

THE MEDIEVAL PAINTED CEILING

ST HELEN'S CHURCH,
ABINGDON-ON-THAMES



THE MEDIEVAL PAINTED CEILING OF THE LADY CHAPEL ST HELEN'S CHURCH, ABINGDON-ON-THAMES

The painted ceiling in the Lady Chapel of St Helen's, Abingdon, is a medieval masterpiece. Miraculously, it has survived over 600 years. After an eight-year restoration programme, it can once again be fully appreciated.

THE GUILD OF OUR LADY It was soon after the rebuilding of the church in the early 1200s that the Guild of Our Lady was formed. Religious Guilds were a common feature of the time, often involved in poor relief and church improvement. At St Helen's the Guild built a Lady Chapel, and, a century or so later, commissioned a magnificent painted ceiling for it. They must have been encouraged by Pope Boniface IX granting an indulgence in 1391 promising four years' relief from Purgatory to "penitents giving alms to St Mary's altar in St Helen's church."

THE TREE OF JESSE The subject of the paintings is the Tree of Jesse, the family tree of Our Lord. This was a popular theme of the time, represented in carols, wall paintings and windows throughout medieval England. At St Helen's, the ceiling is based on St Matthew's Gospel 1:1-16. Kings of the House of David are interspersed with prophets.

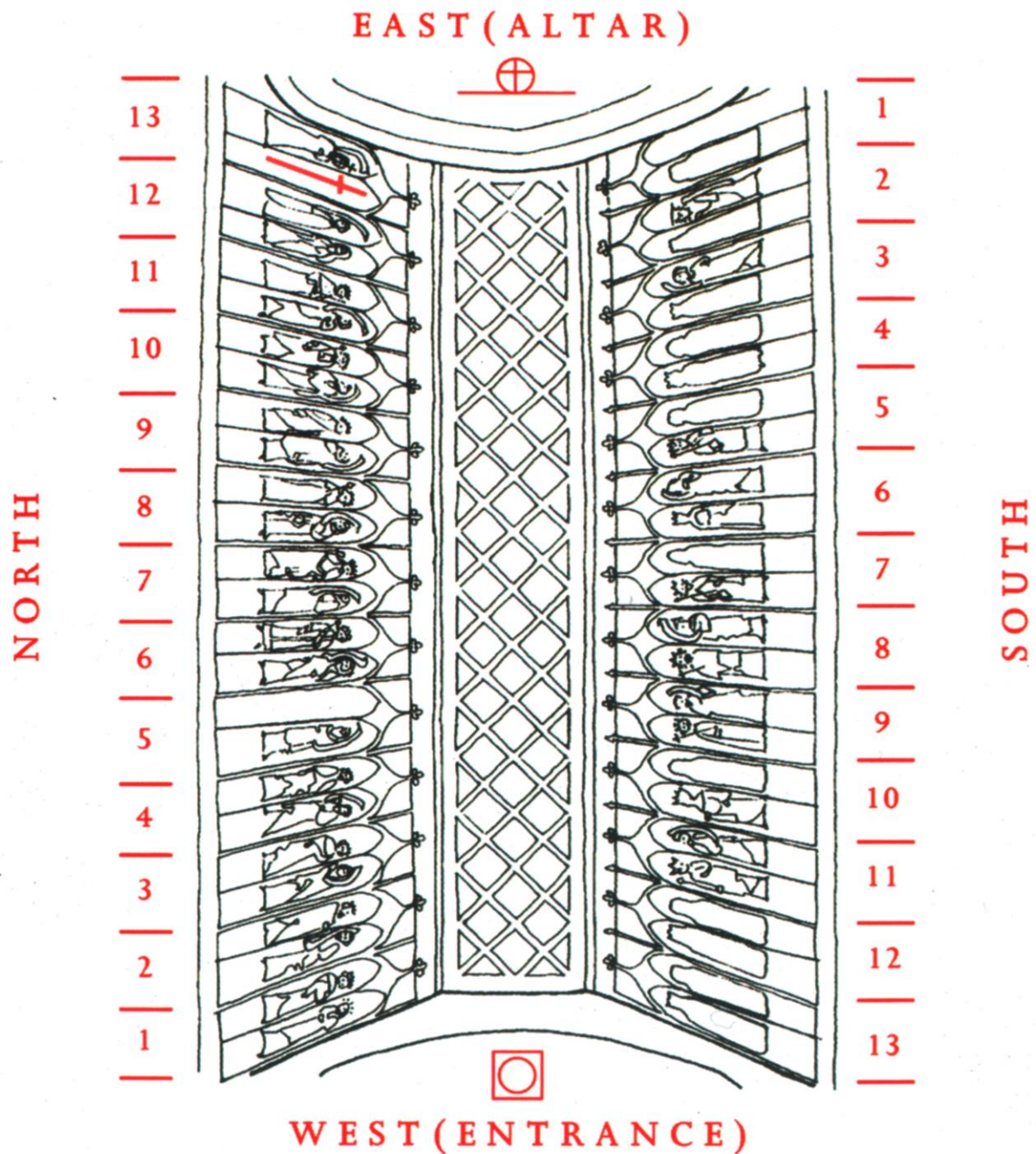
The series begins at the east end of the south side, with a large "ghosted" Jesse in the traditional recumbent position with the vine growing out of his body, continuing with King David and the prophet Nathan. The north side begins with Moses holding the stone tablets, and ends with the four panels of St Joseph, the Archangel Gabriel, a beautiful Lily crucifix, and finally Our Lady. From one panel to the next a vine winds along with a wealth of glossy leaves on curving branches.

THE PAINTING The members of the Guild must have been delighted with their commission. The quality of the work indicates that craftsmen of great sensitivity and skill were employed. The Kings are portrayed in the costume fashionable at the elegant court of Richard II, with long gowns, tippets of white ermine, and flowing robes fastened with delicately wrought gold pins. The prophets with their Jewish caps wear graceful robes in blues and purples.

THE INSCRIPTIONS 52 panels, 2.1 m by 0.3 m, are set in two sloping sections. The horizontal section in the middle is divided into richly traceried squares with carved bosses of lions' heads with yellow eyes. The inscription over the panels states that William Cholsey renewed the roof. On the north side, the chaplain Henry Bernyngton, is mentioned. He gave vestments “to which fine linen gives substance and colour”, as well as a silver cross. On the south side is a prayer “O Virgin, star of the sea, mayest thou lead those who made this chapel to heavenly sweetness after the troubles of the world.”



The Lady Chapel



SOUTH SIDE 1. Jesse & David 2. Nathan & Solomon 3. Ahijah & Rehoboam 4. Prophet? & Abias 5. Prophet? & Asa 6. Baruch & Josaphat 7. Amos & Joram 8. Elijah & Uzziah 9. Jacob & Joathan 10. Hosea & Achaz 11. Nahum & Hezekiah 12. Micah & Manasses 13. Prophet? & Amon.

NORTH SIDE 1. Moses & Josias 2. Jeremiah & Jeconiah 3. Zephaniah & Salathiel 4. Obadiah & Zorobabel 5. Haggai & Eliacim 6. Habakkuk & Zadok 7. Jonah & Eleazar 8. Zechariah & Mathan 9. Malachi & King? 10. Joel & King? 11. Isaiah & King? 12. Joseph & Archangel Gabriel 13. Lily Crucifix & The Virgin Mary.

SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

As you might expect, the effects of time, temperature changes, ecclesiastical disputes and sheer ignorance, have all had their different effects on the ceiling down the centuries.

During the Reformation, in the 16th century, the three panels at the east end of the north aisle, depicting the Archangel Gabriel, the Lily Crucifix and the Blessed Virgin Mary, were covered with red paint.

In 1856, the vicar's daughter overpainted nine panels.

During the restoration of the church in 1872, 14 panels were discarded and those that remained on the south side were pushed to the east, regardless of their original order.

In 1935 the panels were cleaned but left in their Victorian muddle.

Finally, in 1983, Anna Hulbert and Herbert Read Ltd., began a thorough restoration, which was finally completed in 1991 to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the original installation. The 38 surviving panels were freed from Victorian nails, the frail wood was strengthened and the overpainting removed. The panels were replaced in their original positions and gaps filled with new panels of “ghost” kings and prophets. The chapel was partly enclosed to control the temperature fluctuations, which had caused so much damage, and an engraved glass inscription by David Peace was commissioned for the entry.

What makes this ceiling unique is the combination of its age, its quality and its preservation. It is a treasure of national importance. At St Helen's we are privileged to worship daily in this beautiful Chapel, and are conscious of our fellowship with those who have built it, beautified it, and used it to the glory of God for so long.

Photography: Anthony Burrell
Production & Design: Anthony Burrell Media Services
© St Helen's Church, Abingdon-on-Thames





Moses



Vine detail



Unidentified King



Malachi



King Eleazar



The Virgin Mary



King Joram



Joseph