

## The Poldrissick Wall Painting

by Frank Stevens

Mr Maddever, who farms Poldrissick Farm said to me “You’re interested in local history, have you seen my painting?” “No,” I replied, “but I would like to.” - I was thinking perhaps that when the farm work was finished, out would come the oils, or perhaps water-colours because this part of South East Cornwall is so beautiful - the peaceful setting beside the River Lynher, the bird and wild animal life. But I was in for a shock, a pleasant shock!

I was taken to one of the outbuildings and up the steps to the first floor. Inside, on one of the walls, where the lime whitewash was peeling off, some colours were appearing. On closer examination one could make out pictures of pillars, some Gothic style writing and people. “Do you know anything about this, the age, etc.?” I enquired. “No, but it has always been here,” replied Mr Maddever.

With Mr Maddever’s permission, I made contact with Veronica Cheshier, a historian who has written books on Cornish houses. Shortly after, she came to visit Poldrissick and was able to date the building as Tudor, but was stuck on a possible date for the wall painting, but... “she knew a man who could.” David Winfield, a Surveyor of Conservation for the National Trust, was contacted and he too made the journey to Poldrissick. His report is as follows:

Poldrissick Farm lies about a mile south of Landrake on the west slopes above the Lynher estuary. The painting is in a detached building to the east of the farmhouse and is now the farm workshop. The farm was originally part of the St.Germans Priory Estate.

The present building is rectangular with a pitched roof and it is built of roughly coursed masonry with a lime mortar. It is divided into two storeys but it is not clear that this is an original division and nor is it clear that the rectangular structure is all of one period.

The north-west wall has two arches at ground level with ashlar jambs and lintels and both may date from the Medieval Period, or they may be as late as the 17 th Century. The wall painting is in the gable above these arches on the interior surface and it appears to have covered the whole gable.

Plaster and Painting: A thin lime plaster covers the masonry and provides an even surface on which the painting was made. It appears to have been composed of four vertical strips with black and white patterning, and three areas of coloured overall field patterning of a repetitive design. The fragment of vertical black design on the north-west side portrays a herm supporting a Corinthian capital. This might represent an altar of classical design since a small figure to the side of the herm appears to be holding up an offering. The remainder of the uncovered area of this strip appears to be covered with interlace foliage. There is a trace of a second black and white vertical strip towards the centre of the field, and the position of it suggests that if the design of the whole painting was symmetrical, there should be a third vertical black

and white strip to the right of centre, but at present, none of this is visible. On the vertical strip on the north-east side there is the remains of black lettering in Gothic script forming the end of a scroll. Further work would be needed to establish the text but the final words that are visible might read, '*should ring loud*'.

The areas of repetitive field patterning consist of an interlaced equal arm cross design, with the areas between the arms of the crosses filled with decorative diamond shapes. The crosses are made with a rich yellow to red ochre and black outlines. The background areas are black with a thin wash of blue over them. This was a traditional method of achieving a deep blue effect without using too much expensive blue colour. The diamond patterns are in yellow and red, with black outlines and petal shapes radiating from the centre. The black outlines of the patterns are enriched with rows of white dots in imitation pearls.

Present Condition: The areas of pattern that can be seen were uncovered from under several layers of whitewash by the farmer. There is certainly more of the painting to be uncovered but the paint is very fragile. The plaster ground for the painting is very fragile and much of it appears detached from the wall. The painting will not survive for many years longer without positive action to conserve it.

Dating the painting: David Winfield considers this to be a rare survival of a secular wall painting of the 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> Century in remarkably good condition. The black and white herm and the careful and regular execution of the overall field pattern suggests a very competent painter rather than provincial work. The overall pattern seems to have been painted freehand without a stencil. He says it is important enough to merit preservation on the grounds of quality, rarity and historical interest.

To make sure a permanent record exists, in case there is any deterioration in its condition, a copy of the existing wall painting has been made by Rosemary Robertson and deposited with the Cornwall Rescue Archaeology Unit, the cost met by the Cornwall Heritage Trust.