

THE TEMPLECOMBE PANEL PAINTING

Just at the time this *Newsletter* was being prepared, there arrived from Australia the latest *Shroud News* (issue no. 42), with startling new information from Rex Morgan concerning the Templecombe panel painting, believed to have been a copy made from the Shroud while it was in Templar hands. In view of the imminence of Anna Hulbert's talk on the Shroud (October 16), it was felt best to apprise members of this new information at the earliest possible opportunity, although it required the postponing of an important contribution by Noel Curren-Briggs. Unfortunately the length of Rex Morgan's article was such that some cuts have been made, particularly to his arguments concerning the Shroud having been in England, linked to the Somerset associations of the Grail legend, with the Templecombe panel having formed the lid of the Shroud's casket. But what follows incorporates all the salient new information as so resourcefully gleaned by Rex.

Rex Morgan writes:

It has been reported by Ian Wilson (*The Turin Shroud*, Gollancz 1978), and by others like myself who have based their information on Wilson's account, that a painting of the head of Christ was discovered by accident in an outbuilding in Templecombe in the 1950s. This remarkable artefact has been on display in the Templecombe parish but attracted little special attention until Wilson, in 1978, published his important theory that the painting was a direct copy from the face of the image of the man on the Holy Shroud, one of many such copies made by the Templars to be kept in their various preceptories to remind them of their most precious possession, the Holy Shroud, and to be used as an object of veneration. There are some inaccuracies in the information given to Wilson concerning the discovery of the Templecombe painting where he reports (pp. 159/60):

During a severe gale in Somerset, England, in 1951, the ceiling plaster collapsed in the outhouse of a cottage belonging to Mrs. A. Topp in the village of Templecombe. It revealed in the roof, covered with coal dust, a curious panel painting. The presence of a keyhole and hinge marks indicated that at one time it had been used as a door to the cottage coal house.

In my recent researches I was led by the indefatigable Belgian Shroud scholar, Remi Van Haelst, to Audrey Dymock, Parish Secretary of Templecombe, and herself an artist. Mrs. Dymock related to me the true story of the finding of the Templecombe painting and, in turn, sent me to the woman who actually made the discovery, Mrs. Molly Drew, now of Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset.

The facts are that the cottage alluded to above is one of a terrace of three, once used as one building and, in Templar times, according to the extensive research undertaken by Audrey Dymock, the dwelling house of the Templar chaplain, a hundred yards or so from the building which was the actual preceptory.

Attached to (or forming part of) what is today one of the cottages was a semi-outbuilding whose original purpose can now only be speculated upon as it was regrettably demolished after the 1950s. This chamber had no windows and was reached from the back of the cottage through a single door and a step down to an earth floor. It was used by Mrs. Drew, then a tenant of the late Mrs. Topp, as a wood-shed, never a coalhouse. Although Molly Drew

cannot remember exactly which year it was that she discovered the painting it was in the latter part of the Second World War (rather than 1951), perhaps 1944, and she describes in detail that she entered the wood-room one day to get some firewood and happened to look up at the ceiling. A piece of plaster had fallen away from it and she found herself looking at a face of Christ peering at her through the hole.

She attributes the falling of the plaster to the possibility of a bomb-blast nearby during German air-raids on Britain, but not to a gale, as there had not been one. She also states that there was no coal-dust on the painting but a build-up of ordinary dust and cobwebs over the very long period the panel must have been in the ceiling.

Some reports of this panel have suggested that it might have been used as part of the structure of the room and had at some time even been used as a door. In response to careful questioning Molly Drew is sure that the panel is most unlikely to have been so used as it was carefully wired into the ceiling, suspended as it were, and then covered with plaster and laths. Had it been used for any practical purpose at all since its original concealment, for the evidence strongly suggests concealment rather than structural usage, then it is odd that no awareness of its curious painting had ever been reported before and it seems equally unlikely that, at any time in history, someone coming across such a large and heavy wooden panel bearing an obviously very old painting, whatever they might have thought it to be, would blithely use it for a coalhouse door, or for any other purpose.

Mrs. Drew and others who examined the painting at the time of her discovery of it and helped her to remove it were quite convinced that it had been in the ceiling for hundreds of years, which is quite consistent with its being an object of such importance that its owners would have concealed it if their activities were being questioned or suppressed.

After Molly Drew and her landlady, the late Mrs Topp, and a workman called in on account of its size and weight, had removed the panel and brought it into Mrs. Drew's house it was apparent to them immediately that it was a representation of Christ or some other Biblical figure. They had called in the then local rector, a retired Bishop George Wright, to see it, who thought at the time that it might have been part of a celure or tester originally from a high altar and therefore obviously of some religious significance. About three weeks later the good bishop had it removed to his rectory for security where it remained without public attention until after the war and where, in his zeal, Bishop Wright also scrubbed it and in the process removed much of the original paint. Mrs. Drew describes it as having been very much brighter in colour when she first found it and lightly dusted it off than after the bishop had all but destroyed the unique painting "The colours were very vivid then, with bright blues and reds," says Molly Drew.

Later local commentators have suggested that, the panel might have been the lid of a vestment box for religious observances and here, I believe, we might be getting' closer to the truth about this mysterious object.

I had not seen the panel since 1979, and although I had photographed it at that time, had not clearly remembered its size. When I saw it again in August 1987 I was struck by the largeness of it. It measures some 4'9" wide by 2'9" high and is believed to be about 2" thick. It is thus a substantial box lid such as might be part of a heavy trunk which might contain a metal container with something very precious inside it. It was "restored" in the 1950s and

then placed in the Templecombe church on Easter Day 1956 where it has been an object of curiosity ever since...

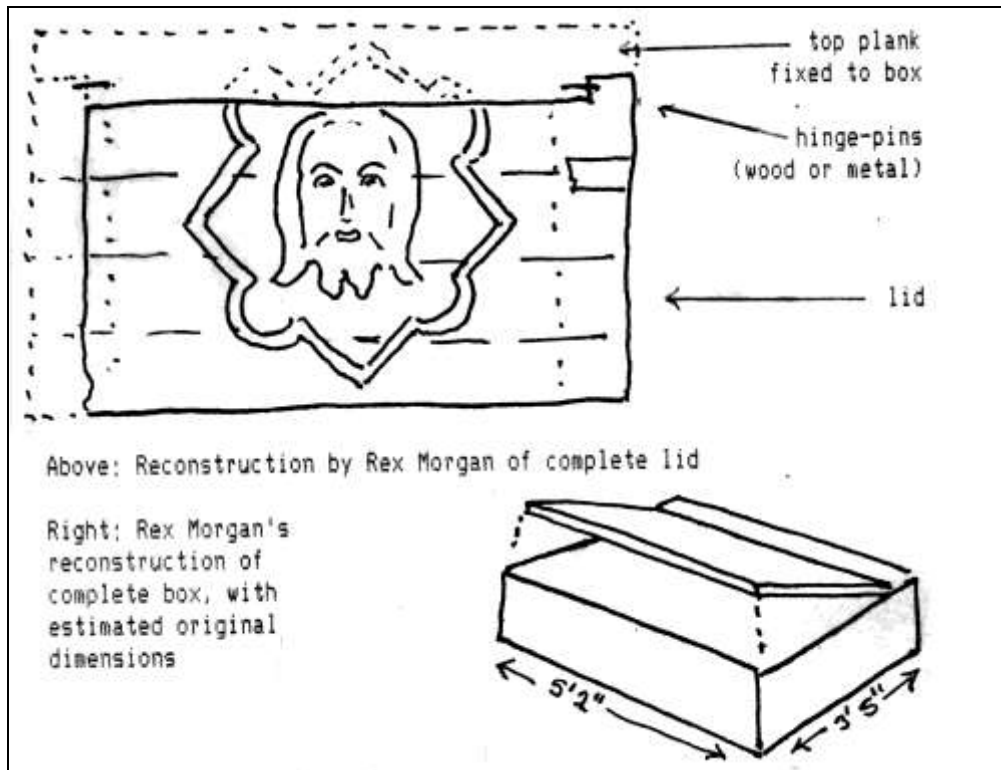
I questioned Molly Drew as to the disposition of the panel in the ceiling to see whether there was a possibility that it had been suspended there for ritual purposes before it had been concealed. The room itself (Mrs. Drew's wood-room) would have held, she says, about ten people. It had no windows but contained, set into the wall, a mysterious circular stone (something like a millstone) with a hole in its centre. Audrey Dymock advances several theories about this. One is that the room was a "priest's hole", a place of and food might have been passed through the hole in the stone. Another is that the circular stone could have had some ritual significance to the Templars, particularly as she has located another such stone in at least one church in the West Country, known to have been a Templar church in the middle ages. I was trying to ascertain from Mrs. Drew's description whether the room itself could have been used for some part of Templar ritual and then, when the practice had been abandoned, the panel was simply plastered over. On balance I would at the moment favour the idea that, whatever the room might have been used for, the panel was simply concealed in the ceiling and had, in fact, been there since say, at least Cromwell's time, until its discovery by Molly Drew in 1944.

In summary, then, we know that the Shroud "disappeared" in 1307 and there is no real evidence as to where it had been hidden but was obviously held by connections of the Templar network of families. It is highly likely that it would have been taken out of France; Curren-Briggs makes a case for its having been in Germany at this time, but it could as easily have been in England. We have extant a panel dating to 1280 [q.v. carbon dating of Templecombe panel mentioned in last *Newsletter*: Ed.] bearing a painting of the head of Christ almost certainly copied from the holy Shroud as pointed out by Wilson, and as not challenged by any other scholar. Alan Whanger of Duke University has pointed out that under his method of polarising overlay technique which he applies to any supposed copy of the Shroud, the Templecombe panel has 125 points of congruence with the Shroud face. The painting is on a panel with hinge and lock facilities and yet it is painted with the panel horizontal which would not have been done on, or for, an upright door.

The panel is clearly then, the lid of a great box. The dimensions are almost exactly those one would choose to contain the Holy Shroud as we know it when folded in eight as it usually was during the middle ages. The fleur-de-lys decoration of the panel strongly suggests French influence and the quatrefoil design is recurrent in Templar (and other) decorative motifs. Templecombe is six miles from the probable site of the centre of Arthurian activity and the quest for the Holy Grail, now shown by strong evidence actually to have been the Holy Shroud, and is therefore a most likely place for this most precious of Christian relics to have been taken by its owners, the Knights Templar, until Europe was considered safe for its return...

But this is not all: As a final bonus to my fascinating enquiry for more information about the Templecombe panel I sought to find out whether any photograph existed of the panel, taken at the time of its discovery. The photographs in current circulation and publication have all been taken since the panel's installation in the church in 1956 and those available at the church, or taken by oneself, are obviously contemporary. They show what markings there are, such markings being very much less clear than when Molly Drew first saw the painting and before the bishop scrubbed the paint off it. Was there, I wondered, any chance of an early photograph?

My hopes were rewarded when Molly Drew produced the only copy she has, postcard size, of a black and white picture taken of the painting during the three weeks she had it in her house. [This is clearer, and shows more of the painting, than that reproduced in *Newsletter* no. 16: Ed.] She gave permission for me to borrow this unique print and to have copy negatives made so that one can now study the details of the artifact from greatly enlarged black and white photoprints which have far greater resolution than any of the more recent coloured pictures I have seen (or taken myself) of the panel in its present state. The great value of this discovery is that scholars can now examine the panel as it was originally at any size they wish.



Below: Actual 14th. century knight's coffer, from France, as preserved in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Of carved oak, featuring two knights tilting. Height 17¾ inches, length 3 ft. 2½ inches; depth 15¼ inches

[photograph not available]

This fortuitous photograph, never before published I believe, reveals hitherto unrecorded information that the panel originally had a protrusion or nib on the right hand corner, which has since been sawn off to allow the present new plank to be placed where one is missing. My speculation is that there could well have been another such protrusion on the opposite corner and that the missing part of the painting above the head was, in fact, painted on a fixed plank on top of the box allowing a pivot hinge arrangement for lifting the lid, as on the diagram. [see above]

This might also explain why the top beam was not kept with, and as part of, the main panel and, as I said to Audrey Dymock, someone now needs to turn up the rest of the box.

It is also interesting to record that the bottom plank, which had obviously deteriorated to some extent when Molly Drew discovered it, had been chamfered off in the "restoration" of the fifties to make a clean edge of the frame in which it still resides.

Ian Wilson writes:

Many congratulations are due to Rex Morgan for his pioneering tracking down of Molly Drew and Audrey Dymock, particularly as he had to travel from Australia to do so. I am also personally grateful for his valuable correction of some of my information on the Templecombe painting. The details of the date of discovery and "coalhouse" location I took on trust from Templecombe's vicar of the mid 1970s, but Rex has most commendably shown the importance of finding an actual eyewitness of the time.

Since reading Rex's account I have myself interviewed Mrs. Drew, particularly with a view to her identifying the original colours of particular features on the Templecombe panel. Unfortunately she could not recall these in sufficient detail, hardly surprising after more than forty years, but she did relate certain details not included in Rex's account. I asked, for instance, whether other parts of the painting, such as the missing left-hand "nib", might have been left in the ceiling. She thought not, but unexpectedly remarked that on discovery the back of the painting had been covered with some form of slatted wood (making the whole ensemble extremely heavy), which had at the time, rightly or wrongly, given rise to the idea that it might have been used as a door. She was also emphatic that a piece of wood towards the top of the panel's right-hand edge, and that I had supposed had been substituted for some former "keyhole", was already in position at the time of the discovery.

I think it is too early to leap to conclusions that the painting was the lid of a chest once used to house the Shroud - although I certainly would not rule this out. But I readily join Rex in the view that Mrs. Drew's information impels further intensive study of the Templecombe panel, particularly including the back and the sides, together with enquiries relating to the possible preservation of any of the items so frustratingly cut away at the time of the initial "restoration". It is also extremely valuable to learn that what I had supposed, from the information I was given, to have been no more than a coal-house, could have been Templar in origin. While this in its turn was demolished during the 1950s, arguably some traces, including the mysterious circular stone, might conceivably survive amidst the fill of subsequent further building. Much might also be learned from a proper survey of the surviving Templar remains in the area, before these too disappear forever.

Like for Rex Morgan, Mrs. Drew very kindly loaned me the "pre-scrubbing" photograph for copying purposes. I have had this professionally copied, with excellent results, and can readily make prints available to those with specialist interests.

Thanks to Mrs. Audrey Dymock, I have also learned more details of the radiocarbon dating of the Templecombe panel. Two samples were taken, one giving a reading of 560 years BP (before the present), the other 580 years, both readings subject to an error of plus or minus 60 years. After calibration these datings fall within the following age range (1) 1300-1420 AD; (2) 1280-1440 AD. Dr. Gowlett of Oxford, who took the samples himself, has commented "The dates are thus entirely compatible with the wood being cut in the period, say 1280-1310, which might associate the painting with the Templars. We cannot rule out a later date of up to around 1440, but there is no doubt that the timber is of early mediaeval date."