Canterbury Cathedral, St Gabriel’s Chapel

The 12th century wall paintings in St. Gabriel's Chapel, in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, are some of the most important in the country and are of international significance. Set up in 1979 The Wall Paintings Workshop was originally one of the Cathedral’s restoration departments, responsible for the conservation of wall paintings such as those in St Gabriel’s Chapel. Since the closure of the department in 1991 the Workshop has been involved in many prestigious projects both in this country and abroad.

The wall paintings in St. Gabriel’s Chapel, situated on the southeast of the crypt under St. Anselm’s tower, are some of the highest quality and best preserved of their type in the country. The chapel consists of four bays of quadripartite vaulting, forming the nave, and a semi-circular apse, separated from the nave by a wall pierced by two arches. Originally part of Prior Ernulf’s work the chapel was altered on a number of occasions due to problems caused by the weight of the tower above. Buttresses were added on the north and south angles of the apse in about 1100 (this dating being based on the use of the broken billet string course – see Woodman, F. - ‘The Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral’). Structural problems remained, however, and at a later date, prior to 1163, the apse was sealed off from the nave by the blocking in the two communicating arches. The unusually good state of preservation can be attributed to this sealing off.

The following description of the wall paintings is based on that by E.W. Tristram (‘English Medieval Wall Painting - The Twelfth Century’ Hacker Art Books 1988):

The apse is covered with an almost complete scheme of painting, except for the recess at the east wall, which probably contained an altarpiece.

The central subject, in the middle of the apse vaulting, is a figure of Christ in Majesty seated on rainbow, with the earth beneath His feet, within an aureole supported by four Angels. The two on the east stand in adoration, with the Sea of Glass beneath their feet. Those on the west emerge from clouds, below which are the roofs and towers of the Heavenly Jerusalem. They are all clad in albs and red mantles, fastened at the waist with belt tied in a large knot.

Clad in an alb, the folds of which are drawn in blue, edged with jewelled borders at neck and hem, and a red mantle, the figure of Christ once held a book, inscribed EGO. SUM. QVI. SVM in His left hand but this part of the painting has been lost.

Unusually, His right hand in not depicted in the act of blessing, but is extended towards the figure of St. Gabriel, who is represented as one of the supporting Angels. The importance of St Gabriel is evident in the depiction of the scenes below depicting the angel’s visits to Virgin and to Zacharias. These scenes occupy the rest of the vault above the string-course which circles the walls.

On the north side the first subject is the Annunciation to Zacharias. St. Gabriel, clad in a white tunic and grey mantle, bearing a scroll with the words AVDITA. E. ORATIO. TVA stands with hand uplifted before Zacharias, who is censing an altar, marbled and covered with a white frontal. The Angel announces the forthcoming birth of a son to Zacharias who, unable to believe the news, is struck dumb. In the next scene he stands indicating his mouth with a gesture of his right hand before a crowd of men and women, headed by a rabbi in a conical hat. On the band above is written ERAT. PLEBS.

The subsequent birth is shown on the register below. On the left, within a building, lies Elizabeth on a couch, holding the infant son. Two men and a woman standing at the foot of the bed, have come for the circumcision of the child, and the foremost of whom bears a scroll with an inscription, now illegible, the wording of which may be inferred from that on the scroll held by the child's mother in her left hand NEQVAQVAM...
SED VOCABITVR JOH. Beyond, on the eastern side, stand two men, turned towards the father and appealing to him for his decision about the name. White-haired, and wearing the conical hat of a Jew of high standing, Zacharias is seated in front of a desk, holding a scroll, and pointing with a pen to the words which he has just written JOHS. EST. NOMEN. EI. Behind his chair are two more figures, the one in front with hands raised in surprise. On the band above are the words ISTE.PVER.MAGNVS.CORAM.DNO.ET.SPV.SCO. REPLEBITVR.

Unfortunately, the paintings on the south side are much more damaged and very little of any of the subjects now remain visible. In the upper register the faint outlines can be made out of the Annunciation of the Virgin and the next subject, the Visitation. According to Dart, the incident depicted in the lower register was the Adoration of the Magi, but this has almost entirely been lost. Only the word NAZARETH remains of the inscriptions which once existed above these subjects.

According to Dart the flat facet of the string-course below these paintings once bore an inscription HOC. ALTARE. DEDICATVM. EST. IN. HONOREM. SCI. CABRIELIS. ARCHANGELI. Beneath this the lower part of the walls are covered with the remains of painted hangings with an elaborate border.

At the apex of the soffit of the eastern arch is a representation of the Seven Stars, on a blue background, within a medallion, bordered by the words SEPTEM. STELLAE. ANGELI. SEPTEM. Below this are four rectangular compartments, on each side, representing the Seven Churches of Asia - Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (on the south), Pergamus, Smyrna, and Ephesus on the north with a full-length, seated figure of St. John the Evangelist, writing the Apocalypse in the lower rectangle.

The Seven churches are represented by half-figure depictions of their respective guardian Angels holding golden candlesticks, surrounded by roofs and towers symbolizing the churches. Originally their names were inscribed below them, but these have been lost.

Guarding the entrance to the Sanctuary on the north and south faces of the piers at the entrance to the apse stand two fine Seraphim, with six wings and standing on wheels. Adjacent to these, on the eastern faces of the piers and on the vaulting over the arches and are trees, probably representing ‘Tree of Life’. On the soffits of the entrance arches are the remains of half-figures of Angels within medallions. It is thought that a head of Christ was formerly at the apex of the southernmost of these two arches.

The paintings in the apse have been dated c. 1130-40.