladder.)

Fig 21 The Pious Painter

The Rose with Ave Maria
(north panel 2b)

This represents a story in which a monk constantly recited certain psalms, of which the initials formed the words “Ave Maria”. After his death a rose (one of the flowers associated with The Virgin Mary) grew out of his mouth.

Fig 22 The Rose with Ave Maria
The Devil as Steward
(north wall panel 2d)

A robber knight had an evil steward in his employment. On one occasion the knight captured a man who told him that the steward was the devil in disguise, and made him assume his true form. The steward then admitted that if the knight had ever omitted to make his salutation to the Virgin, he would have strangled him.

Fig 23 The Devil as Steward

The Sick Cleric
(north wall panel 2e)

This represents one of many stories in which the Virgin Mary cares for a sick cleric who is devoted to her.

Fig 24 The Sick Clerk

Panel 2f on the North Wall

The image was so badly destroyed on this panel that Professor Tristram was unable to reconstruct it meaningfully. He has created the leg of a supposed knight, and there is a second leg in the picture, in a position which implies that someone has fallen.

Fig 25 Partial Reconstruction of A Scene with a Knight
The Sequence showing the Story of St George, St Basil and Julian The Apostate

St Basil, and Julian  
(north wall panel 1d)

St Basil and Julian had been brought up together and were taught the scriptures together but Julian rejected his faith and eventually became the Roman Emperor. St Basil became Archbishop of Caesarea and Julian made threats and impossible demands upon him, which St Basil tried hard to meet.

Fig 26 St Basil and St Julian

St George raised by the Virgin  
(north wall panel 1e)

In some versions of the story St George was raised from the dead in order to get rid of Julian the Apostate.

Fig 27 St George raised by the virgin

St George slays Julian  
(north wall panel 1f)

St George is shown killing Julian.

Fig 28 St George slays St Julian
Priest of One Mass  
(south wall panel 1a)

A priest only knew one mass. A complaint was made to his Bishop and he was suspended from duty, but the Virgin Mary interceded and he was reinstated.

Fig 29 Priest of One Mass

Betrothal to Image  
(south wall panel 2a)

A young man is attracted to an image of the Virgin and goes to place a ring on the statue. Eventually he becomes a monk.

Fig 30 Betrothal to Image

Vision of St Angelo  
(south wall panel 1c)

This refers to the Vision of St Gregory at the end of the 6th century, when Rome was suffering from a great plague. He ordered a procession to St Peter's, and at the end of it, he had a vision of an angel on the top of the Castello built by Hadrian as his mausoleum. This was taken as a sign that the plague was over. Many centuries later a statue of the Archangel Michael was added to the top of the tower.

Fig 31 Vision of St Angelo
The Jew of Bourges
(south wall panel 2c)

A young Jewish boy living in Bourges went with his Christian friends to church and took bread and wine as they did. When he got home, his father asked him where he had been and was so angered by his reply that, much to the protestations of his mother, he threw him into an oven. The young boy survived and the neighbours retaliated by throwing the father into the oven where he perished.

Fig 32 The Jew of Bourges

A Miracle at Mont St Michel
(south wall panel 1d)

Mont Saint Michel was a place of great pilgrimage, and it was considered a dangerous destination as the seas around the island were inhospitable. A pregnant woman made the journey and was protected by the Virgin Mary. She gave birth on the causeway to the island.

Fig 33 A Miracle at Mont St Michel

The Image as Hostage
(south wall panel 2d)

A woman stole an image of the Christ child in order to force the Virgin to restore her captive son to her.

Fig 34 The Image as Hostage
The Woman Unconfessed
(south wall panel 1e)

This is the Miracle of a woman who was restored to life so that she could make a confession of a deadly sin.

Fig 35  The Woman Unconfessed

The Columns Raised
(south wall panel 2e)

A basilica in honour of the Virgin was being built in Constantinople. Columns were brought to adorn it but they were too heavy to be lifted. The architect was in despair but the Virgin appeared to him and told him to take three boys from school who would easily be able to accomplish the work. The Virgin had explained the use of pulleys and ropes to the architect.

Fig 36  The Columns Raised

The Wounded Image
(south wall panel 1f)

A man came and found a woman praying in front of an image of the Virgin Mary and he mocked her. He threw stones at the image to damage it, but he himself fell to the floor and died.

Fig 37  The Wounded Image
The Drowned Monk  
(south wall panel 2f)

Every night a wayward monk left his monastery to visit his mistress, but before he left he would say the Ave Maria. One night he fell into a river and drowned. Devils and angels argued over his soul; the devils’ case was stronger and the angels were about to give in when the Virgin made them recover the monk’s soul. The angels returned the soul to his body and revived him.

Fig 38 The Drowned Monk

The Miracle of the Candle  
(south wall panel 1g)

This is the story of a pious woman who had a vision of a Candlemas service attended by the Virgin and she was miraculously given a real candle.

Fig 39 The Miracle of the Candle

The Ship Saved  
(south wall panel 2g)

A ship was in difficulty on the high seas in a storm. The Virgin Mary brought the ship to safety.

Fig 40 The Ship Saved
Between the images on the upper tier, there are representations of unnamed saints, both male and female. (Figs 41 and 42) They stand on columns, which are comparable in design to the columns of similar date which support carved figures in the Langton Chapel. Originally, Professor Tristram had assumed that the figures between the scenes were those of prophets and kings, but he must have changed his mind when he compared the Winchester paintings with those at Eton, where saints are clearly defined and have been identified.

**Fig 41** A Female Saint

**Fig 42** A Male Saint

**Conclusion**

The Eton paintings are considered to be the College’s greatest art treasure, and rank as the most important surviving series of late medieval murals in Northern Europe. More is known about them as relevant documents still exist in their college records. We know they were completed soon after 1486, and we even know that they were executed by named painters, Baker and Gilbert. [4] Sadly, I have never seen behind the hinged boards in Winchester, but I understand that there is now very little left of the original paintwork. However, we do have a lasting copy and reminder of images described by John Milner [3] as “highly curious and valuable for the information they convey concerning the customs of former times”. They too must surely rank as one of Winchester Cathedral’s special treasures.

**Photographs**

All of the photographs were taken by the author, many as much as ten years ago, when the technology was significantly less advanced. She looks forward to retaking the images once the Lady Chapel is accessible.

**Footnotes**

1. Prior Thomas Hunton, Prior of St Swithun’s Priory from 1470 to 1498.
2. Prior Thomas Silkstede, Prior of St Swithun’s Priory from 1498 to 1524.
3. Bishop Peter Courtenay, Bishop of Winchester from 1487 to 1493.
4. Bishop Thomas Langton, Bishop of Winchester from 1493 to 1501.

5. Elizabeth of York had a unique place in history, the daughter of a king (Edward IV), sister of a king (Edward V), wife of a king (Henry VII), and mother of a king (Henry VIII). The coat of arms of Elizabeth of York is complicated and the version used on the frieze differs from both the one in the Lady Chapel east window by Kempe in 1898, and that given online, which is illustrated here. Elizabeth’s personal arms are shown impaled upon those of her husband. Both his and hers are quartered.

The three golden lions passant guardant on a red field were used in English royal coats of arms from Richard I onwards, and are part of the royal arms today.

The three gold fleur-de-lis on a blue field were adapted from the the French royal coat of arms, representing the Trinity. This simpler version of the French arms (previously, more fleur-de-lis were used) was included in English royal coats of arms from 1400 until 1603, based on the English claim to the French throne. The quartering of the two was used by kings from Henry IV through to Henry VIII, so including Elizabeth of York's father and her husband. This four-part combination is shown twice: in the four elements making up the left half of the coat of arms (that of Henry VII), and again in the upper left quadrant of the right half of the coat of arms (in her own arms inherited from her father Edward IV).

The cross gules (red cross on a gold field) represents the de Burgh family; Elizabeth de Burgh had married Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the second (surviving) son of Edward III.

The element with blue and gold stripes and a white shield comes from the Mortimer arms. Philippa, daughter of Lionel, Duke of Clarence and Elizabeth de Burgh had married Roger Mortimer.

(Information taken from womenshistory.about.com)


7. Thomas and Co, was a partnership between Thomas Laverty, a cabinet maker, and the architect George Herbert Kitchin, son of George William Kitchin a former Dean of Winchester.

8. Queen Mary's Psalter is housed at The British Library, and is named for Queen Mary Tudor (1516 - 1558), daughter of King Henry VIII, as it came into her possession, but the manuscript was not made for her. In fact, it was produced nearly 200 years before Mary's birth. The Psalter was created in England, probably in London or East Anglia, between 1310 and 1320. Some scholars argue that it was made for Isabella of France (1295 - 1358), Queen of England and consort of Edward II, but unfortunately there is no certainty about this point. The Psalter was certainly created for an aristocratic patron, and possibly a royal one, but the lack of any colophon or coats of arms in the manuscript means that it has been impossible to conclusively link it to any original owner.
There are 223 Old Testament images, 24 calendar scenes, 104 half- or full-page miniatures, 23 historiated initials, and 464 marginal or bas-de-page drawings. Most remarkably, every image in the manuscript was produced by a single highly-skilled artist, now known as the Queen Mary Master.

(Information taken from British Library website)

9. Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936) was well known as an author of ghost stories. He was Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University during WWI and Provost at Eton from 1918 until 1936.

10. Ernest William Tristram (1882-1952) was an Art Historian and a conservationist, who trained at The Royal College of Art. Some of his techniques are now considered controversial, and it is likely that covering the wall paintings with the boards has had a detrimental effect upon the originals, as air cannot circulate.

References


4. Professor E W Tristram, Winchester Cathedral Record, Vol 2 1933, pp 14-17, Wall Paintings in the Lady Chapel

Further Reading

Roger Rosewell, Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches, published 2011 by The Boydell press

Emily Howe, Henrietta McBurney, Professor David Park, Wall Paintings of Eton, published 2012 by Scala.