

Pictures: Simon Pizzey C215677A28a

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■ **HIGHER THINGS:** Decorator Joe Reas of Walden and Doyle takes a look at the uncovered panels on St Laurence Church, Stroud's, ceiling.

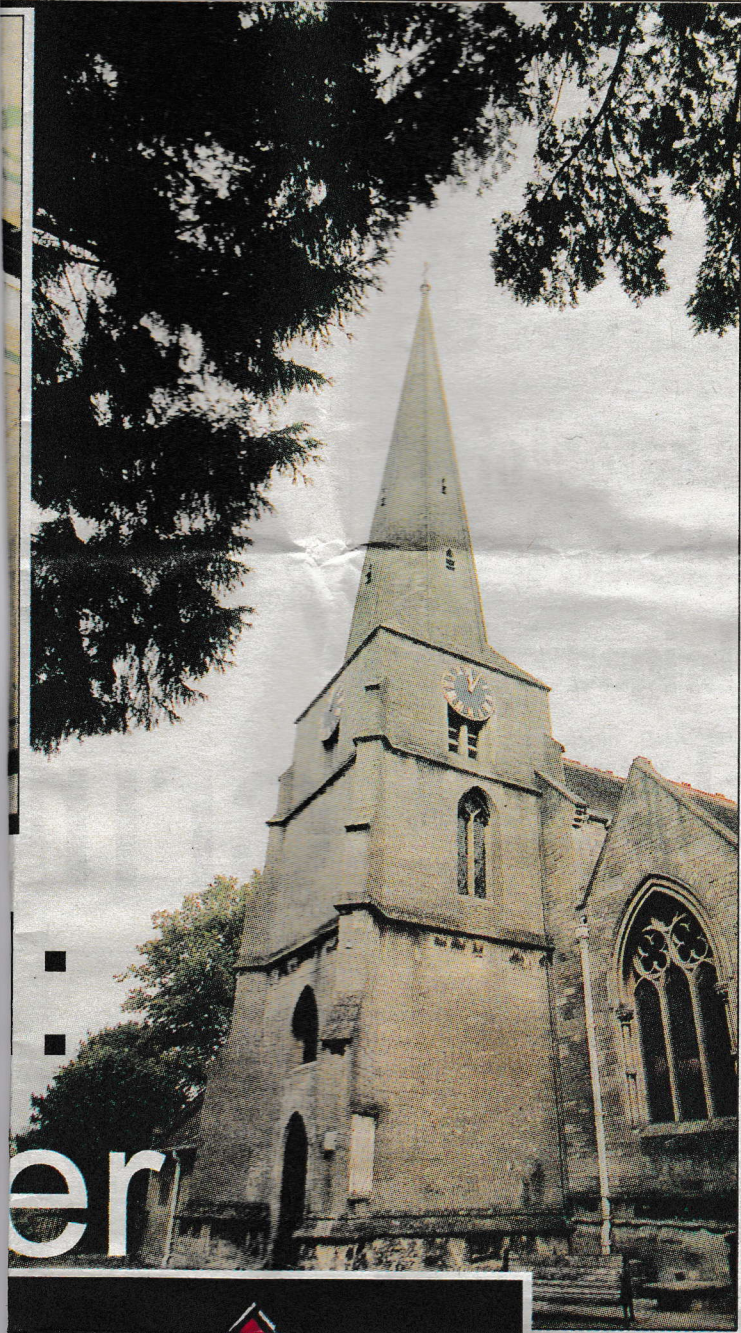
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▲ MUCH-needed face lift
at a Stroud church

by Emma Pickles

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■ **HIDDEN ART:**
St Laurence Church, Stroud. Renovation work on the parish church uncovered unsuspected paintings on the ceiling, some of which are thought to have been inspired by this Alpha and Omega window (left).

A MUCH-needed face lift at a Stroud church revealed a lot more than builders bargained for.

Because underneath ugly 1960s wallpaper decorating St Laurence's Church, was a ceiling decorated with 65 original turn-of-the-century paintings of St Laurence and other saints and holy figures.

Now restoration workers have been called in to return the paintings to their former glory after the congregation decided unanimously they wanted the works of art to stay.

The paintings stretch half the length of the church over the chancel and the congregation said they were at a loss to explain why they had been covered up with "gaudy" wallpaper.

Builders have removed 40 years of dirt and grime from the paintings and restoration experts will start work on Monday to remove the wallpaper glue

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■ **ON HIGH:** The view onto the nave of the church from the decorators' scaffolding.

by Emma Pickles

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and touch up the artwork.

Vicar the Rev Canon Barry Coker said: "The wallpaper was not exactly psychedelic 1960s style but it certainly wasn't in keeping with the rest of the church.

"I suppose fashions change but it's going to be great when these paintings are fully restored.

"They add some fabulous history and character to the interior which is what we've always wanted.

"We started the renovation work to give the church a bit of an up-date because it was starting to look a bit shabby.

"But finding the paintings is a real bonus and our congregation love them. They all met on Sunday and decided they wanted the paintings to stay.

"It's amazing they've escaped unscathed and they should be returned

to their original glory in three weeks."

The church was built in the 13th Century but rebuilt in 1866 and the panel paintings are the second ceiling. The original Victorian celestial ceiling, which has a deep blue background and gold stars is just visible beneath the panel paintings.

"You can just make out it out - but we'd rather have these paintings than Sixties wallpaper," Canon Coker said. He was also appealing for help towards the cost of the restoration work which would be expensive.

The paintings have been dated by architectural historian Alan Brooks who sits on the Diocesan Advisory Committee for church repairs.

Mr Brooks, from Winchcombe, studied the paintings last week and said: "The paintings are an exciting discovery for the church because no one knew they were there.

"We believe they date from between 1910 and 1914 as there is a carving of the crucifixion in the church which was made at this time.

"The paintings seem to match and compliment it in style so we think the ceiling was painted at the same time.

"We know they aren't originals because you can see Victorian painting underneath.

"I believe the painting was wallpapered in the 1960s which was when the church was last decorated.

"There are 56 timber panels that have an off-white back-ground bordered by a simple green foliage pattern with red berries.

"This frames three repeating gold monograms with black detailing.

"The monograms are HIS, which denotes, Jesus Christ Saviour of Men, SL, for St Laurence who the church is named after, and AQ for Alpha and Omega which signifies the beginning and end of all things."

Kevin Poolle, foreman of the building project said: "It was a bit of a shock when we uncovered them, but the discovery has taken precedence over the original work now.

"We've uncovered all the panels and have cleaned them because they were quite dirty.

"They are a big find for the church and we've been happy to help."

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