

## The Journey of St Christopher

Welcome everyone. Its lovely to see so many faces old and new. We hope that today you are going to get a better understanding of our amazing wall painting.

Why are WE doing this? We lived alongside this church for nearly 30 years and we can't explain it but it has a special feel for us and we love it and its wonderful wall painting, which is the most complete telling of the story in England and as such is nationally important.

We aren't experts or historians but have learned bits and pieces over time and love its story.

We are going to talk a little bit about the history of St Christopher and how his story developed into a cult and then explain the story with reference to our wall painting here in Hemblington.

Let's start by trying to imagine this church in the medieval period.

This little church is a shadow of what it would once have looked like back then, but, if we take the time to look closely, we can see the traces of its once highly decorated interior.

The niches painted with ochre show the outlines of leaves and flowers.

Looking up at the roof we can see faded barley twist patterns and symbols M for Mary and IHC for Jesus.

Even the floor has a few medieval tiles remaining with hints of colour.

Turning to the front we have the steps here which would have led up to a loft over a rood screen which would have been painted or at least heavily carved. We have no record of this here but good examples can be seen at Ranworth and in other churches around the country. The steps would have allowed candles to be lit often on either side of a crucifix.

This is an example which was reinstated in the early C20th at Lound in Suffolk.

There may have been other wall paintings here though only Christopher has survived to our knowledge. It has only survived because it was painted over at the time of the reformation around 1550 when the law demanded that Roman Catholic images be removed.

This appears to have been done quite carefully here as you will see on the C15th font the faceless Saints all still hold their symbols, so can be easily identified.

The painting was discovered in 1937. We were told that a wall plaque fell off the wall revealing traces of the paint. While we were living here, we met people who had been young choristers at the time and they described the great excitement around its discovery. The eminent Professor Tristram came to work on the painting and as can be seen on the Hemblington Church website interpreted the story (he incidentally also coloured the font).

So, who was St Christopher?

He's not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. There is no tangible evidence that he ever existed but a strong medieval cult grew around the story and still venerates the saint today. In the early years the story would have been passed by word of mouth. Where did the story originate?

Early Christians were said to bear Christ on their hearts. They held the spirit of Christ within them. The name Christophorus comes from the Greek for Christ bearer. A believer.

The first firm evidence of Christopher is in 451 A.D., in the city of Chalcedon, on the Bosphorus in what is now Turkey, where a stone was found in the ruins. Its inscription mentions the 4<sup>th</sup> ecumenical council held in Chalcedon, when the eastern orthodox and roman catholic churches were beginning to divide. and the laying of a foundation stone for a church dedicated to the martyrdom of St Christopher

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a great persecution of Christians when the Romans forced everyone to sacrifice to their Pagan Gods and follow traditional Roman practices, many Christians were horribly tortured and put to death.

The dates are all confused and the king mentioned in Christopher's story could be any of several who ruled in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Decius and Dagarus are mentioned most. Decius was a Roman Emperor who ruled between 249 and 251 and is known for his persecution of Christians. Dagarus was the King of Lydia according to Professor Tristram, but we have found little trace of him. All begin with "D" and were all Roman authorities.

At this time the story of Christopher would have been passed by word of mouth. Even today with all our books and technology how many slips and spelling mistakes we make. This would only have been amplified in the past with little way of proving that a mistake had been made especially if you travelled to another village or country that hadn't heard the tale.

The story of Christopher is set in Lycia which equates to Xanthos in present day Turkey and at that time it was under Roman rule. Stories began to emerge in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and in 553 a bishop in Lydia had taken the name Christophorus. Around 600 AD a nunnery in Galatia was consecrated to Saint Christopher

These are the early beginnings of a solid history. The events happen in Lycia, the church in Chalcedon on the Bosphoros, the Lydian Archbishop and the nunnery in Galicia- all centred on what is now western and central Turkey. This is an earthquake prone area so it's not surprising that the evidence for his life is very sketchy.

However, in the Croation city of Rab, a church contains a jewel encrusted skull in a golden casket which purports to belong to St Christopher. There are reports that in 1075 the city was under siege and a Bishop showed the relic from the city walls and the army fled. For many years a large tooth held by Vercelli church in Italy brought pilgrims from all over Europe but in the 18<sup>th</sup> an archaeologist sadly determined it to be a hippo tooth. Relics were venerated objects real or not, which, brought pilgrims and money to churches providing a valuable income stream to the early church.

In the Eastern orthodox tradition Christopher was described as a dog headed man. A Canaanite who some believed ate human flesh. He was a monster. Someone who was a stranger. He prayed to Christ for the power of eloquent speech which he was given. He then proceeded to convert others to Christianity. So here we have the beginnings of the western tradition too. A giant called Reprobis a reprobate who becomes a Saint by converting many to Christianity.

Somewhere over the next 300 years the man bearing Christ on his heart morphed into the man bearing Christ on his shoulders.

In the second half of C9th in England a manuscript containing the hagiographies or life stories of 230 saints was compiled. The “Old English Martyrology” included Saint Christopher. In the Latin texts Christopher wanted his place of death “to never be plagued by hail, nor the fury of flames, nor evil plague, nor famine...illness or demons”. Later Anglo-Saxon translators cut this down to “let there be no want there, nor fear of fire and asked for the power to heal.” Changes were constantly being made to the story.

Then we have Aelfric of Eynsham who in the early C11th popularised the lives of the Saints and commissioned several manuscripts trying to make the Saints more accessible. He tried to bring in some uniformity to the stories by demanding changes weren't made to his manuscripts, however, variations have been identified.

Over the next 100 years or so the manuscripts continue to be reproduced and images of Saint Christopher begin to appear. This is an image from the Grandisson Psalter probably from the early C13th.

The publication of the Golden Legend written in 1275 by Jacobus Voragine seems to have been an impetus for wall paintings in churches. It tells the stories of saints and shows how to lead the Christian life.

One of the earliest surviving English wall paintings of St Christopher is in Westminster Abbey. It shows Christopher carrying Christ with two inscriptions one above says "Think that St Christopher was so called because he carried Christ." and at the base "Whoever keeps safe the image of St Christopher is surely possessed by no exhaustion on that day". This painting has been dated at between 1270 and 1300.

It wasn't just wall paintings. At about this time in a cave at Royston, associated with the Knights Templar, a St Christopher was carved into the cave wall just below the main entrance.

Throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries images of St Christopher became very popular and many are found on the walls of our parish churches. Some of this may have been due to the Black Death of 1348-9 when a huge proportion of the population succumbed to the illness. Just up the road, Acle may have lost 45% of its population at this time. St Christopher was invoked against sudden death and vile plague.

Is this why Wickhampton shown here, Hemblington, Moulton St Mary and South Burlingham all have St Christopher wall paintings? Just a glimpse of the Saint was thought to protect one for the day. Hence its position on the North wall where it can be seen from the main door which was typically on the southside. This image is of Moulton St Mary viewed from the door.

In Europe St Christopher was often painted on the outside of churches and this one is on St Blaise Church in Gottertal, Germany.

By the fifteenth century it is thought that a large proportion of our parish Churches would have had a St Christopher wall painting. Caxton's translation and printing of the Golden Legend in 1483 must have made the story more accessible as it was a medieval bestseller

Ten years later in 1493 Christopher Columbus discovered, for Europeans, the islands of St Kitts and Nevis, in the Caribbean. He named the largest island Saint Christobal which became St Christopher Island when English settlers arrived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and over the years St Kitts a nickname for Christopher. Columbus thought of himself as a Christ bearer and was considered to be an early missionary by the Catholic Church.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> Christopher became one of the 14 helper Saints who could intercede on one's behalf. The list of things he is supposed to protect one from is huge. Sudden death, hurricane, flood, plague, epilepsy and he was the patron saint of travellers, athletes, bachelors, fruit carriers, bookbinders and surfers just to name a few

St Christopher medallions are still readily available and are often given to those embarking on long journeys. Our son was given one by his close friend as he set off sailing. The badge on the right here is for a car bumper as he became the patron Saint of motorists in the 20<sup>th</sup>. They often have the words "Behold St Christopher and go your way in safety" or "If you trust St. Christopher, you won't die in an accident".

Even in the twentieth century in Lound a new wall painting of St Christopher was added to the church in 1913 which showed the architect Ninian Comper in his Rolls Royce and in the renovations of the 1960's an aircraft was added. Modern updates to an ancient story! So, despite now being removed from the official Roman Catholic calendar of Saints his popularity endures.

Most surviving St Christophers just show him carrying Christ across a river. There are only 2 church wall paintings surviving in England that contain the story of his martyrdom in detail. This one and Shorwell on the Isle of Wight. Some years ago we had a little pilgrimage to Shorwell arriving on 25<sup>th</sup> July, his Saints Day, for a service to celebrate the renovation of their painting. It is very delicate compared with Hemblington and shows local fish, ships and landmarks. It is on the north wall above a door and is smaller than ours but very beautiful, showing 6 episodes from the story.

So, to our amazing wall painting here in Hemblington.

Who painted it?

We have no idea but as Imogen Corrigan suggested last week there were itinerant crafts people working in churches across the country and this was probably the case for wall painting artists too.

Looking at the wall here we have 11 vignettes of his life and martyrdom. It pretty much follows the telling by Caxton in his translation of the Golden Legend. This is a unique painting because it is so detailed. Suggesting that it is a fifteenth century painting as earlier depictions of the Saint tended to be much simpler.

To our mind this is a medieval comic strip. In the centre we have our larger-than life St Christopher carrying Christ. Think of him maybe, as Desperate Dan a large rough man with an enormous appetite.

On the left-hand side of our huge St Christopher we have traces of his early life when he was called Reprobus. He sets out to serve the most powerful person in the world to use his strength in whatever way is demanded. We will fill in the gaps in the picture as we go.

Our story begins in the top left-hand corner with Reprobus serving the King of the Cananites. We can see bits of the Kings canopy but little else. At the court Reprobus hears a minstrel sing many times of the devil and sees the King make the sign of the cross to protect himself Reprobus demands that the King tells him why, he does this. At first the king refuses but eventually tells him that he fears the Devil will have power over him.

So Reprobus thinks Satan must be stronger than the King and he sets out to find and serve the devil. He comes across some cruel and horrible Knights who convince him that they are Devils so he falls in with them. We can see the devils riding out here with horns on their heads.

On their route Reprobus notices the Devil make a long detour through a desert to avoid a cross. Reprobus demands an explanation for this diversion. At first the Devils refuse but when Reprobus says he will leave their service the Leader according to Caxton, tells him

“There was a man called Christ which was hanged on the cross, and when I see his sign I am sore afraid, and flee from it wheresoever I see it.”  
We can't see this on our wall painting but at Shorwell he is seen taking the path of the cross having left the devils.

Reprobus Leaves the devils and sets out again, to find the most powerful person. He comes across a hermit who instructs him about faith in Jesus Christ. He suggests that Reprobus should serve Christ by fasting. But this is too hard for Reprobus and he asks for some other task. (He was a big man with a large appetite after all)

The hermit says you must rise early and make many prayers. But again Reprobus says he cannot. (He isn't educated.)

Now the hermit suggests he uses his strength to bear travellers across a treacherous river where many have perished. Reprobus thinks this is a good use of his skills and he gathers his staff and sets to work tirelessly helping others over the river.

So we have two banks of the river with Reprobus crossing over. We think these lines just above his right knee are the remains of what would have been a fish and there are more on his lefthand side. Their position in the picture suggests a wild river not the flat calm seen in many oil paintings. Interestingly in Shorwell they have sea fish and 3 interlaced fish indicating the Trinity on the right-hand side of the picture.

One night, when he is sleeping, he hears a voice calling him to take them over the river, so Reprobus rouses and goes out to see who is there but finds no one. He goes back into his house but hears the voice calling again but sees no one outside. The third time he is called, he finds a small child waiting to be carried over the river.



Reprobus lifts the child onto his shoulders takes up his staff and begins to cross the river. The river rises and swirls around them and the child grows heavier and heavier so much that Christopher fears he will drown. At last, they make the other side and Christopher sets the child down on the bank. He tells the child that he could bear no greater burden and that he feared for his life and the child answers;” Christopher marvel thee nothing for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne him who created and made the world, upon your shoulders.”

We now use the name Christopher as he is now the Christ bearer. Some see this as the baptism of Christopher.

As a proof of what has just happened Christ tells Christopher to plant his staff in the ground which he does and by morning it bears flowers and fruit. This is a symbol for his new life flourishing. Sadly, we have no image for this.

Now we move to the bottom righthand side of the painting where his story unfolds.

He travels to Lycia and prays for the ability to understand the language which he is given. He goes to the place where Christians are martyred and comforts them. Using his staff, he again plants it in the ground for it to bloom and bear fruit and converts many to Christianity some say 8000 souls.

The king hears of this and is angry and orders men to bring Christopher before him. They find Christopher deep in prayer and don't disturb him. More soldiers are sent by the king but they all end up praying alongside Christopher.

We can see a group at the bottom here with Christopher. Having converted the soldiers Christopher then tells them to bind his hands and take him to the king.

In Caxton's telling the king falls off his seat for fear when he sees Christopher but here on the right, he retains his seat and is shown with a canopy and two swords which appear throughout the painting.

These indicate the Kings status and scimitars like this one are consistent with the story's Turkish origins. He berates Christopher as a fool for following Christ who couldn't save himself from death and demands he sacrifices to Roman gods.

Christopher refuses. The King declares that he will torture and destroy him. So, he is imprisoned and moving left and up our painting shows the prison and a jailor with his large key or possibly lantern. In the cell on the left is our beardy Christopher and a woman.

Two women Vysena and Aquilina, purportedly harlots are then sent to tempt and seduce Christopher but he prayerfully converts them. Sadly, the bottom of this picture is blank but we still have one of the women.

Now we move to the right.

The furious King summons the women and Christopher to sacrifice to his gods. The women ask for the temple to be made clean and then they will make their sacrifice. However, as they enter the temple, they remove their girdles and use them to pull down the statues of the gods proclaiming "Call your doctors to make them better".

The king commands that the two women be hung by their hair with their feet weighted by heavy stones. Aquilina dies but Vysena was thrown on a fire only to survive and be beheaded. We have this wonderful image of the ladies with hands together in prayer being hung here. It takes 3 men to lift them off the ground pulling for all they are worth.

The brutal King has Christopher tied to a tree and beaten. Some say he was beaten by iron rods but here it looks like cat-a-nine tails.

Moving left, we have what we believe is Christopher being tied to a stool. Caxton states that he is tied to an iron stool and thrown onto a fire where the iron melts and he survived unharmed.

Moving left and up we have Christopher in front of the King being threatened with death. We again see the two sword symbols.

Moving right we find 2 of the forty archers summoned to fire arrows at Christopher while he is bound to a tree. The arrows do not harm him and lie broken and bent on the ground around him. All except one which is heading off up to the right hitting the king in the eye. Here it is shooting off at an angle headed for the King.

Christopher knows he will be beheaded and tells the king to take some of his blood and mix it with earth from the site of his death to anoint his eye and he will have his sight restored

So at the top left of the painting, we think there is Christopher lying on the ground having been beheaded by the executioner on the left. Kneeling beside the body is the humbled king, now without his sword, holding an arrow in his hand presumably anointing his eye with Christopher's blood and seeing the error of his ways for the first time.

The journey of St Christopher from reprobate to Saint was long and arduous a story of trial and error

And of enlightenment not just for Christopher but for the king too.

Whether Christopher existed or not his story was used in the past to illustrate the trials and tribulations of leading a Christian life.

He shows us the way to lead this life

Through redemption by giving up on the devil

Through Service - using his skills to help others

Through Perseverance - in the face of adversity and

Through Courage and sacrifice in his service and martyrdom

A Christian life that is open to everyone both peasant and king.