

THE LOST APOSTLES OF PILTON



The Bequest of Thomas Martyn

The rood screen of St Mary's Church, Pilton dates from the late 15th Century. It was painted and gilded in a rich array of colours, the dado panels being picked out in alternating red and green. Then in 1510, twelve apostles were added thanks to the bequest of **Thomas Martyn**, parson of All Saints, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton (1502 -1509), who then took up residence at Pilton until his death in 1510. In his will, written by the **Prior of Pilton, John Bewmont**, Thomas Martyn left 26s.8p (£1.33p), a not inconsiderable sum in those days, 'to the paynting of twelve pictures in the Rood lofte in the churche of Pylton aforesaid'. And an art historian writing 90 years ago commented that 'the majority of Devon screens have quaint paintings of saints in their panels. These never rise to the level of works of art, though they are most amusing and interesting'.

All was well until, after the Reformation and the Order of Council of 1547/48, churches were ordered to obliterate their 'superstitious images' and the panels were covered and remained hidden for four and a half centuries. First they had their faces scratched out and they were then overpainted with limewash and red and green paint to match the blank panels. And if that wasn't enough, the whole screen was finally overstained in brown in the late 19th Century – the gates having already received a coat of thick cream in the 18th Century. So when **Anna Hulbert** was called in in the 1980s she revealed the daunting task facing a conservator – first herself and latterly **Jane Rutherford**.

The Challenge of Conservation

From the late 1990s the first five panels on the screen were cleaned by Anna Hulbert. The north choir gate then went to the studios of paint conservator Jane Rutherford whose work yielded two more painted panels. While the over stain is easily soluble and the copper green overpaint is also fairly soft and not too difficult to remove, the red overpaint is a very hard red lead. Painted over the original soluble vermillion, it takes at least 3 – 4 times as long to remove as the green. And where repainted again with Georgian thick cream and brown, the time-scale for conservation treatment doubles again.



Panels on the rood screen, l. to r. : St Philip, St Bartholomew, St Matthias and an as yet unknown saint.

Who are the Saints?

Without the benefit of names, we have to rely on iconography for clues to the identity of our figures - as difficult as it appears simple. Whilst most saints can be recognised by their symbols and emblems, these are often shared so until all twelve panels are uncovered, we cannot be absolutely sure about them. Twelve paintings suggest twelve apostles, the original eleven plus St Matthias, who took the place of Judas Iscariot.

Fortunately, the screen panels (below left) so far recovered have been positively identified. Reading from left to right we have **St Philip**, the only apostle depicted clean-shaven in mediaeval art, and recognisable for the loaf of bread for his role feeding the five thousand. Next to Philip comes **St Bartholomew** holding the symbol of his martyrdom, the flaying knife which made him patron saint of tanners. Next is **St Matthias**, who holds a halberd, the long-handled axe-like weapon, the symbol of his martyrdom. The next panel, adjacent to the gates, is insufficiently uncovered to be identified, unlike the fourth panel from the north, which is clearly identifiable as **St Andrew** with his cross saltire just legible.



North Choir Door Panels: St James the Less on the right, but who's on the left?

With the newly-restored panels on the door (left) we run into some difficulty. The figure on the right, against the red background, is **St James the Less**. He was martyred by a fuller's club shown as a long-handled instrument with an end like a hockey stick. His companion carries a long spear and also has a strange lock of hair extending up into his halo. Both **St Thomas** and **St Matthew** are depicted in mediaeval art carrying a spear. However, the spear is probably more readily associated with St Thomas, but what about the forelock which

might suggest **St Paul**. Scholars out there who think they know the answer, are invited to comment!

Overall, we can agree with the art historian that Pilton's saints belong very much to the primitive. In their simplicity they possess great strength and the artist has captured in each figure a compassion and timeless spirituality.

Screen Restoration Fund

The Parochial Church Council established a dedicated 'Screen Restoration Fund' so if you would like to know more about how to help do please speak to someone in the church. To record the generosity of those who have enabled the work to be done, brass plates have been fixed on the dado rail. St Matthias was restored in 1989 in memory of **Harold Jago**, Reader in the Parish of Pilton, in grateful memory of his ministry. St Philip was restored in memory of **Bertha Turner** and **Hilda Norman**, life members of the Mothers' Union. St Bartholomew was restored in memory of **Steve and Doris Norman**.

In June 2007 the newly-restored north choir gate was re-dedicated, the brass plate noting that **Robert Whitaker** Proctor of Chatham, Barnstable, Massachusetts, had funded the restoration in memory of his late wife **Sheilah Whitaker** 'who loved Barnstaple, Devon'. And in October 2009 it will be 500 years since Thomas Martyn funded the painting of our twelve 'lost' apostles. We would like to celebrate that occasion with re-dedication of at least one more panel.

Peter Ferguson