The Mural at Hall Green Farm

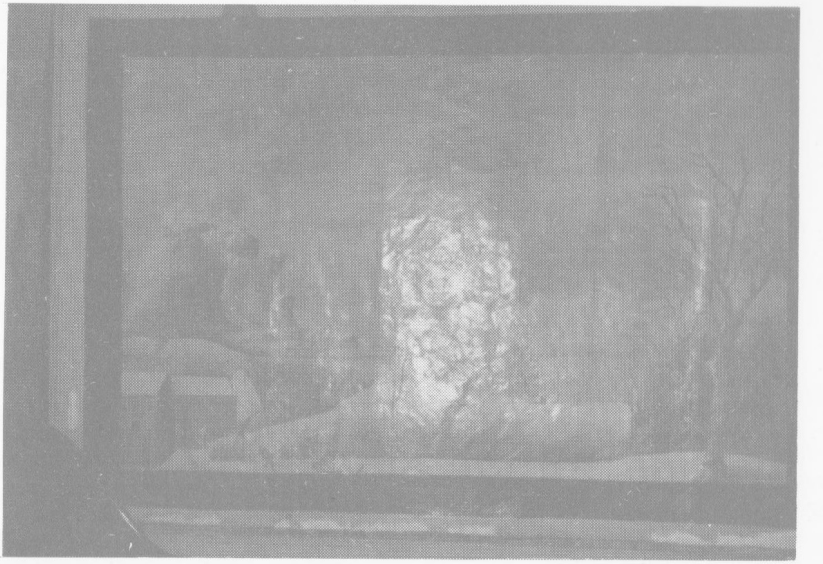
by Richard Turner, Cheshire County Archaeologist

Regular readers of the City University Journal will be familiar with the remarkable activites of the Milner family. In this piece, I hope to bring an earlier article in the journal, "An Odd Turn of Events" (volume 1, no. 2), up to date. To recap, upstairs in a bedroom of Hall Green Farm, Acton Bridge near Northwich are the surviving parts of an unusual mural. When I first saw the room in 1985, only parts of two of the painted panels were visible. The complete picture showed a view of the nearby, but now demolished Marbury Hall, set within its park and gardens in which a variety of activities are set. The composition and perspective are naive but the detail is accurate. To the fore is a town coach pulled by four black horses and followed by a negro servant on a chestnut mare. In the middle distance is a hare coursing scene, with in the far distance, a charming group ploughing and sowing the fields.

The painting was dirty and covered by a thick varnish carelessly applied some 30 years ago. To the left of this panel was part of another, showing a pair of windmills on a cliff top with the sea beyond. Whatever else survived lay hidden under layers of wallpaper which covered the rest of the room.

Three years have now passed. Through the efforts of the owners Lynette and Andrew Lithgoe, the painstaking work of the conservator, Brian Cardy and grant aid from Cheshire County Council, Vale Royal District Council and English Heritage, considerable strides have been made.

Marbury Hall



Skating scene

the end of the work is in sight, if not yet quite in reach.

On entering the room, which is now largely stripped of wallpaper, it is clear about half of the original scheme survives. The parts of the room with outside walls were probably badly decayed and stripped of their plaster in the 1960's when the original fireplace was removed; all no doubt the result of centuries of damp. Recently it has become clear that the room had a unified decorative scheme. The lower third of the walls have painted wooden panelling, above which was a moulded dado rail, now removed. Above the dado are four and a half painted panels. Each has a painted ebony and gilt frame and they are hung on painted hooks.

All the scenes seem to be local to Cheshire and some progress towards their identification has been made. Inside the door is a now fully restored winter scene. It shows people skating on a large sheet of ice below what seems to be Helsby and Frodsham hills. This is at first sight puzzling, for there is no lake here now and the estuary of the River Mersey is 2 miles away. However historical research shows that in the 18th century, the water in the estuary often reached much closer to the foot of the hill, especially at high tides. The scene may even record the fierce winter of 1740 when the landscape was frozen for many months.

The panel of Marbury Hall has now been cleaned and the colour and details are now fresh and clear. This involved the lifting of the varnish, square centimetre by square centimetre with a scalpel, before any solvents could be used. This painting is of a higher quality than the others and may be the

work of a different artist. The remainder of the panel with the windmills is in a fragile condition and some of the plaster is badly cracked and the paint loose. However cleaning has revealed additional details; a lighthouse on the headland, ships on the sea, and an inn sign on the building. All this information suggests that it is depicting Neston on the Wirral with the Irish Sea beyond.

The remaining two paintings are on the wall opposite to the door. These have only recently been revealed and remain to be cleaned. Both have survived in relatively poor condition. The complete panel has Beeston Castle at its centre. The other, of which about one third survives, must have been above the fireplace and the most important view in the room. It seems to show another view of a country estate. In the foreground, is a walled garden, a stable yard behind and in the middle 'istance a major Baroque country house. Though indistinct, it may represent Oulton Park, another lost Cheshire mansion. No other scheme of decoration quite like this survives in England. They are arranged like a set of giant picture postcards of local scenes hanging around the wall. Individual scenes of this type, particularly of the house and grounds in which they are found, were painted as overmantels in the main room. It is one of these pictures which proved to be the key to understanding and dating the mural at Hall Green. By coincidence, another naive view was revealed under the wallpaper of a house being restored in another Cheshire village, Moore near Warrington. This is an overmantel picture and the house represented is dated on the front to 1758. The style and composition of the picture is the same as those at Hall Green and crucially the house was built by another member of the Milner family. This gives a firm date for the activities of the artist. Detailed study of the architectural and decorative detail on the Marbury Hall painting would seem to confirm a date in the 1750's. This returns us to Daniel "Tightrope" Milner, who remains the most likely patron of these paintings and perhaps even one of the artists whose hand has been detected upstairs at Hall Green. By 1750, he was in his fifties and his unorthodox youth may have been far behind him. He became a pillar of Weaverham Church, where a brass memorial plaque to his virtue hangs in the church and the burial register records an unusual testimonial. But it is his will which betrays an interest in topographic painting. It is a very long document in which 26 of his relatives benefited. The crucial statement would seem to be:- "Also I give to my said niece Mary Clare my bed above stairs and all the other goods and furniture of the room, the grate, the fireplace blind and the history piece over the fireplace and Great Landscape excepted". What survives at Hall Green is a rare glimpse of a type of interior decoration, which may have been very much more frequent, before the introduction of wallpaper and cheap emulsion paint.