

SHROUD HISTORY DATA BASE

Ian Wilson archives

ARTWORKS

TEMPLECOMBE PANEL PAINTING

late 13th century?



Painting on panel consisting of four oak planks, with all joints tongued and grooved (ref 10), and secured by iron nails on two cross battens (ref.5). The cracks between the planks were filled with gesso.(ref 10). The frame and the topmost oak plank as seen in the above photo are modern, and were supplied during conservation in 1956

Dimensions:

Approx 57 inches wide by 33 inches high, and possibly two inches thick (ref 1, p.7). Measured in centimetres in November 1986 as 141 x 74 . (ref 14)

Location:

St.Mary' s Church, Templecombe, Somerset, England, where it is displayed on the south wall of the nave (last available information late 1980s) Discovered during World War II, in December 1945 (ref.4) it was given to the church by Mr and Mrs.Topp, the owners of Templecombe's bakery, who also owned the cottage in which it was found.



Circumstances of Discovery:

The panel was discovered sometime during World War II (1939-45) in the ceiling of the outhouse at 3 West Court (ref.9), Templecombe, one of a row of three cottages in Templecombe High Street. The discoverer was Mrs Molly Drew, the cottage's then tenant, and according to her recollections as recorded by local archivist Audrey Dymock Herdsman on 16 November 1982:

The outhouse was at the back of the house, and built into it. You had to step down into it to get inside. The floor was just earth. I would think it would hold about ten people ... I had been in the shed many times before, but this day I looked up, and part of a face was looking down... Then on pulling down more of the plaster I could see all the face. It was covered in a thick layer of plaster, and very firmly wired to the ceiling... A workman had to be called to remove it, as it was very heavy and much bigger than it looked up in the ceiling. It was very dirty and covered in cobwebs... The colours were very vivid then, with bright blues and reds. (ref.6)

The outhouse was demolished around the 1950s, and its date and original purpose can now only be speculated upon. It featured a stone 'porthole' set into a sidewall, but was otherwise without windows. Only the 'port-hole' was salvaged from the demolition. This was re-used by being cemented into the stone garden wall between 3 West Court and its neighbour number 4. It measures approximately 18 inches across.

Conservation work

Shortly after the panel's discovery Templecombe's then rector, Bishop George Wright carried out an amateur cleaning. According to a letter from a successor of Wright's, the Revd Jesse Sage:

'Not realizing what it was, [Bishop Wright] took it home and scrubbed it in a bath, thus removing the paint which was vivid until that time!' (ref. 8)

According to the subsequent conservator Eve Baker, the cleaning agent that Wright used was 'Vim - with dire results' (ref 15)

The loss of the blue coloration noticed by Mrs Molly Drew suggests that the original blue paint was azurite, which conservator Anna Hulbert has stated to be difficult to mix with any of the normal binding media, thereby rendering it less adhesive, and easier to wash away. (ref 10)

The first professional conservation of the panel was carried out in 1955 by London conservator Eve Baker, A.R.C.A.. According to a handwritten letter she addressed to Templecombe on 9 January 1956:



*Above: no. 3, West Court, Templecombe;
Below: Mrs. Molly Drew, photographed in the
1980s*



I have cleaned it – given it a great deal of treatment for worm (this remained active until late in the year...) I have fed the colour and given it preservative treatment. It is now firm and I expect it to remain so for many years. I was unable to save the gold stars – I counted ten of them – but they can only be seen under special conditions. I hoped they might be clearer after treatment but was disappointed. ... I hoped that I made it clear when I came to Templecombe that I never repainted – this panel is better left as it is. If it were repainted it would lose its character and no longer look old as it does now. Because of the extensive amateur cleaning the panel has suffered it has made it a longer and more difficult problem than I had anticipated. I am now satisfied that the condition of both wood and paint is sound. (ref.7)

According to Eve Baker's letter the Central Council for the Care of Churches allowed only £5 for the frame, which they specified should be of simple moulded oak. The actual cost was £20, and the overall cost £80. (ref. 14).

Further conservation work on the panel was carried out during the 1980s by professional conservator Anna Hulbert (died April 2000), following the formation of mould apparently due to its placing in a closed area with insufficient air circulation. Following this the painting was mounted behind shatter-proof glass, work funded by Plessey Marine Ltd. According to Hulbert there is a general lack of surviving paint particles for any sampling purpose (ref.10), though with the aid of a microscope she found some 'scarlet vermilion and verdigris (bright green)'. (ref 16)

Photography

Two black and white photographs exist documenting the panel's appearance prior to the 1956 conservation work. One, size 5 x 3½ inches, is in Ian Wilson's Templecombe file, and is of unknown date. The other, dated 1952, is in the Templecombe Women's Institute Village Book 1965, vol 2, appended to an article by Templecombe's then rector, Rev. Robert Jones. (ref 17).

The 1952 photograph is notably lacking two apparently extraneous pieces of wood in the top right-hand corner. It is unclear whether these may have been post-discovery additions removed at the time of the conservation work

In a 1968 letter to Ian Wilson the Rev Robert S.Jones remarked that 'It had even been used at sometime or other as a door, as the marks of the hinges and keyhole can still be seen' (ref. 12). It may have been to this top right area that Jones was referring. The same feature led Australian writer Rex Morgan to hypothesise that the panel once formed the lid of a chest.(ref.19)



Above: Photo unknown date; Below: Photo dated 1952, from a photocopy



Dating:

Two tiny samples of the panel's oak were taken on 20 November 1986, on site in St. Mary's Church, Templecombe, by Dr. John Gowlett of the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art. One sample gave a reading of 560 years BP, the other 580 BP, both plus or minus 60 years. After calibration these dates were calculated to fall within the range (1) 1300-1420 AD; (2) 1280-1440 AD. According to Dr. Gowlett:

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.' (ref 1, p.13)

Historical background to the location of the discovery

In 1185 the Knights Templars were granted land south of the local stream, today the property of the Manor House on the present day village's south side. There they established a preceptory for members of the Order. The preceptor was responsible for managing the Templar estates in the West Country, admitting new members to the Order and training them and horses for service in the East. The order was suppressed in 1312 and the property handed over to the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem. It remained their property until 1540, when the buildings and land passed to the English Crown as part of the Reformation. (ref 12)



During the 1890s there remained fully visible in the Manor House grounds some ruins of what was locally supposed to have been the Templar preceptory's one-time chapel. The only known photograph, provided by then rector the Rev. H.J. Poole, was published in *Somerset & Dorset Notes & Queries*, vol V, part XXXIV, June 1896, p.49 (see above). According to the accompanying text, this 'represents the chapel of the Preceptory of Templecombe, taken from the south: the wall partly covered with ivy being the north wall of the chapel.' (ref 11)

During the first half of the twentieth century the ruins on the site, which was divided by a farm sale during the 1960s, fell into further disrepair, with all meaningful mediaeval features unrecognisable. Following entreaties from Templecombe local historian Audrey Dymock Herdsman an inspector from English Heritage visited the site during the 1980s, but according to a Department of Environment summary of his findings, he 'recommended that there is nothing of listable quality there. He commented that the manor (which is listed), shows no detail older than the 17th century and that there did not appear to be anything mediaeval about the chapel either' (ref 20).

On 18 February 1988 Ian Wilson visited the Manor House, then owned by Geoff Wilson (no relation). According to notes he wrote after the visit: ‘Capitals from the original chapel are in the forecourt as plant stands, and Geoff Wilson brought out another large piece of masonry from beneath rubble in a lumber room.... The plan of the preceptory would appear to have been long and narrow, similar to Selborne, Hants, as featured in Gilbert White’ s books’ (ref 13).

Parallels to the Painting

Other examples of early English panel painting are very rare, because of so much destruction of such works during the Reformation. The closest equivalent that I am aware of is preserved in Oslo. (ref. 18) A depiction of St. Peter, it is on a gesso-covered oak panel (thereby exactly comparable to the Templecombe panel), and once formed part of a tabernacle shrine now lost .

Because almost all Norwegian panel painting is on pine, the St. Peter is thought to be by either by an English artist, or a Norwegian artist trained in England, that was taken from England to Norway in the 13th century. A notable feature is the similarity of the St.Peter panel’ s foliate decoration (at top and bottom) to that on the outer reaches of the Templecombe panel.

The ornamental frame around the head on the Templecombe panel is similar to equivalent decoration, to be found in 13th century manuscript illuminations such as in the Oscott Psalter, preserved in the British Library, dated c.1265-70. (ref 18, p.352). Though an exact parallel to the specific shape of the Temple-

combe ornamental frame has yet to be identified, the ‘square and circles’ motif is notably reminiscent of the Masonic logo seen at left.



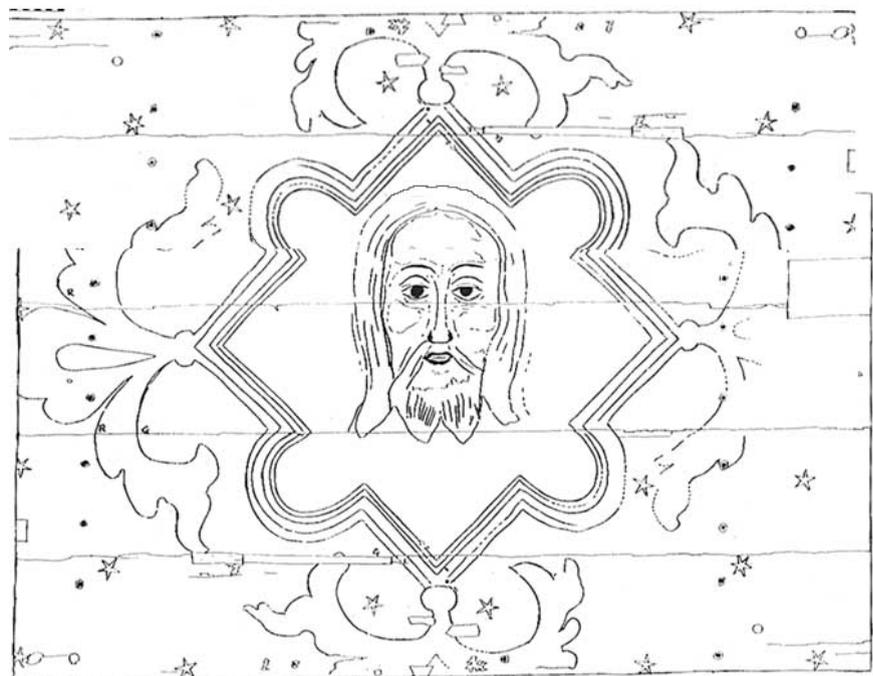
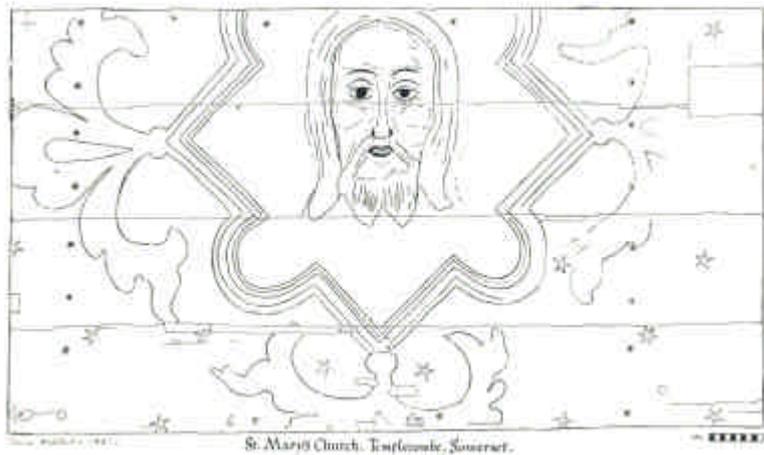
St.Peter, oak panel from a tabernacle preserved in the Universitetets Oldsaksamlingen, Oslo, 185 cm x 75 cm



The Templecombe Painting Reconstructed?

In the course of her 1980s examination of the panel painting, conservator Anna Hulbert made a careful drawing (right), of all the features she was able to distinguish. Included in her drawing are the gold stars mentioned by her predecessor Eve Baker, which Mrs Baker described as only visible under special conditions.

From the regular design of the ornamental frame, also the disposition of the stars it is possible, using Anna Hulbert's drawing, and purely by copying the panel's lower section, to make a very rough and hypothetical reconstruction of the full original appearance of the panel, as seen at right.



References:

- 1: Articles compiled by Rex Morgan and Ian Wilson in *BSTS Newsletter* 17, September 1987, pp.3-13
2. TSW TV documentary 'A Head of Time' shown on TSW 5.30 pm Easter Sunday 1987, then on ITV at 11.30 am Tuesday January 5, 1988
3. Anna Hulbert 'The Templecombe Panel Painting and the Shroud', Lecture to the BSTS 29 January 1988
4. *Templecombe and Horsington Church Magazine*, December 1945. Extract copied in 1969, and preserved in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives
5. Letter from a Mr F. de F. Daniel of Horsington, published in the *Western Gazette*, c.1945, photocopy provided by Mrs. Drew and preserved in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives
6. Statement by Mrs Drew obtained by Audrey Dymock Herdsman 16 November 1982, preserved in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives
7. Letter by Eve Baker, sent from her private address, then 24 Roehampton Close, Putney, London SW.15, to Rev. William George Currie, rector of Templecombe 1951-1960. Photocopy in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.
8. Letter from Revd. Jesse Sage, the Rectory, Templecombe to Fr. Maurus Green dated 19

September 1976, photocopy in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives

9. Letter of 4 November 1987 from Mr.J.H.Campbell of 3 West Court Cottages, Templecombe, to Ian Wilson, correcting a mistake in a newspaper article, original of letter in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

10. Report on lecture by Anna Hulbert to the British Society for the Turin Shroud 29 January 1989, original copy in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives

11. Photocopy of relevant page preserved in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives

12 Background information provided by Templecombe rector Robert S. Jones in a letter to Ian Wilson dated 14th February 1968, original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

13. Handwritten page of notes headed ' Templecombe – Visit 18 Feb 1988', original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives

14. Notes by Ian Wilson handwritten on a Templecombe church leaflet about the painting, dated September 1985, original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

15. Letter from Eve Baker to Ian Wilson, 26 May 1980, original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

16. Letter of Anna Hulbert to Ian Wilson dated 1 December 1986, original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

17. Letter from Miss Evelyn Davies, SRN to Ian Wilson, dated 6th February 1988, original in Templecombe file, Ian Wilson archives.

18. See Jonathan Alexander & Paul Binski (eds.), *The Age of Chivalry, Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1987, pp.329-40

19. Rex Morgan 'Was the Holy Shroud in England?', article in *Shroud News* 42, August 1987

20. Letter from U.Garrett of Old Farm, Templecombe in the *Western Gazette* 28 August 1987

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