

# Medieval Wall Paintings at Breage Church

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The church of Saint Breaca houses many important late medieval wall paintings which were initially uncovered in 1891, during renovations to the church. The two most imposing paintings are sited adjacent to each other either side of the north door and were so placed to be instantly observed by anyone entering the building from the main entrance on the south side of the church.



To the left of the north door can be seen the figure of St Christopher (approx. 7ft x 9ft) bearing the Christ Child on his shoulder and carrying a staff to help him cross the river. This St Christopher is a huge bearded figure dressed as a Canaanite. He wears a grey/blue tunic with a yellow border and a red cloak draped over his shoulder. Around his head is a red band. His legs are bare from the knees down. In the water are ten fish, a mermaid holding a mirror and, seated in a small clinker boat, a hermit-like figure wearing a cowl. St Christopher was a very popular subject of 15<sup>th</sup> century wall paintings. He was thought to protect travellers and was also considered to have powers against the bubonic plague which was particularly relevant at this time.

To the right of St Christopher on the other side of the north door stands a huge sorrowful looking bearded figure of Christ with shoulder length black hair. He stands only in a loin cloth displaying a scarred and blood spattered body. One hand hangs limply by his side while the other holds his wounds at his waist. On his head is a crown and the stigmata are shown on the hands and feet with blood dripping from the wounds. He is surrounded by various working tools and objects associated with gambling, music and drinking. The tools include axes, scythes, scissors, shears, a toothed saw, a farm cart, rakes, a weaver's shuttle, jars for wine, a lute and a playing card, an anchor and a boat. Droplets of blood are shown on Christ's body where the tools make contact. This 'Sabbath Christ' is a warning to potential Sabbath breakers and is intended to carry the warning that those who do not keep the Sabbath day holy and offer devotion to Christ will be sent to everlasting damnation. The tools depicted around the figure will inflict injury to Christ's body if used to carry out work on a day of rest.

There are various smaller (and less well preserved) figures set into the window reveals and on the walls to the right of The Sabbath Christ. These are thought to be (in order):

### St Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers

St Hilary wears a Bishop's mitre and holds a pastoral staff. He is dressed in a chasuble decorated with embroidered bands. Beneath his chasuble is an alb – a full length white robe with red decoration down the front. He has shoulder length yellow hair and holds up his right hand with two fingers raised in the sign of a blessing.



### St Corentin, a Breton saint

St Corentin's identity is clearly shown by the inscription above him and by the fish symbol to his left. He is

dressed as a bishop wearing a mitre and holding a pastoral staff. He wears a red cloak or cope with a yellow lining over a dalmatic. Beneath this he wears a white alb decorated with a shield shaped apparel at the front. As with St Hilary, his right hand is raised with two fingers displayed in the sign of a blessing. An inscription above his head reads Sancte Quarentine ora pro nobis.



### Unknown archbishop

In the east reveal of the window to the right of St Corentine is a painting of an archbishop (possibly St Ambrose). He is clearly identified as an archbishop because he holds an archiepiscopal (two-barred) cross in his left hand. He wears a bishop's mitre which was probably yellow with red bands. His



chasuble is similar in design to that worn by St Hilary in the adjacent window reveal.

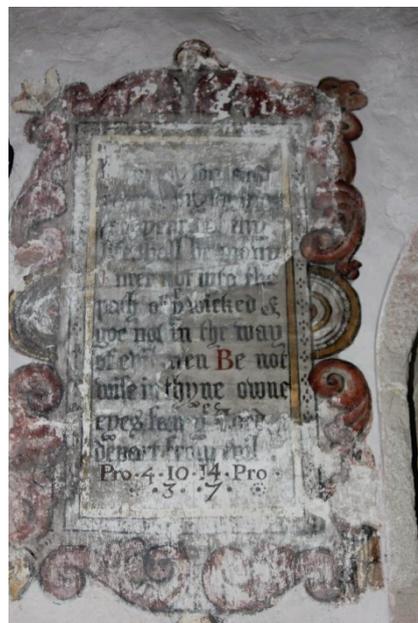
### St Michael and the dragon

Above a plaque in the north aisle (and to the right of the three saints mentioned previously) are the remains of a large painting of St Michael the Archangel. St Michael with raised red wings tramples on a red dragon. Only fragments of this painting are now visible. It is possible to make out the outline of his wings to the far right (like the edges of a saw) his legs – which are now only black – and the sword raised above his head.



### Gothic text

In the organ area (and hidden from view by the oak screen) is a 16<sup>th</sup> century text painted on the wall. It has a wide border of vigorous red scrolling motifs with yellow motifs at the corners. The text, which is black gothic lettering with red capitals, is taken from Proverbs 4 verses 10 and 14.



On the south wall (to the right on entering the building) is a further collection of wall paintings also dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## Henry VI

Immediately adjacent to the main door is a painting thought to be that of King Henry VI but may possibly be St Germoe (thought to be the brother of St Breaca). The king holds an orb in his left hand and what appears to be a book in the other. He wears royal robes of red lined with ermine and an ermine cape. The face appears to have been very crudely drawn and the figure has a thick neck which may be partly due to it having been retouched at some time in the past. For some reason the original crown appears to have been redrawn into a mitre as if to convert the figure from a king to a bishop.



## St Giles

In the next window reveal is St Giles. The inscription above him is said to read 'sc Aegidius' his Latin name. Other identifying features of this saint are the presence of his symbol a hind at the bottom of the painting, although in this case it appears to have been represented by a stag with antlers. He is portrayed as a bishop wearing a red mitre with white bands. He also wears a red chasuble decorated with orphrey, similar to the other bishops, and holds a bishop's staff across his front. The hind/stag is still discernible but the other details are obscured at present by a white bloom.



## St Thomas à Becket

In the adjacent window reveal is a depiction of St Thomas à Becket. He is shown wearing a red and yellow mitre with matching cope and is holding an archiepiscopal cross across his front. His mitre is pierced by a sword, one of the symbols used to depict this saint. His right hand is held up with two fingers raised in the sign of a blessing.



## Ornamental design

This unusual and puzzling decoration, to the left of St Giles, is painted in black or grey. It has an outline of curves and straight lines, rather like a continuous moulding, with a pendant-like motif at the base. The horizontal top edge of the design is completed with a simple border of connected half ovals. It is possible that this was a background to a figure formerly standing on a now destroyed stone image bracket, though there is no evidence of a previous fixing. There are fragments of a later framed text above this with a semi circular pediment. Virtually none of the text has survived and only fragments of the border.

