

Who's Who?

The Wall Painters

Hello. I'm Brother Gregory. I'm a painter, and work with my great nephew Jacob, my sister's grandson. He's a good boy. Been painting with me now for a while. Painting, yes that's what we do. We're monks, and creating paintings for churches is a wonderful way to celebrate God. We've been busy here in Flamstead, and we're your guides today. Take a look around ... look higher ... you'll have to look up if you want to see our work. That's some of it ... over there.



Figure 1 A Medieval painter.

Four large figures - Apostles, in red ochre – that's a natural clay pigment us artists love to use. That's the first of the wall paintings here in St Leonard's. Created 700 years ago. That's right, Jacob and I were painting here in this Church in 1300. Those were the medieval times.

If we'd known then that these paintings would have been added to, and then lost, hiding under layers of limewash for 400 years to be rediscovered just 70 years ago... well we'd never have believed it. Would we Jacob? Mind you, all you can see now is their legs and feet. The rest of the Apostles probably got lost when the Church raised the Nave Walls and added those stained-glass windows. I don't mind about them spoiling our picture, because the windows are beautiful too.

But that's by the way. You heard me right. These incredible paintings were covered in layers of limewash after the Reformation. The Reformation was in the Sixteenth Century, when the Christian Church split in two, making one group called Protestants who followed the ideas of a German monk called Martin Luther. The other group was called Catholics, and they carried on following the Pope in Rome. That Reformation led to decades of unrest and wars across Europe.

Anyway, the paintings were covered over because it became the law that churches should be plainer, with decorations and statues taken away. Do you know, they were only rediscovered in 1930. Imagine that, uncovering Flamstead's secrets. That would have been something....



Figure 2 The remains of the wall painting of St Christopher discovered beneath limewash in St Leonard's Church, Flamstead.

Back in my day all the walls would have been painted in bright colours. So, who knows what other painted treasures are hiding on these walls around us?

Now you can see St Christopher over there. He's the largest painting in the Church ... up there on the Nave, the North Wall opposite the main doorway on the south side of the Church. St Christopher, he carried Christ across a river. This picture is the first thing you'd have seen when you came into the Church in my day, those medieval times. They used to say that if you looked at this picture you'd be protected against sudden death!

Come and look over here, on the South Wall. This one's interesting. The Three Living and the Three Dead – life size murals of three living princes and three dead ones. They were painted later, and not by me. You can tell it's later by the clothes they're wearing.



Figure 3 The remains of the Three Living and the Three Dead, St Leonard's Church, Flamstead.

See that young man over there, the one holding a hawk? He's dressed in fifteen century clothes. This painting comes with the warning: "as ye are, so were we; as we are, so shall ye be." It's telling us that life is short and death, bringing heaven or hell, is only too near.



Figure 4 The Doom painting, St Leonards Church, Flamstead.

There are many other paintings to see as you look around. Christ sitting among rainbows and clouds, his arrest in Gethsemane, angel's wings, the Last Judgement.... If these paintings could talk – well, what they would tell us ... all the weddings, christenings and funerals they've been secret witness too. 700 years of Hertfordshire history.

Before you go, do one thing for us. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and think for a moment. Imagine how splendid, how colourful, how glorious these paintings would have looked in medieval times, before they were painted over. Which one do you like the best?