

ANNA HULBERT' S LECTURE ON THE TEMPLECOMBE PANEL

Report by Martin Smith

Anna Hulbert illustrated her talk with slides, commencing with several views of the present day appearance of some of Templecombe's supposed Templar sites, showing how little if anything of recognizably Templar construction remains at the present day.

Drawing on her professional experience as a conservator of mediaeval paintings, Miss Hulbert introduced various works relevant to the Templecombe panel, including heads of John the Baptist; a Virgin & Child in the Bishop's Palace at Chichester, Sussex; a painting of Christ above Bishop Stapledon's tomb in Exeter Cathedral, Devon; and copies of the Mandylion as photographed in Orthodox churches in Cyprus.

Miss Hulbert explained that she came to be consulted on the Templecombe panel because of concern over mould spots forming on its surface, due to inadequate ventilation inside the glass case in which it is displayed. In the course of her work on these she had the opportunity to examine the whole panel very closely, particles of the original paint, as her close-up slides showed, being very difficult to see. In particular Bishop Wright of Templecombe's now notorious scrubbing of the panel seemed to have removed almost all of the original vivid colours, there being a complete absence of the blue reported by original discoverer Mrs. Drew. If this had been azurite, Miss Hulbert hypothesised, its high water solubility would have allowed it to be easily washed away, and this seemed the more likely pigment than the alternative candidate lapis lazuli.

Of particular interest was Miss Hulbert's noting that although clearly high-quality expensive paints had been used, there seemed to be something amateur about the painting's execution. She suggested that if, as seems likely, only properly initiated Templar knights were allowed to see the Shroud, the Templecombe copy had been painted by an artistically inclined knight rather than by a professional artist.

She pointed out that so far there had been no professional access to the back of the panel, because of the difficulty of removing it from the modern frame. If this were allowed at some future time, valuable data might be learned, including the possibility of dating the timber, even more accurately than by carbon 14, from its tree rings.

Editor's Note The Templecombe mystery is, if anything, deepening. On a recent visit to Templecombe I was shown in the Women's Institute Village Book (vol. 2, 1965) a second pre-cleaning photograph of the panel-painting, dated 1952, showing the panel's right-hand edge as originally more extended and uneven than at the present-day. The apparent wood insert at top right was missing, but particularly curious, the apparent lug of wood at top right, which led Audrey Dymock and Rex Morgan to speculate on the panel having at one time been the lid of a casket, was also already absent.

It would appear that the panel may never have been deliberately concealed in the ceiling. One Templecombe resident, Mrs. Neal, born in the house where the painting was found, recalled being told by her cousin Mrs. Webb, now deceased, that she remembered seeing the face in the ceiling of the outhouse during her childhood in the early part of this century. It would seem only subsequently to have been plastered over. Could the panel have been the centre-part of a Templar initiation rite, in which perhaps the initiate lay "entombed" for a prescribed

period before being granted a particularly sacred vision of Christ? Although still highly speculative, this seems a possibility.

In addition I was shown the area thought to have been the site of the original preceptory, close to the Manor House currently owned by Mr. Geoff Wilson, a local teacher and antiques enthusiast. According to some apparently well attested local stories, a few feet beneath the surface are some mysterious underground tunnels. Whether these have any relevance to the mystery is at present anyone's guess...