

A HISTORY OF ST ANDREW'S IN 100 OBJECTS



4.

The lost saint

Date: early 14th
century

This object has spent most of its—or her—life hidden from public view. She was discovered in about 1871 when church restorers opened up the ogee-shaped 14th century window at the south-east end of the south aisle. She was rubble infill, 37 cm tall, and already obscured by a coat of whitewash. She was presumably placed there when the 15th century builders inserted the perpendicular windows. This wall-painting was probably on the jamb of one of the old windows, knocked out to make way for its larger, more fashionable replacement. When she was rediscovered she was handed over to the Fitzwilliam Museum.

The Victorian antiquarians first identified her (holding a basket of flowers) as St Dorothy, a virgin martyr of the early 4th century, but later scholarship concluded that the small scythe ('sithe' in middle English) in her right hand must be a rebus, a play on her name. What is in her left hand is a reference to a miracle when her master, suspecting her of taking bread from his kitchen to give to the poor, asks to see what she is carrying: the bread is miraculously transformed into a basket of flowers.

Sitha was born ca 1212 near Lucca, and served in the city in the Fratinelli household until she died in 1272. She lived a highly devout life as an uneducated lay person. She cared nothing for possessions, devoted hours to prayer and gave much of her time (and all her money) to the poor. Initially despised for her piety and heavenly-mindedness, she won over her employers for whom she became housekeeper, and in the illness leading up to her death she was treated with honour as one of the family. Popularly acclaimed a saint in her native city, her fame was not great elsewhere in Europe—except in England, where, though largely forgotten after the Reformation, in the 14th and 15th centuries she became a role model for the many of all classes who went into service (for the wealthy it was part of their education). She is often pictured carrying a bunch of keys, symbols of her office in the household. In England, but not elsewhere, she became the heavenly assistant in finding lost keys (and other things), much to the contempt of the Reformers.