



ST MARY'S CHURCH
THORNHAM PARVA, SUFFOLK

*A guide to
the Retable*

Paul Binski

Introduction

The famous 14th-century gilded and painted Retable that graces the altar of St Mary's church is one of the most miraculous survivals of the art of the English Middle Ages.

Made of painted oak, the Thornham Parva Retable is the sort of object that was to be found in English churches of all ranks in the Middle Ages – and exactly the sort of thing that was to be destroyed during the English Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet this extraordinarily beautiful painting survived the religious turmoil of these centuries largely unscathed. How this happened will be explained later.

For the moment, we need simply to reflect on the fact that this is the second oldest altarpiece to survive from medieval England, and one of only a handful now existing from the entire Middle Ages in this country (others are to be found at Westminster Abbey and Norwich Cathedral).

The Retable is now in a secure glazed wooden case over the high altar in the chancel. It was originally intended to be seen at this sort of height, and in this sort of position over an altar. However, this particular retable was not in fact made for the church at Thornham Parva. It arrived here in 1927 as a result of a donation by Lord Henniker, and for a while was displayed in the little gallery at the back of the church. Lord Henniker's staff had found the Retable in a stable loft at Thornham Hall, not far away. Like many medieval works of art, by the 19th century its importance and beauty were long forgotten, its value as a stout piece of oak timber being much greater. A beautiful medieval altarpiece had

become no more than a bit of Suffolk farmyard junk. Its resurrection in the 1920s and location in the church here in effect saved it for posterity.

Although the first publication about the Retable was in 1933, by the 1980s works of art of this sort had started to attract not only scholarly but more widespread public attention. Much more had become known about the manufacture, use and history of such objects. It was now possible to pose certain questions about the Retable: for whom and where was it originally made, by whom, and when? We can now answer these questions, and so much the better because of the recent conservation of this Retable undertaken by the Hamilton Kerr Institute.

But to do so requires a close look at the Retable itself.

FRONT COVER:

St Margaret of Antioch

BACK COVER:

St Edmund

The Retable

Now (as of 2003) completely cleaned, the Retable can be seen in something more like its original medieval appearance. What we see is a low wide rectangle, 3.81m by 0.94m, consisting of painted and gilded timber, which consists of a row of carved canopies, an arcade of pointed Gothic arches supported on round columns. Over the row of arches is stylized carved and gilded foliage. Within the arcade stand the figures of saints, long and slim in form with small heads and graceful swaying postures. No two figures are quite alike, for it was important to identify and differentiate the saints by the attributes they hold. In medieval fashion, the saints are anachronistically imagined in then-contemporary costume as if present before the eyes of the beholder in the here and now. The overall impression is of rich dark gold for the frame and grounds, and of deep reds, browns and greens with a few dark blues – the harmonious colours of autumn.

The practice of placing images – whether statues or paintings – on or over altars, was well established by the 14th century in Europe as a whole. We know from a variety of written sources that panels like this one were being made for all sorts of churches in England as early as 1200. A 'retable' is simply a panel (after the Latin *tabula*) at the rear of an altar, which could be sculpted or painted, as here. In fact painted images were quite as common in medieval England as they

The centre of the Retable: The Crucifixion (see pages 8 and 9 for complete Retable).





were in Italy, but they survive much more commonly in Italy, which did not undergo the traumas of Reformation or revolution. The Thornham Parva Retable might make us think of Italian art of the period of an artist like Duccio or Simone Martini, but it is in fact entirely English in form and origin. Throughout the Catholic Church all such panels had the same aim: to stress the fact that altars were dedicated to the saints who witnessed the daily commemoration of Christ's death in the Mass.

Paintings like this were made in highly-organized workshops of joiners and painters, most likely based in the towns and cities. On the Retable, the central compartment of the arcade is a little wider and with a rounded arch. So the woodcarvers who made the frame already knew what was to be painted: the Crucifixion of Christ, the most important moment in the Christian history of our salvation at which mankind was redeemed. Christ, a painfully thin figure, was duly painted hanging on the Cross with his mother Mary, and St John the Evangelist, the disciple whom he loved, to either side: Mary wrings her hands in despair, and John puts his right hand up to his cheek in contemplation and grief. He holds a book as the sign of his role as Evangelist. Note the carefully-inscribed *titulus* or placard at the head of the Cross: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

To either side of the Crucifixion is, literally, the company of heaven, the 'cloud of witnesses', in the form of the saints, ten in all if we count Mary and John by the Cross. Each saint stands under one of the arches of the arcade, and the figures are elegantly and politely arranged in pairs, turning to one another as if in a sort of heavenly conversation. The choice of saints is extremely important. It tells us much about what the original destination of the Retable is likely to have been, and even where it might have been made.

In looking at the saints, we should bear in mind that medieval retables were formally arranged precisely for the use and interest of those that commissioned them. Applying this general rule to the Retable, the results are surprising. Had this Retable really been made for Thornham Parva church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, we might have expected the Virgin Mary to be accorded great importance. Here this is not quite so. Mary is present, but only within the Crucifixion, of which she was a traditional part. Often the most important saints were placed to the right-hand side of the central figure of Christ or Mary on such a picture, i.e. to the viewer's left (the clue to this is the opening verse of Psalm 110).

On the Retable, the first saint we encounter to our left is the tall austere figure of a man with a tonsure (the shaved crown of his head), a

red staff with a cross – a preaching cross, a book, and the habit of a Dominican friar. This is clearly St Dominic (d. 1221) the founder of the Dominican order of preachers, or Black Friars. Dominic was Castilian by birth, but died at Bologna, where his shrine is still to be seen. The order he founded was highly intellectual in nature, and also international, spreading rapidly throughout Western Europe and, of course, to England. Its particular purpose was to preach true Christian doctrine in the cities, and especially in the face of heresy.

Dominic is turned to the queenly figure of St Catherine of Alexandria (d. 4th century), who holds up her attribute, her wheel of martyrdom: she too was a famous preacher. So was the next saint, John the Baptist, who stands in his rough hair shirt and holds the little red disk with the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (St John's Gospel, 1:29). The next saints on either side of the Cross, Peter and Paul, were not only important preachers, as set out in the Acts of Apostles, but also the principal founders of the Church: here they seem to lead the procession of saints as witnesses to the Cross.

Next in the right-hand half comes the regal image of St Edmund (d. 869) the martyred Anglo-Saxon king whose relics lay at Bury. Edmund was the most important local Anglo-Saxon saint aside from St Etheldreda at Ely. Both were royal: almost all the great English saints of the earliest period of Christianity were. Next to Edmund is St Margaret of Antioch (d. unknown), a formidable crowned early martyr whose elegant figure tramples on the dragon which swallowed her up; she completes the job by skewering it with her preaching staff. We might never have guessed from this that Margaret was the patron saint of childbirth because she had escaped from the stomach of the dragon. She too was an important preacher – note that she holds a book – like her neighbour, the final saint on the panel, St Peter Martyr (d. 1252), also an Italian Dominican martyr who was killed during a violent ambush on the road to Milan. The very mirror image of Dominic, the 'model' for the order, the artists show how saints in religious orders obeyed the same 'rule', even in their appearance. Peter differs only by the cleaver buried in his head, from which horrid wound issue forth great gouts of thick blood. Christ dies to redeem us: all the saints here, bar Dominic, Mary and John, died for the Faith, and so were martyrs.

So the saints depicted make some points about its purpose clear. The large size of the panel and the fact that it is enclosed by the two Dominicans, proves beyond reasonable doubt that it was originally made





for the church of a Dominican Priory, and probably for its high altar. Altars dedicated to Dominican saints in cathedrals or parish churches were very rare. The theme of preaching is stressed throughout the panel by the choice of saints, preaching staffs, and books. The Dominicans, like the Franciscans, were part of the mission of the Church Triumphant at the medieval height of its power. By the 14th century houses of Dominicans were to be found in the major cities of southern England and East Anglia – at Norwich, Cambridge, Lynn and Ipswich. The presence of St Edmund also suggests an East Anglian connection – as does the history of the panel, of which more presently.

The Retable, now preserved in a parish church, is therefore a masterpiece of medieval Dominican art. So now we have to try to establish when the Retable was made, and for which of these Dominican houses in East Anglia.

When and where it was made

The dating of what is now called the Thornham Parva Retable can be arrived at by two means: by judging its style in relation to other dated work, and by scientific methods such as dating the timber-work.

All the evidence points to an origin in East Anglia at some time around 1330, give or take a few years. The first reason for thinking so is that the style in which the figures are painted looks very much like works of art made in or for East Anglia at around this time – a period of great prosperity in this region when East Anglia was producing some of the most interesting art made in northern Europe. More paintings of this sort survive in illuminated manuscripts than they do on walls or on panels, and although the craftsmen who illuminated manuscripts were not always the same as those who did larger-scale paintings, the styles they used were similar. The Thornham Parva Retable was once thought to resemble wall and panel paintings of around 1300 at Westminster Abbey; but the best comparisons come from luxurious gilded and illuminated manuscripts made in the Norwich area in the first half of the 14th century, such as the great Ormesby Psalter (now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford). The similarities are close enough to lead us even more firmly to the conclusion that this Retable is East Anglian work, and that it was made by painters

linked to a city in East Anglia such as Norwich at some point in the early fourteenth century

In this regard the Retable lies at the start of the tradition of magnificent art patronage in late-medieval East Anglia. It is the ancestor of such important paintings as the Despencer Retable at Norwich Cathedral painted in the last decades of the 14th century, and the 15th-century great rood screens of Norfolk and Suffolk such as those at Ranworth, Barton Turf and Southwold, all of which are within easy driving distance of Thornham Parva. Like the Retable, these famous works can all be enjoyed in the living context of religious buildings, and not museums. Wall paintings similar to the Retable may be seen in the Ante-Reliquary chapel at Norwich and at Brent Eleigh church in Suffolk.

Mention of the great rood screens also brings to mind a final aspect of the art of the Retable, its gilding and patterning. Gilding and patterning are commonly used on the later rood screens as signs of the prosperity and ambitious taste which brought the screens, made for the parishioners, into being. The first thing to strike will certainly be the chequerboard pattern on the grounds of some of the saints on the Retable, alternating with grounds entirely gilded over. The taste for chequers can be found elsewhere in East Anglia at just this time, as in the flint flushwork and heraldic patterns on the gatehouse at Butley Priory in Suffolk. The 14th-century eye loved alternating patterns like these, and the Retable is found to be full of them, if looked at patiently.

Examined closely, these grounds can be seen to have been made of a textured substance forming the devices, which were actually cast from tin moulds in paste rather like seal-designs. The resulting relief patterns were then covered in a red ground and gilded. A variety of small patterns can be identified on the stamps, including fleurs-de-lys (which, though part of the arms of the Kingdom of France, were used as general patterns much more widely at this time), back-to-back birds, eagles and the *Agnus Dei* or Lamb of God. The stamps were also used to produce relief effects on the covers of the books held by the saints. The relief produces a subtle glitter in the gold, much of which has been carefully restored by the conservators. The carved foliage over the arcade is also gilded, and looks a little like beaten metalwork. The general aim was to turn something made of base materials, wood, paste and paint, into something seemingly precious, in a sort of artist's alchemy.

Patterning like this was becoming very common towards the middle of the 14th century. The date of the Retable has also been confirmed by tree-



ring analysis (dendrochronology) of the timber used to make the 'support', or wooden structure, to which paint was applied after suitable preparation with a coat of chalk in size, or glue. The Retable is very simply constructed from rows of vertical planks, to which the carved arcade was pegged from the front. The top edges of the planks expose the grain, made up of the rings left by the annual growth of the tree. By studying the differing width of these rings in sequence and comparing them to dated samples of the same sort of oak, it is possible to come up with a surprisingly accurate date for the cutting of the tree from which the planks were sawn. The best dates – to one year's accuracy – can be established where the outer sapwood is retained. Where (as is the case here) it has been cut away, an estimate needs to be made. In the case of the Retable, the last certain date of felling of the tree is 1322 – to which a small number of years must be added to account for lost timber cut away, including the sapwood. Little time was spent seasoning timber in this period, so the construction and painting would have followed the felling by but a few months. So this confirms the art-historical date of 1330 or so – perhaps into the decade 1330-40. It has even been possible to establish that the timber came from eastern Europe, via trade with the Baltic lands. By this time England itself was already on the way to deforestation, by no means a modern phenomenon.

The Retable was therefore made from eastern European oak felled after 1322, fashioned into a carved support by carpenters and joiners, and coated with a ground made of chalk-size. It was covered with tin-relief stamps and gilded. Finally, it was painted with pigments mixed with linseed oil. All this occurred in a workshop based in the Norwich region around 1330-40.

Its history

In the 1920s the Retable turned up in a stable loft on a Suffolk estate. But for whom was it made, and how had it survived at all?

To work this out requires a good deal of detective work. How long the Retable had lain at Thornham Hall stable is unknown, but the connection was fairly old. The column next to St Dominic at the very edge on the left of the panel bears a small label saying 'Second



ABOVE

The Thornham Parva Retable

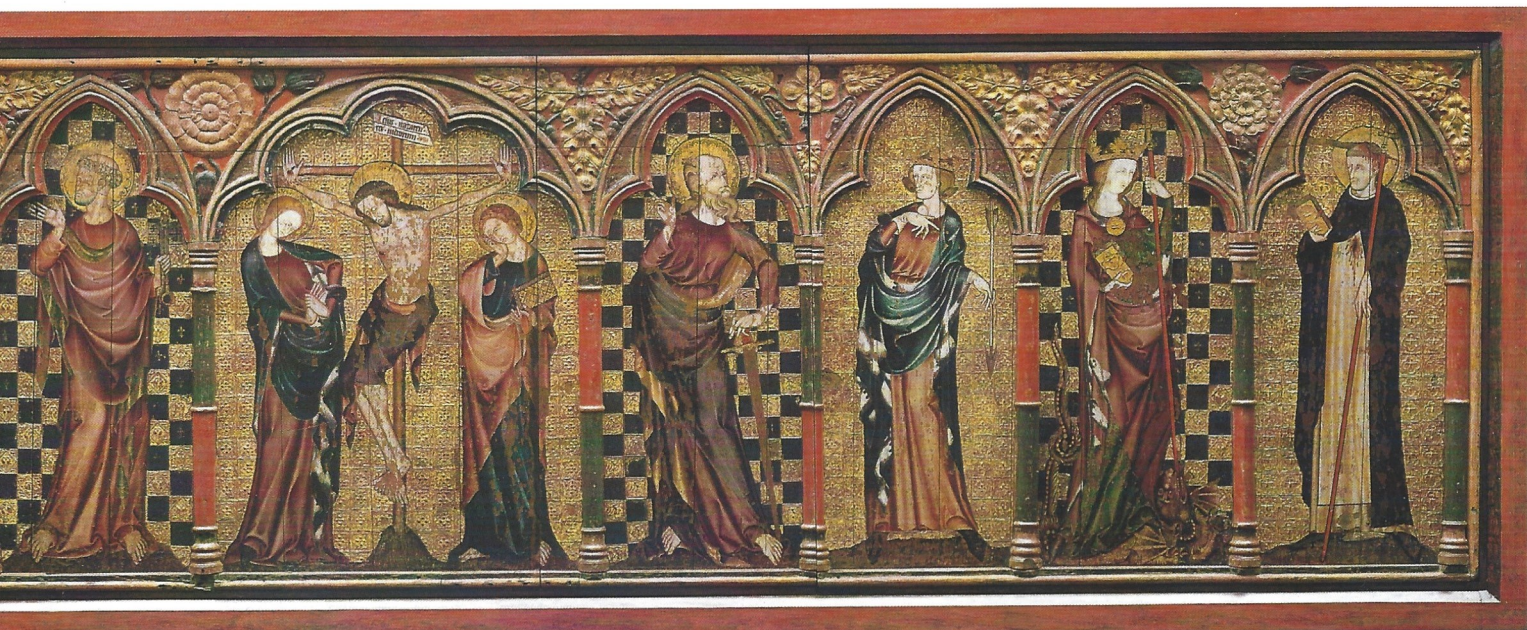
Left to right: St Dominic, St Catherine, St John the Baptist, St Peter, The Crucifixion, St Paul, St Edmund, St Margaret of Antioch, St Peter Martyr.

RIGHT

Frontal, Musée de Cluny, Paris (see page 12).

Left to right: Nativity, Death of the Virgin, Adoration of the Magi, St Anne teaching the Virgin. The missing left hand section probably showed the Annunciation of Mary.







Day, Lot 171' showing that it had been purchased at a sale in 1778 by an ancestor of Lord Henniker, called Sir John Major. The sale was of a house called Rookery Farm at Stradbroke in Suffolk. Between 1778 and 1927, then, the Retable was presumably at Thornham Hall, and before 1778 at Stradbroke.

The Stradbroke connection, taking the Retable back into the 18th century, is critical. At the sale, Rookery Farm was owned by a family of the name of Fox, who belonged to a line of Catholics going back at least to the 16th century. The Fox family appears to have been connected to Stradbroke since the Reformation. As Catholics, their regard for an object of medieval religious devotion such as the Retable would be understandable. Before the era of Catholic emancipation, they would have practised their religion in secret at Stradbroke, quite possibly using the Retable in their own house in a private chapel. It seems quite possible that the Retable survived the period between the Dissolution of the friaries in the 1530s and the sale of Stradbroke in 1778, by becoming an object in private Catholic hands.

But no family of laypeople is likely to have commissioned such a grand object in the first place: the Foxes must in turn have got the Retable from somewhere else. Here we are in a more conjectural realm, but one possible route suggests itself. One of the Fox family in the 17th century, Simon Fox, was closely connected with the important Catholic aristocrat Henry Howard, Duke of Norfolk (1677-84) the grandson of the famous art collector Thomas Howard. Thomas Howard is famous for having gathered all sorts of art objects, including medieval illuminated manuscripts, which passed subsequently into the Arundel collection of the British Museum, now Library. Simon Fox even bought manuscripts for Henry Howard and so acted as a sort of art dealer. Now, the Howards matter partly because of their collection of medieval artworks, and partly because they were associated especially with one of East Anglia's Dominican houses, that at Thetford, on the road from Cambridge to Norwich. The site of Thetford Priory, itself dissolved in 1538, had passed into the hands of the Howards in the early 17th century.

If we assume (and there is no reason not to) that the site of Thetford Priory was kept relatively intact for a few generations after the Dissolution, the possibility arises that the Thornham Parva Retable was actually the original high altarpiece of Thetford Dominican Priory, preserved after the Dissolution at or near Thetford Priory, then acquired by the Howard family and subsequently by the Fox family, whence it

arrived at Stradbroke, first appearing for certain in 1778.

Thetford suggests itself for a variety of reasons. One is that it is possible to trace a line of descent for the Retable exclusively from this particular Dominican house. The other important Dominican houses in the region such as Norwich can be ruled out by circumstances, usually because the history of the churches used by those houses was very discontinuous. For example, the important house at Norwich, dedicated to John the Baptist, suffered a devastating fire in 1413 that led to its church being abandoned for a generation.

Other reasons for favouring Thetford Priory include the following. First, this particular house was founded in 1335, and would have required an altarpiece for its new church at around the date for the Retable that we established earlier. Fragments of stained glass recently excavated on the site of the priory at Thetford show that stained glass with figures and canopies was installed in the Priory chancel at this time.

Second, the Retable has one slightly odd combination of saints. Reading inwards from the edges, we find the saints falling into pairs: Dominic and Peter Martyr as Dominicans; Catherine and Margaret as a famous pair of female preacher saints and martyrs; Peter and Paul, who share the same feast day. But what of St John the Baptist and Edmund? No natural connection aside from their martyrdom suggests itself between the forerunner of Christ and the Anglo-Saxon king of East Anglia. But saints were sometimes singled out on works of art because of the needs of the patron, whose first or Christian name was chosen for a reason. Thetford Priory was founded in 1335 by two well-known figures, John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey (d. 1347) and Edmund de Gonville, founder of Gonville Hall in Cambridge (d. 1351) and a wealthy Norfolk priest. Was John the Baptist chosen as the name-saint of John de Warenne, and St Edmund of Edmund de Gonville?

We cannot be sure, but the evidence seems to add up: of all the likely Dominican houses in the region, Thetford seems the most probable in terms of its history, and of the subsequent ownership of the Retable.



The Retable's sister painting in Paris

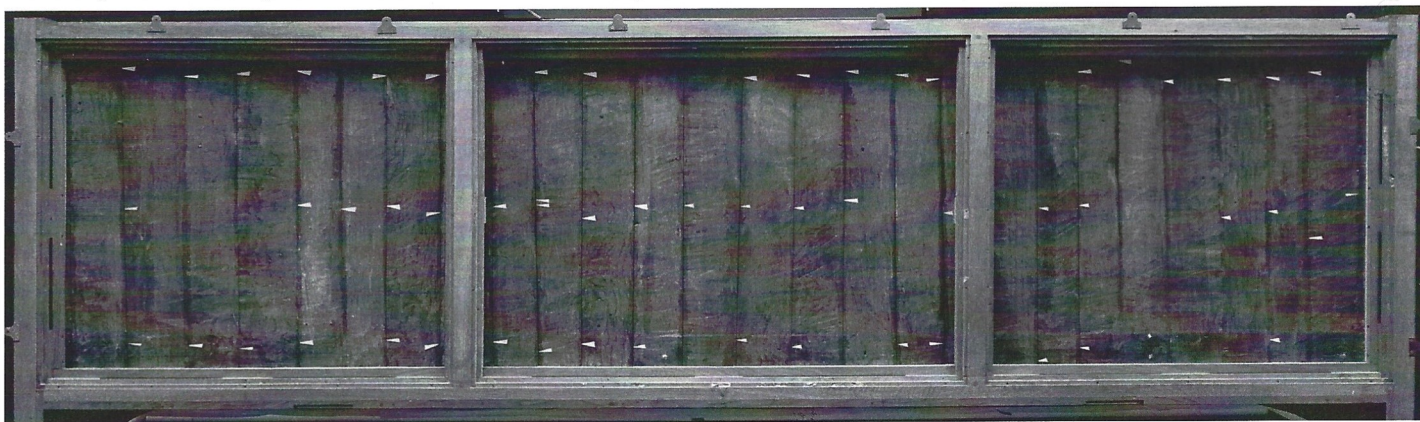
And this raises a further puzzle. The Thornham Parva Retable is not absolutely isolated, because it has a sister panel painting which is now in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. For many years the general resemblance between the two was acknowledged. The Cluny panel was painted by the same team of painters using the same distinctive stamped decoration. The patterns, colour and style are basically identical. The Cluny panel however has square panels with painted cusps, which depict scenes from the Life of the Virgin: the Nativity of Christ, the Dormition (or death) of the Virgin Mary, the Adoration of the Magi, and St Anne, Mary's mother, teaching her to read or pray from a Psalter placed on a lectern. As it stands the panel is certainly incomplete, because it lacks one scene at the far left which must have shown the Annunciation to Mary, making five scenes in all.

The puzzle is that when the original dimensions of the Cluny panel are restored by the addition of the missing scene, the overall size of the panel and the system of compartments which enclose its scenes, exactly coincide with the overall

width and internal divisions of the Thornham Parva Retable. Not only that, but both panels were damaged, probably at or after the Reformation, in exactly the same way, by someone who scored with a knife across the faces of some of the figures and drilled into the eyes with its point. It seems that the two panels may have been together when this damage was done.

To have two paintings in the same style, from the same workshop, of the same size and with the same damage, is most unlikely to be coincidental. The most likely explanation is that the two panels were commissioned together, one as the Retable altarpiece at the back of the altar, the other as the frontal, or ornate panel placed in front of the altar table. When co-ordinated in this way with one above the other, the two panels work very well together, the death of Christ on the Cross falling over his mother's death below, and the pairs of saints above answering to the story panels below. Thetford Dominican Priory was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, Virgin Mary (the Frontal) and All Saints (the Retable) – for the Dominicans were especially devoted to the Virgin Mary. If this is so, the two panels formed one group – a really remarkable survival. However, much less is known about the history of the Cluny panel, and nothing at all about its past before it arrived in Paris in 1864; nor has it been closely investigated.

Reverse of the Retable, before the recent conservation, showing construction.



Conserving the Retable for posterity

At various points in its history the Thornham Parva Retable is likely to have been repaired and retouched, though how much of this occurred when it was being used in the Middle Ages is unknown. It was certainly repainted, and rather crudely, at least once in the 18th century when the figure of St Catherine was extensively retouched. The authority on wall paintings E.W. Tristram also cleaned off overpaints at some point between 1927 and 1955, and the panel was regilded in the 1960s. When three young scholars, Christopher Norton, David Park and myself came to take a really close look at the Retable in the early 1980s, it stood above the altar with its back to the east window, with no significant protection or security. It was obvious that its medieval appearance had been seriously compromised by later repairs. Our work was published in 1987 (see Further Reading) and the Retable included in the *Age of Chivalry* exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, that year. This greatly increased interest in it.

In the 1990s the parish of Thornham Parva decided to have the Retable conserved and brought up to the standards of display nowadays expected of art works of this stature. The commission was given to the Hamilton Kerr Institute, the easel-painting conservation department of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Reasons for undertaking the work included the way that repainting can, in time, damage original layers of paint by contracting and pulling them up: the well-intentioned repaintings of the Retable done by the Foxes or the Hennikers were now shortening its life. The decision was taken to remove all but the medieval paint, secure what remained by 'consolidation' and to tone in the losses, so that the remaining images should be legible. This required years' of patient work under a microscope. In the course of this process, all sorts of nuances were revealed, not least the fact that the modern



Alice Tavares da Silva cleaning the overpaint on the Retable at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge in 1999.

fairground reds and greens on the foliage carved on the frame covered the most delicate original golds and reds.

At Cambridge, scientific analysis was possible. Tree-ring analysis identified the timber and its date. Infrared imaging of the panel with wavelengths of light longer than visible light could harmlessly show up preparatory drawings beneath the paint layers, which reveal how faithfully the painters followed the initial designs. Analysis of the colours and media used showed where the pigments had originated (in the case of some as far away as the Middle East) and that the panel used linseed oil – it is in fact a very early oil painting. Cleaning revealed tiny patterns and details that helped to tie the

paintings even more closely to East Anglian illuminated manuscripts.

And so by early 2003 the panel could be returned to Thornham Parva church, where it was newly and securely framed in a fire-retardant case, safely alarmed, and rededicated with a blessing by the Dean of Saint Edmundsbury's Cathedral and in the presence of the Director of the National Gallery in May 2003.

Though not made for this place, the Retable still powerfully brings to minds the glories of medieval East Anglia and its Faith.

Acknowledgements

The Parochial Church Council of St Mary's Thornham Parva are indebted to the following for permission to reproduce photographs in this guide: The Hamilton Kerr Institute and Musée de Cluny, Paris.

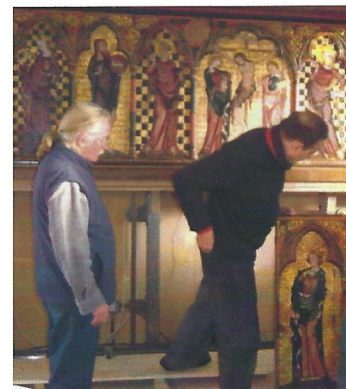
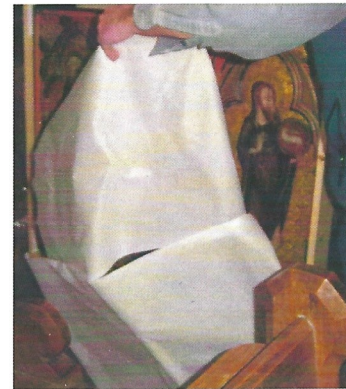
We are especially grateful to Dr Paul Binski, a Research Fellow at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, for the text and his generosity.

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Finally, we would thank our publishers, Expression Printers, for their invaluable guidance.



28 January 2003: Ian McClure and his team from the Hamilton Kerr Institute return the Retable to Thornham Parva after an absence of eight years.

Further reading

For the standard investigative work on the Retable done before its conservation, including a discussion of many aspects of Dominican patronage and history in East Anglia, see C. Norton, D. Park and P. Binski, *Dominican Painting in East Anglia: The Thornham Parva Retable and the Musée de Cluny Frontal* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press 1987), with full bibliography.

For the recent conservation and new discoveries, see A. Massing, ed., *The Thornham Parva Retable: Technique, Conservation and Context of an English Medieval Painting* (Hamilton Kerr Institute and University of Cambridge/Harvey Miller 2003).

For the art of the Gothic period in England generally, see J. Alexander and P. Binski, eds., *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400*. Royal Academy of Arts, London 1987. The short catalogue by P. Lasko and N.J. Morgan, eds., *Medieval Art in East Anglia 1300-1520* (Norwich: Jarrold) is also very useful.

