

Church's ancient murals restored by expert to their original glory



A close-up of the larger fragment which form part of a 13th century painting depicting an old French legend

TWO fragments of murals, the earliest dating back to the 13th century, have just been restored at St. Clement's Parish Church.

The murals were first rediscovered in 1879 when the church was being restored, but were in poor condition and practically colourless.

Now a professional mural restorer from England, Mr. Michael Rhys-Jenkins, has brought the fragments back to as close to their original glory as was possible.

The largest fragment is in the south transept of the church, and is part of a 13th century painting that depicted the legend of "The three living and the three dead", an old French poem telling how three young princes out hunting see three horrible corpses who give them a lecture on the perils of worldly success.

All that remains of the painting is the hind legs of a horse followed by the fore legs of another, with a dead boar and a dog's head with a hand reaching down to it.

Underneath this is part of the legend in French, which translated reads:

"Alas, St. Mary! Who are these three corpses that are so grim?

It breaks my heart to see them thus piteous."

The other fragment of mural is in the north transept, and is part of a late 15th century painting depicting St. Barbara standing by her tower. St. Barbara of Heliopolis in Egypt was beheaded for her faith after being miraculously converted to Christianity.

The restoration work has been spread over three months, with Mr. Rhys-Jenkins first visiting the church to undertake a feasibility study in June.

The fragments and the surrounding areas were scanned with the aid of ultra-violet light to reveal



Mr Rhys-Jenkins at work on one of the murals

the outlines of the painting, and then the stonework was cleaned with nitric acid and caustic soda.

Alcohol was then injected which acts as a solvent for the paint pigment embedded underneath the surface, and which with capillary action is brought to the surface so that the original colours used are discovered.

Mr. Rhys-Jenkins thinks that some people may be critical of what appear to be bright primary colours that he has used to restore the mural, but the colours have been matched with specimens of the original pigment and he says the mural will not look so "fresh" in a few years time.

Unfortunately there is no hope of recovering any more of the hunting scene in the south transept, which must have been part of a mural over 20 feet long, as the stone surrounding the fragment is of a different origin to that on which the mural appears.

The other mural, depicting St. Barbara, was also part of a larger painting which has been cut in two by an arch that joined a previously separate chapel with the main body of the church.

Part of the mural is just visible on the other side of the arch, depicting a dragon's wing, and an attempt to restore this may be undertaken at a later date.

Also in the church is a previously restored mural on the wall of the nave depicting St. Michael slaying the dragon.