

Visual stories in churches: The Poor man's Bible

In the Middle Ages scenes from stories in the Bible or from the lives of the Saints were often painted on the inside walls of churches, as well as being included in stained glass windows. At this time few could read or write and there were no printed books.

The church of St Thomas in Salisbury has a wall painting showing the meeting between Mary, Jesus's mother, and her cousin Elizabeth, mother of St John the Baptist, when they were both pregnant and looking forward to the birth of their sons.



We know that there were medieval wall paintings in St John's church. Vicar Bennett, writing in 1866, noted that:

"Along the clerestory walls, there were found, in the old church, circular paintings, one in each of the spandrils between the arches. These paintings, most likely, represented the works of creation, as shewn in Mrs Jameson's Book, p 65.

One was found very distinctly marked – the arm of a figure holding a circle – precisely the same as the figure in the said work, p 71. In order, therefore, to keep the old Church in its former state, medallions have been introduced in the spandrills, which are intended to be sculptured or colored, from time to time, as offerings may arise for that purpose. They are to represent, on one side, the Parables, on the other, the Miracles of our Lord."

The book by Mrs Jameson referred to by Vicar Bennett is 'Sacred and Legendary Art', by Anna Jameson, first published in 1848. The image below from a later edition is the sort of figure holding a circle, in this case being the moon, that he refers to.



After the Reformation in the C16 and in the build up to the English Civil War in the mid C17, there was a strong movement against imagery being used in churches, whether in statues, paintings or stained glass.

The development of printing and the spread of Bibles translated into the common language of the people led to an increased focus on the words, on reading writing and printed material and a reaction against visual forms. This Puritan influence led to many statues being destroyed or damaged, wall paintings being covered with limewash and stained glass being smashed out of windows.

We know that in Frome almost all the stained glass in the church of St John the Baptist was smashed out in 1643, and medieval wall paintings removed or plastered over.

The only glass that remains having survived the destruction of 1643 is that within the St Nicholas chapel, by the font, which is heraldic in style rather than containing imagery then found offensive.





Early photographs of the church show that many of the windows were filled with panels of plain glass (as to the right) and some were filled up with stone or brick (as to the left).

The pulpit was the centre of attention in the church and the words of sermons and hymns the focus of any story telling without any visual support in the form of stained glass, wall paintings or statues.



The scale of restoration in the C19 at St John's was immense: The early photograph to the right shows the South Aisle of the church completely removed ready for rebuilding.



In the mid C19 when the church was being restored some new wall paintings were introduced and a lot of stained glass added as can now be seen.

The wall painting of Christ in Glory was added in the 1860's and the carved scene of the crucifixion, the rood screen, was added in the 1890's.



Since the restoration work of the C19 the parish church of St John the Baptist is one again full of things to see reflecting the skills of artists and craftsmen and women in wood, glass, metal, stone, embroidery and other materials.

For centuries, when few could read, the work of such skilled people was known as

“The Poor Man's Bible”

as it was the visual means by which people were reminded of the people and events recorded in scripture.



Tilework, near the font, showing Dives and his greed ('Voracitas', in Latin)