

The Painted Room, Whittlesey

The recent discovery of a mid seventeenth century earthen wall painting in a vernacular building of Whittlesey (Cambridgeshire) is a startling and important survival. Exact dating of paintings such as these is often difficult but broadly they range between the late sixteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries. Elements of the composition suggest a later dating of c.1650, meaning they are of a later and rarer date than comparable paintings.

Uncovered behind later wooden panelling during refurbishment the extensive and surprisingly well preserved paintings have been protected through the centuries by this very fact. Finds of this kind in a vernacular setting are increasingly rare as in the past they have been undervalued and little protected. The wall paintings communicate social and cultural values of the people who commissioned them, usually the owner or occupier of the house. There is little surviving material evidence of ordinary people in a rural or vernacular setting so they offer a tantalising glimpse into the artistic and social tastes, as well as technological practices of the time.

Two landscape scenes depict bucolic and verdant hills leading to classically influenced buildings in the distance with figures and hunting dogs. The landscape does not appear to be local and is possibly not of the UK either. Further portrait-like scenes are painted of enigmatic figures in contemporary seventeenth century dress. The dado level below show fictive wooden panelling typical of the period with white strap-work against cross graining.

The Painted Room of Whittlesey is undoubtedly of very high local significance and indeed national significance within a wall painting context. The distinctive dress of the figures may reflect local Protestant and Puritan history as well as dialogue and exchange with the Netherlands or Northern Europe. The classically influenced architecture may also reflect the growing influence of classical Europe on English art and architecture of the time through individuals such as Inigo Jones (1573-1652) and greater travel to/from Europe as a result of the Civil War (1642-1651).

The paintings are executed on an earthen (mud/clay) plaster, and tie in with Whittlesey's history of mud walls and the local abundance of Oxford and boulder clays. A rich palette of blues, greens, reds and yellows attest to the high quality of the paintings. Preliminary investigations suggest the use of inorganic and fugitive organic pigments. Further research and analysis of the paintings will undoubtedly reveal more about this remarkable find.