



**The Mediaeval Murals
St Ethelbert's Church
Hessett
In the County of
Suffolk**

Our murals are a remarkable survival from a bygone age. Some may have been painted as long ago as 1460.

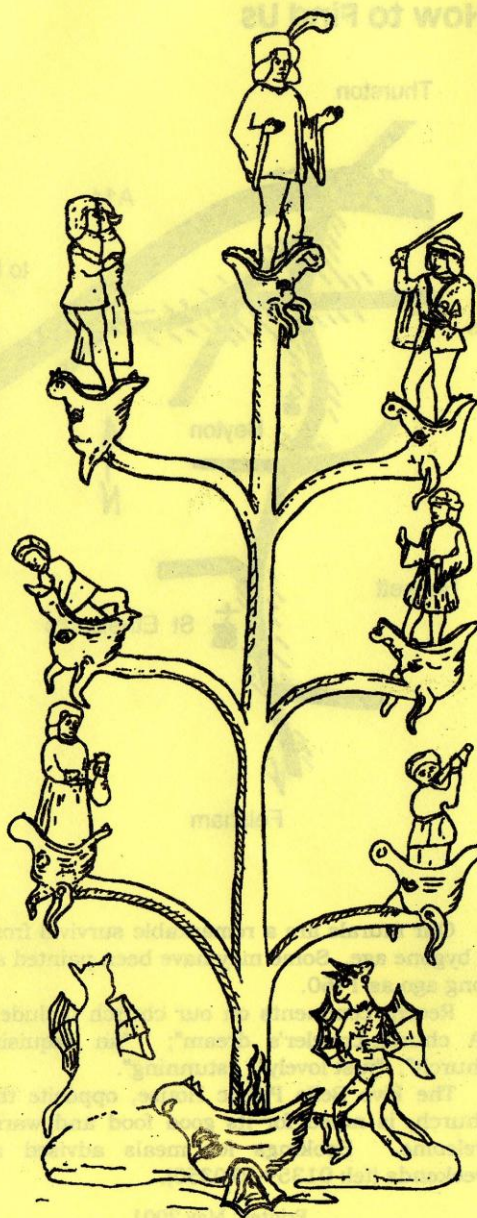
The Hessel Church wall paintings are a remarkable survival from a pre-Reformation church. At first, murals served a dual purpose. They decorated plain walls and, together with colourful stained glass, must have made churches resplendent. Added to that was the didactic purpose of providing instruction to illiterate congregations, often providing a dire warning of what could be in store in the afterlife for the wicked.

Later, particularly with the spread of Puritanism during the Civil War, church decoration was thought to be sacrilegious, and monuments and other church treasures were ruthlessly destroyed. Sometimes, roof angels were used for target practice. Remarkably, the Hessel murals largely appear not to have been defaced, although we do know that Cromwell's men visited this church.

St Michael Weighing The Souls

The subject of this mural was a mystery for many years, as much had been painted over and only a small square containing the legs, cloak and the lower part of a wing was visible. The remainder was revealed during May and June 1997, when Ann Ballantyne and Andrea Kirkham removed the overpainting, allowing the subject to be identified.

St Michael stands over the South Door. This fragmentary painting repays study, as some of its features are hard to distinguish immediately. He wears a feather tunic, of which only the lower parts of the right wing can be seen, the upper part of the right and the whole of the left wing being plaster repairs. His head has survived, although details of the face are gone, and the fact that he is crowned with a cross on a circlet helps to identify him as an archangel. The cross bar of the balance scale, the strings and pan carrying the soul, as well as fragments of the strings and pan with the soul's evil deeds can just be made out.



The evil deeds take the form of a devil, visible a short way above, and to the left of, the south door arch.

This mural served to remind the congregation of their mortality and the last judgement as they left church by the south door after a service. It must have been a powerful warning in the days before modern medicine, when life was nasty, brutish and short.

St Barbara

At the east end of the south wall over the piscina stands St Barbara, holding a tower. She was a pagan (to the Greeks, barbarians were people who made noises like "bar bar" instead of talking Greek) and her pagan father killed her when she revealed herself as a Christian by ordering a third window to be added to a tower in honour of the Holy Trinity. He in return was struck dead by a thunderbolt. For this reason she is patron saint of the Royal Artillery and others concerned with explosives. She is also patron saint of architects.

The Seven Deadly Sins

In the North Aisle is the earliest of the wall paintings which, on the evidence of the clothes style, may well date from 1460. A tree rises from hell with two demons at the bottom, and the branches end in dragons' mouths in which stand the Sins. Clockwise from bottom left these are: Avarice (clutching his tightly-closed purse), Sloth (too lazy to save himself from an imminent fall), Lust (a kissing couple), Pride (flaunting his finery), Anger (with switch and dagger), Envy (holding forth) and Gluttony (with his haunch of meat, or possibly bottle). This painting is particularly well preserved.

Christ of the Trades

Below the Seven Deadly Sins, this painting shows items from trades, handicrafts and amusements which were prohibited on Sundays, surrounding the Body of Christ. The tools depicted were in use around 1430, and it is possible that the altar nearby was used by local Trade Guilds. Similar paintings survive in some Cornish Churches, e.g. Lanivet.

Christ has unfortunately been obliterated but the tools remain, some of them very faint. Possible identifications include patten, jug, playing card, scourge, musical pipe and awl. A full list can be found in the Church Guide.

St Christopher

Above the North Door can be found this mural of the patron saint of travellers. Unfortunately it is in a fragmentary state but something remains to be admired and repays careful study. It is just possible to make out the Christ Child standing on St Christopher's shoulders. The saint is holding his staff with both hands while he strides westwards through a river full of fish observed by the Donor and his wife who kneel on either bank. Details such as the richness of the pearl and jewel-encrusted border to the hem of the saint's robe indicate that this was an expensive painting of a rather later date than the painting of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Consecration Crosses

Under St Barbara and the Seven Deadly Sins. These were incised on the dry plaster at the time of the consecration of the aisles. Tapers were inserted in central holes, and below St Barbara the mark made by the burning taper can still be seen. These are a very rare survival.