



St Peter's Church, Shorwell, Isle of Wight

Medieval wall painting

Above the north door to St Peter's church, Shorwell, an important medieval wall painting dated to circa 1470 depicts scenes from the life of St Christopher. St Christopher is usually shown carrying the Christ Child across a river, as is described in the Golden Legend; but here he carries the Christ Child across a much larger expanse of water, quite possibly the Solent or even the English Channel.

The middle ages were a time of economic difficulty for the Isle of Wight with raids from the French and their allies and the constant threat of invasion. Indeed the present vestry in the church used to house a cannon; part of the Island's defences. In view of this one can understand the reason for depicting a large expanse of water like the Solent as opposed to a river.

The primary aim of the practical conservation programme was to remove embedded 'bast' fibres from a coating on the surface of the painting. The 'bast' fibres are most likely to be residual traces of tissue paper unfortunately left behind following a previous programme of conservation. Other aspects of the work included securing instances of a second type of paint flaking (much finer in scale), where the medieval paint layer itself was delaminating from the ground.

As a result of removing the embedded 'bast' fibres the coating was much reduced thereby leaving the surface of the wall painting looking much cleaner. To retain tonal unity across the painting the coating was reduced to a similar level from all areas thus improving its aesthetic appearance. This painting acts as a valuable document recording life on the Isle of Wight in the late medieval period.

