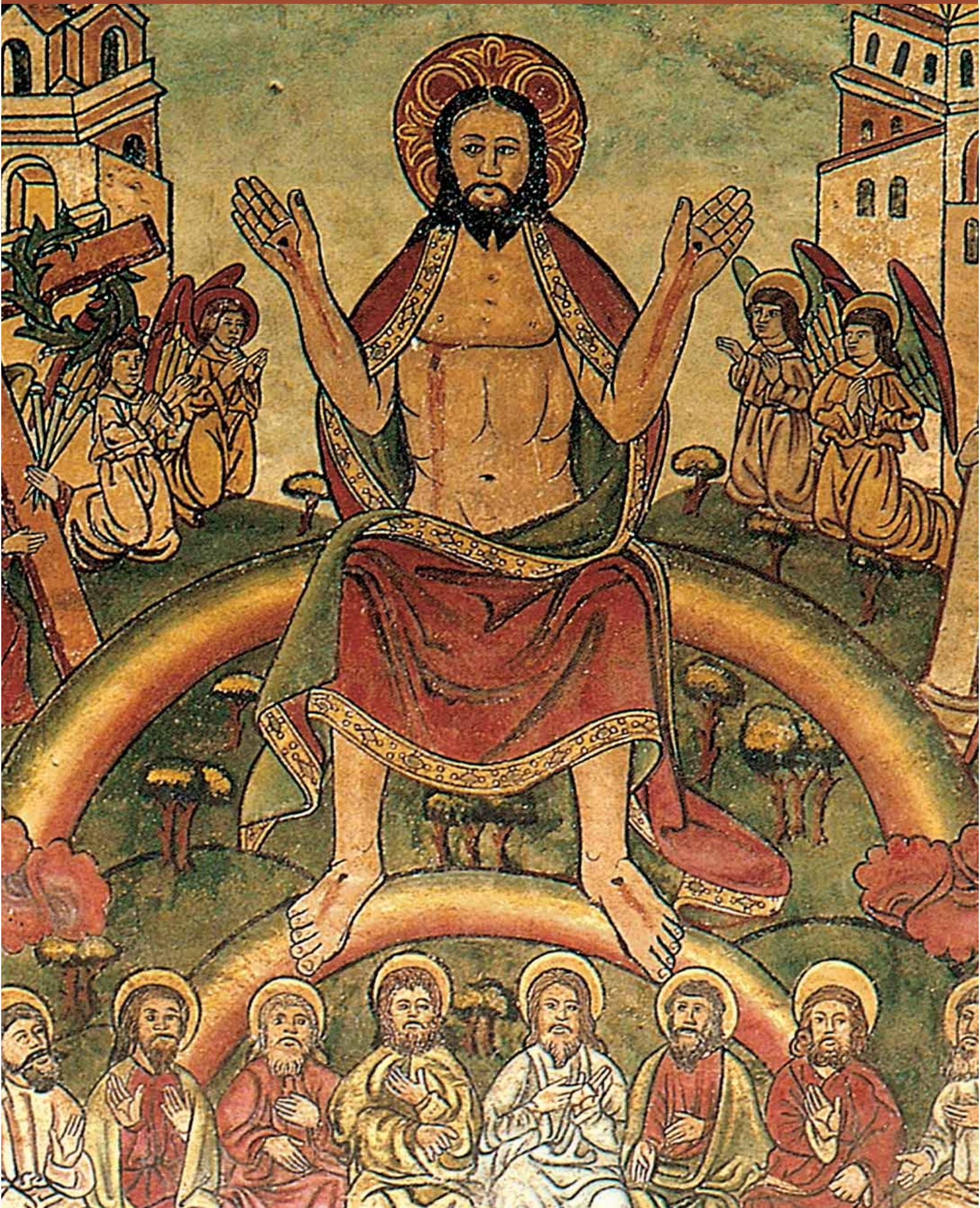


The Medieval Doom Painting in St. Thomas's Church Salisbury



THE DOOM PAINTING ON THE CHANCEL ARCH

As you enter the Church through the west door and look down the nave you are confronted with a most remarkable painting over the chancel arch. Some visitors may have come to St. Thomas's especially to see this painting, having read about it in their guide books; for others it may be an unexpected surprise. Either way we hope that this document will help you to know a little more about it and its strange history. This is the famous Salisbury "Doom" painting of the Last Judgement.

A General Description of the Painting

The painting occupies all the space above the chancel arch and continues down the spandrels on either side. It follows the general pattern of medieval doom paintings with Christ in Majesty sitting in the centre, dominating the scene in judgement over all. He is seated on a rainbow with his feet resting on a smaller one below. His hands are raised, and His side and feet exposed to show the wounds of crucifixion, while behind Him angels hold up a cross on his right side in the shape of a T, with the crown of thorns hung upon it, and on the other side, the pillar on which He was scourged, and a sponge, a spear and nails.

Beneath our Lord's feet in a long line are seated the Twelve Apostles who are judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matthew 19 v. 28). On His right we can see the Blessed Virgin and, on His left John the Evangelist. Note also at the back of the picture the Sun of Righteousness in meridian splendour and on the other side, the Star of the East.



In the lower part of the picture we see on the left, as we look at it, a green garden-like burial ground with a number of open graves from which the dead in shrouds are emerging, helped by Angels with trumpets in their hands. Among these is a man with a mitre on his head - although not otherwise clothed - and higher up Angels are taking two groups of the naked dead into the Kingdom of Heaven. No doubt to their considerable relief.

On the other side the picture is very different. Here are the infernal regions; flames are rising from the ground and devils are in charge of the proceedings.

Here stands the Prince of Darkness with the head and feet of a beast, one foot boldly projecting out of the picture over the edge of the chancel arch. A small group of the damned chained together is being dragged down to the mouth of Hell, represented by the mouth of a monstrous gaping dragon. The mouth is held open by two horned devils. This group of souls includes a Bishop and two crowned heads.



Next to the Prince of Darkness is the dishonest Ale-wife with a jug in her hand and it is significant that she is the only fully clothed figure among all the souls. Lower down is a miser holding money bags in each hand. If you look closely you may see that the devil which has seized him has left black burn marks on his shoulder.



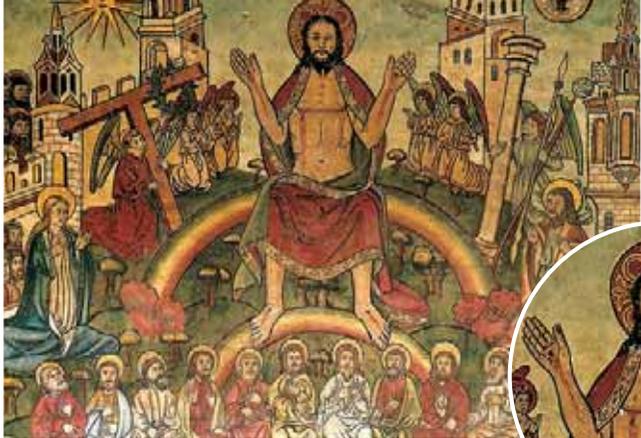
The whole scene on the right hand side of the painting is clearly designed to emphasise the terrors of Hell and to point the awful moral to medieval minds that God in His final judgement is no respecter of rank or position and that we shall be judged equally according to our sins.



At the bottom of the picture is a scroll which reads "Nulla est Redemptio" which means "There is no escape for the wicked".



Sketches by Bill Toop



A Brief History of the Painting

Paintings of religious subjects were very common on church walls in mediaeval times when few men and women could read, and they served as an illustrated guide to biblical teaching easily understood by simple and uneducated minds. Arthur Bryant, the historian, has expressed it well when he says:

"except in Lent the village parson seldom preached. He relied on the dramatic ritual of the church to make his teaching clear... statues, images and pictorial representations of saints, martyrs, angels, the Last Judgement and Harrowing of Hell depicted in brilliant colours and terrifying detail over the chancel arch.."

At the end of the Middle Ages doom paintings were very common in English churches and, even as late as the 1880's one scholar listed over one hundred of them. There are far fewer now and not all the surviving ones are complete, but Albert Hollaender, a great authority on church wall paintings, has written of this one (in 1944):

"among English ecclesiastical mural paintings of the late middle ages representing the Last Judgement, the Doom in St. Thomas's Church is certainly one of the largest, completest and comparatively best preserved, in spite of the fact that it bears traces of an unhappy 19th century restoration. It is not only a most remarkable work of art of the late 15th century, but also a historical document of first rate importance".

The painting in our church was commissioned to cover the great wall space above the chancel arch sometime between 1470 and 1500 after the roof had been raised to its present height when the nave was restored and enlarged. We do not know who painted it, nor are we sure what it looked like then, but we may be fairly certain that it would have been very striking in its bright new colours, and sufficiently terrifying to strike alarm in the hearts of the congregations of those days.

However, in 1593 at the time of the Reformation, it was covered by a coat of whitewash, and we find an entry in the churchwarden's accounts of that time showing that a certain Gusset "recd. 22 shillings for washing the church with Lyme". This was quite a considerable sum in those days, so he was no doubt commissioned to cover more than just the chancel arch. Soon afterwards the large wooden panel showing the coat of arms of Queen Elizabeth the First was placed over the arch. We still have this panel and you can now see it hanging over the south door leading into the St. Michael's Room underneath the Tower. It is particularly interesting to note that these arms have the Lion and Welsh Dragon as supporters and not, as in later reigns, the Lion and the Unicorn.

As the years passed the Doom Painting was forgotten and it was not until 1819 that faint traces of colour were noticed behind the coat of arms when it was being cleaned, so the centuries old whitewash was carefully removed and the painting revealed. Unfortunately we have no contemporary record to tell us what state it was in and how badly it had deteriorated in the years of its disappearance, but fortunately it was recorded at time by a local artist, and then, for reasons unknown, covered again with whitewash.

There is an interesting account of all this in the "History of Modern Wiltshire" by Benson and Hatcher which was published in 1843. They tell us that:

"when the coat of whitewash was removed in 1819 the western side (of the chancel arch) was found to be covered with a painting which has fortunately been rescued from oblivion by the correct and ready pencil of Miss Wickins of the Close"



There is an engraving of Miss Wickin's drawing in the Benson and Hatchervolume which we reproduce here at the end, somewhat reduced in size. The interesting thing is that this drawing, or more accurately the engraving is dated 1819 which indicates that it was taken from the "Doom" as seen on being first uncovered, but Richard Benson in his preface to the 1843 History comments as follows:

"As regards the painting on the wall of St. Thomas's Church the original designer, though not skilled in foreshortening, had endeavoured to represent, according to Scripture, the twelve apostles sitting in judgement, but that circumstance, though sufficiently apparent in Miss Wickin's sketch, has escaped the notice of the engraver who has placed them erect".

We are therefore left wondering how much we can rely on Miss Wickin's accuracy, or at least her engraver. The really interesting question is whether Miss Wickin's drew an accurate copy of the original in which case the picture we see now must be a Victorian pastiche. We really do not have enough evidence to solve this problem, but it does seem likely that we cannot put too much reliance on Miss Wickins. After all the engraving leaves out several important figures, notably the Ale Wife and the Miser and the Mitred man emerging from his grave, and these surely must have been in the original? In the light of present.

The next stage in the history is that, after being covered again with whitewash, the painting remained undiscovered until 1876, and in 1881 the whitewash was finally removed and Messrs Clayton and Bell of London were commissioned to restore it. We do not know who actually did the restoration, but it was done in oils and Hollaender has commented:

"although the restoration cannot be called a happy one as the artist employed has not quite refrained from corrections. Moreover the painting was done in oils which are bound to grow pale. The high position of the painting offers no easy facility for regular cleaning".

In more recent times the painting was examined by Professor E.W. Tristram of the Royal College of Art in 1950. He advised that it be cleaned, damaged areas retouched and the whole sprayed with liquid silica to preserve the paintwork. This work was carried out in 1953 by Professor Clive Rouse since in the meanwhile Professor Tristram had died. The cost of this work, together with similar treatment to the mural paintings in the Lady Chapel, was in the region of £200, which cost was defrayed by Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox, a one time churchwarden and generous benefactor of the church.

During major repair work on the roof carried out on 1994 the opportunity arose to examine the present state of the painting. This was done by representatives of the firm of Herbert Read who reported as follows:

"The wall is dry and there is no evidence of salt effervescence. The colours have faded, but the paint is generally well adhered. Dirt on the surface appears to consist of loose particles without any particular attachment to the painted surface. Hol low areas exist which need to be stabilized and grouted."

Clearly the painting would benefit from restorative work by experts when funds are available.

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SOME NOTE ON DETAILS IN THE PAINTING

The supporting side canopies

The two figures within the spandrels at the bottom have been variously identified at different times. On the north side is a nimbed figure with book and staff under an elaborate canopy. Miss Wickins, in 1819, had no doubt that this was King Henry II, but more recent research would prefer St. James, Patron Saint of Pilgrims - he wears a scallop shell in his hat. On the south side, the figure with Bishop's mitre and crook is now recorded as St. Osmund who was canonised in 1457. (Miss Wickins suggested that he was St. Thomas a Becket, the Patron Saint of our church).





The Demons

Among doom paintings the demons in this one are a little unusual. As is proper, special stress has been laid on depicting Hell with all its horrors, but the demons are not clumsy and ridiculous beastly monsters as in many paintings of this type. Here they are vivacious and bizarre little creatures, full of movement, doing their grim work not without humour and not much use has been made of instruments of torture. There are no pitchforks, turnspits, wheelbarrows or similar implements.

The Date of the Painting

There are various clues which point to a particular date to within twenty or so years. One of these is that St. Osmund was not canonised before 1457. Then the roof was not raised to reveal the whole area of the chancel arch until around about 1460. The fact that the Ale Wife is clothed is significant because her costume with bonnet and kerchief approximates in date to the reigns of Edward IV, Richard III or Henry VII (ie 1471-1509), and finally the miser with his money bags is a subject taken from some mediaeval "Dance of Death" imagery which did not come into fashion before the third quarter of the 15th century.

These, and other more subtle indications, point very definitely to a date somewhere in the last quarter of the century.

The origin of the Painting

Scholars are convinced, for reasons too erudite to include here, that this is a painting of English origin and authorship, but the roots from which it came go back into Dutch and Flemish schools of the 15th century and even earlier. It seems certain that this is a magnificent example of the work of a very talented artist, born in England, but who had travelled and learned many of his skills from schools in Flanders and elsewhere on the continent.

We shall probably never know the name of the Master who painted this work, but he may well have visited the studios of the Van Eycks, Hans Hemling, Dirk Bouts and others. Who knows what commissions he may have been given on his return to England in various churches but, as far as we know, this is the only surviving work of his hand. It is certainly, in spite of its later vicissitudes, one of his best and greatest "works."

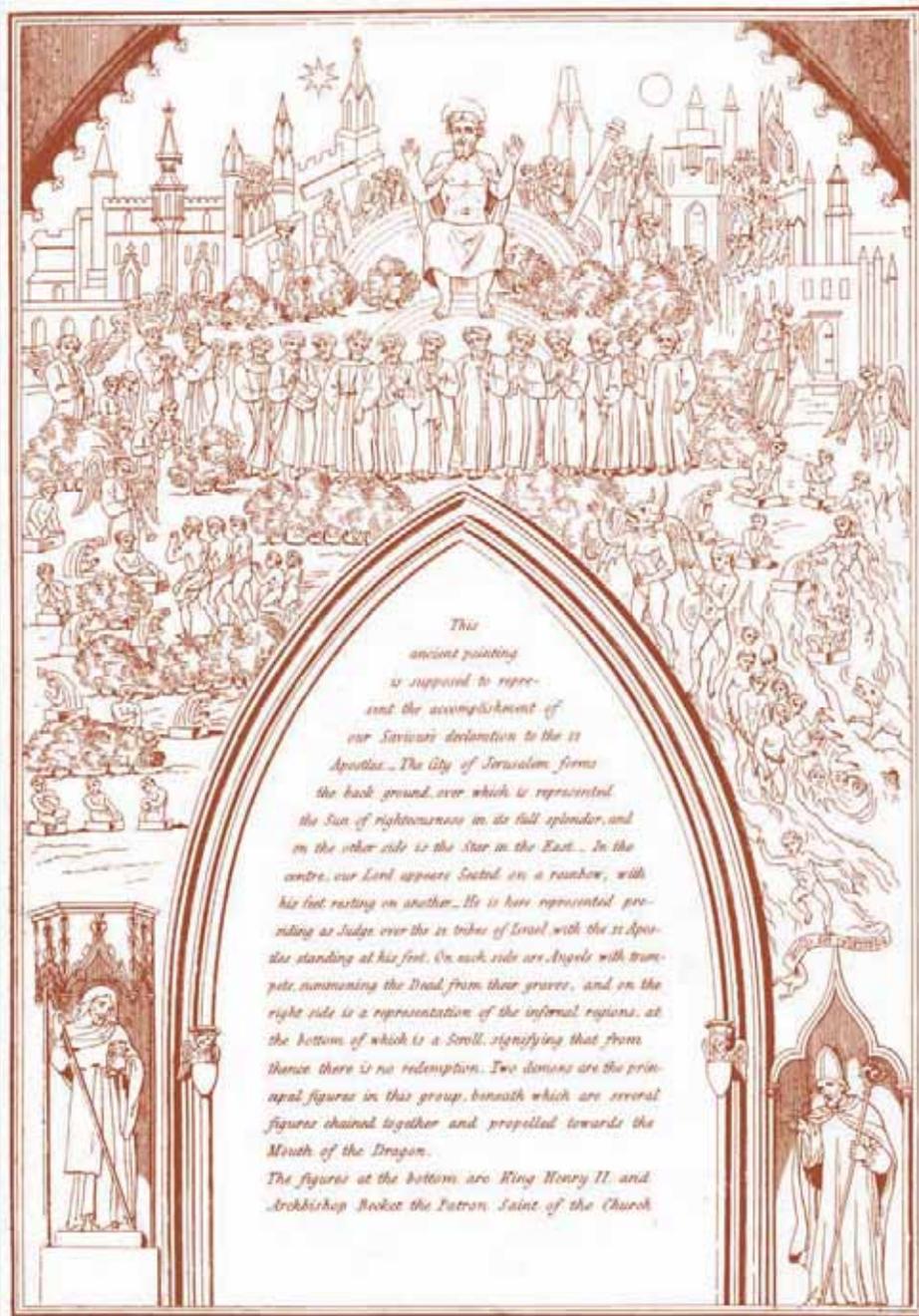
So, as we look at this somewhat faded and altered painting today, it is worth making the effort to cast our minds back to mediaeval times when it was fresh and new, probably the chief among many brightly coloured paintings on the walls of this church, all teaching the lessons of the Bible to men and women of simple and unquestioning faith who worshipped here. Let us thank God that it has been preserved for us to see today and let us pray that it will always be so.

Other Doom Paintings

For those who wish to see other paintings the following churches will be of interest:

- South Leigh, Checkendon and Coombe - all in Oxfordshire
- Wenhaston in Suffolk
- Dauntsey in Wiltshire
- Chaldon in Surrey
- Patcham in Sussex
- Penn in Buckinghamshire
- Oddington in Gloucestershire
- Symington in Bedfordshire
- Lutterworth in Leicestershire
- Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire has a glass painting
- York Minster has a carving in the crypt

For those able to travel, there are many and varied examples of the Doom theme in paint, embroidery and stone to be found in continental churches and museums.



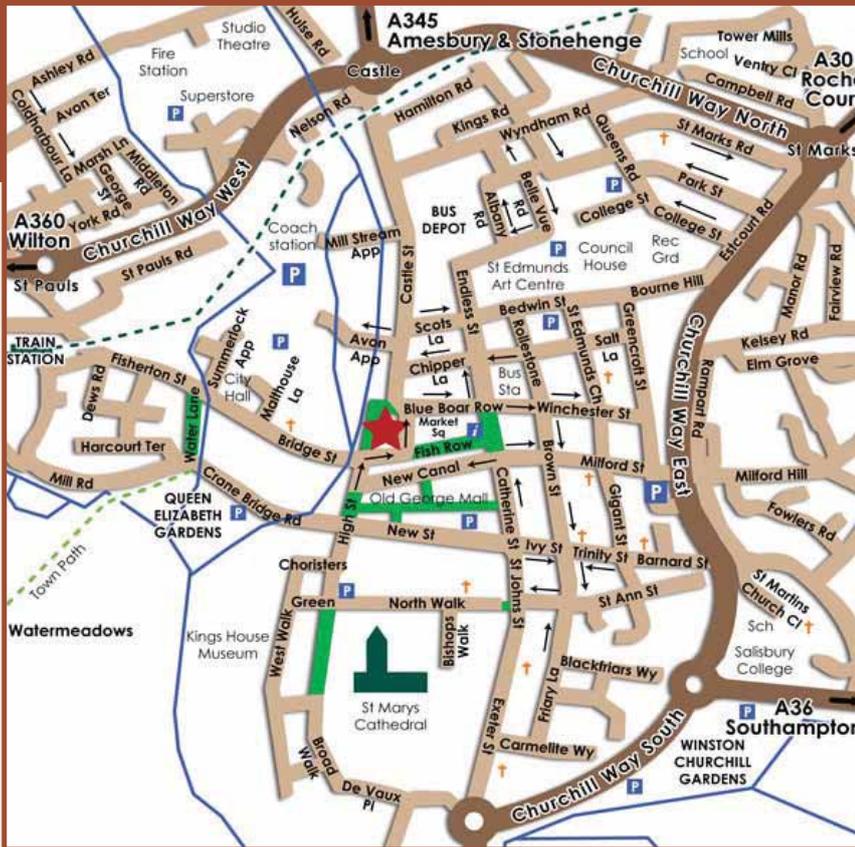
AN ANCIENT PAINTING IN THE CHURCH OF SAINT THOMAS

The text in the centre of the picture opposite reads:

This ancient painting is supposed to represent the accomplishment of our Saviour's declaration to the 12 Apostles. The City of Jerusalem forms the back ground over which is represented the Sun of righteousness in its full splendour, and on the other side is the Star in the East. In the centre, our Lord appears seated on a rainbow, with his feet resting on another. He is here represented presiding as Judge over the 12 tribes of Israel with the 12 Apostles standing at his feet. On each side are Angels with trumpets summoning the Dead from graves, and on the right side is a representation of the infernal regions at the bottom of which is a Scroll signifying that from thence there is no redemption. Two demons are the principal figures in this group, beneath which are several figures chained together and propelled towards the Mouth of the Dragon.

The figures at the bottom are King Henry II and Archbishop Becket the Patron Saint of the Church.





How to find St. Thomas's Church, Salisbury.

Contact:

The Parish Office, St. Thomas's House,
St. Thomas's Square, Salisbury, SP1 1BA
Tel: 01722 322537

email: saint.thomas@btinternet.com

website: stthomassalisbury.co.uk

Admission is free, although donations are welcome towards the upkeep of this special building. There is full wheelchair access.

There is adequate parking and good Park and Ride facilities from all directions.

Opening times 8.30am – 6pm

Tues & Sat morning coffee is served in the People's Vestry 9.30am – noon.

