

## The Chapel Reredos

The chapel reredos has changed its appearance on at least four occasions since the Founder's day, and the college archives are particularly rich in evidence for its current form, which dates from 1888-1892 and was the work of the sculptor Nathaniel Hitch to designs by John Loughborough Pearson.

According to the Founder's Statutes (section 63) the reredos contained statues 'placed along the wall of the College Chapel (that is to say, the stone wall dividing and separating that same Chapel and the College Hall)', and provided one practical reason why the 'throwing of stones, balls, or any other objects of any kind against these same walls, and above all leaping or dancing ('*saltus*'), fighting, ... incautious and rough games' were prohibited in Hall or Chapel. Exactly how many statues and what they represented is unknown, the Statutes simply referring to 'representations of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity, the Holy Rood with the Crucified Christ, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, and many other representations of the Saints, in sculpture...'. A very few mutilated fragments of scenes from the life of the Virgin still survive, now in the choristers' Song Room.



Annunciation fragment from the medieval reredos: (photo from Hayter, *William of Wykeham, Patron of the Arts* (1970), 84.)

The ups and downs (mainly downs) of the reredos since the sixteenth century and its fate at the hands of the Reformation zealots, who smashed the carvings and plastered over the niches, the rediscovery of fragments of statues in 1696 (when they were moved out into the cloisters and apparently built into the cloister walls) before Henry Cook plastered over the east end again and installed his extraordinary Verrio-type mural, the re-discovery of the now empty niches, still bearing traces of gold and deep blue pigments, by James Wyatt and James Pears as they redesigned the Chapel in the 1780s and their restoration of the niches in plaster, and Richard Westmacott's installation of five new carved alabaster panels (still there today) at the base of the reredos in 1793; all these events are described in Gervase Jackson-Stops's articles on the college architecture in Buxton and Williams's *New College Oxford 1379-1979* (pp. 172-3, 219, 238, 243, 254), and need not be retold here.



By the 1880s however, there was a growing sense that something more had to be done about the reredos. The entire Chapel had undergone restoration by Sir George Gilbert Scott and his son John Oldrid Scott, but at the east end, looking like some enormous unlit fireclay gas fire, still stood the empty niches of the reredos. One old member, Charles Branch (matriculated in 1884) noted that he had always thought that 'the empty niches at the East end were a reproach to the College' (NCA 3236, letter dated 23 Aug. 1888).

The wall of empty niches beneath Pears's groined roof of the 1790s, photographed c. 1870 (NCA Photographic Collection)

Scott's new hammer beam roof, completed in 1878, also gave urgency to the need for work on the east end, as there was now nothing to fill the gap above the reredos caused by the raised roof level. An East End Restoration Appeal was launched, the stonemasons Egglestone and Morris came in to carry out essential work on the niches, and the stage was set for college to commission John Loughborough Pearson to complete the reredos by installing statues in the niches once more. Pearson at that time was working at Westminster Abbey, and bursar Robinson naturally took soundings – and may have wished he had not. A letter in dean Bradley's sprawling hand came back from Westminster, noting that 'Pearson is first rate at Church Building. In doing smaller work I am not quite so sure; he is a very honest worker...but he's very overworked. I find him very slow in the Abbey & the house he has built in the Abbey Garden I think quite vulgar and horribly out of keeping with its surroundings' (NCA 3140/1, letter dated 31 Dec. 1883).

Be that as it may, Pearson was commissioned by the college, and his correspondence with bursar Robinson and sub-warden Spooner indicates a good working relationship. In 1886 he submitted a proposal to range the statues in tiers 'suggested by the Te Deum', that is, depicting The Trinity, Seraphim and Cherubim, Angels, Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs, Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. Two years later his slightly revised plan described the reredos as we see it today, although his plans to add a resurrection scene in carved wood (perhaps to replace Westmacott's panels) was never implemented. Nor were Robinson's requests to include Plato, Aristotle, Dante and Milton in the bottom row of sculptures (NCA 3140/1, letter dated Nov. 1889). His estimate for the reredos, with figures 'in Bath stone', came to £2458 (NCA 3142/4); less than half of that would be paid to the sculptor.

Reactions from former and current members of the college to the notion of reinstating over fifty sculptures in the reredos were mixed, as the chunky bundles of letters in the archives witness. While, as ever, keen to contribute to the beautification of the chapel, some of the old members did not hesitate to try to dictate terms, or simply misunderstood what was envisaged. Taking sideswipes at Scott's reredos at All Souls also seemed to be par for the course, as was a general unease that the college might settle for mass-produced statues of little artistic value, simply to get the project finished; and it is interesting that the most negative letters were all addressed to Spooner rather than to the bursar, or perhaps that is an accident of archive survival. William Howe (matriculated 1875), for instance, wrote from Shrewsbury asking 'that an attempt will be made to get statues which will not only fill the niches at the east end respectably but will be also really beautiful in themselves. I would myself prefer to leave the upper niches unfilled and to have some first rate sculptures in the lowest row, to having a crowd of moderately interesting figures standing on one another's heads as they do at All Souls. What a grand thing it would be to have a statue or two like Donatello's St George in the niche outside Orsanmichele at Florence!' (NCA 3236, letter dated 28 Aug. 1888). Sydney Cooper (matriculated 1880), by now a curate at St Probus near Truro (which already boasted a reredos by Pearson), was even more outspoken, writing of the project 'May it prosper as it deserves, and not be a laughing stock alike to artists and churchmen (worthy of the name), like the All Souls reredos with its archers & men-at-arms of the period'. So anxious was he that New College should avoid putting the heads of living celebrities or even the college fellows onto the bodies of buried saints and heroes ('portraits of the fellows in fancy dress!') that he offered to 'increase my subscription by HALF A CROWN if I received a satisfactory assurance on this' (NCA 3236, letter dated 24 Sept. 1888). Spooner did not oblige, for the Subscription Book notes Cooper's donation as two guineas, with not a half crown in sight (NCA 3167). Henry Laurence (matriculated 1883) wrote from Norwich that he was worried about the enormity of the task: 'Is the present state

of British sculpture so excellent that that amount of its work should be set up in that place to last for ever? Was the whole number of statues originally undertaken and completed at one period? ... Is it possible that art so contracted for by the dozen (as indeed I suppose there will be nearly a gross of them) can help being paraded in its general effect by that dreary monotonous mediocrity that really is characteristic of anything of that sort...?' (NCA 3236, letter dated 8 Sept. 1888). Charles Pritchard, Savilian Professor of Astronomy, on the other hand, was 'strongly averse to a protracted or piecemeal proceeding' and threatened to withhold his subscription if the work could not be completed in one go (NCA 3236, letter dated 1 Sept. 1888). Others agonised about adding or not adding colour to the reredos: the ebullient Sydney Cooper being in favour, as was the elderly rector of Saham Toney, Coker Adams (who urged 'a little gilding') (NCA 3236, letters dated 15 and 23 Aug. 1888). Pearson himself was open-minded on the question, and in any case it proved impracticable on grounds of cost.

Robinson's idea of 'sponsor-a-statue' to raise larger donations of £30 - £50 per statue proved popular, with twelve statues being so sponsored: Anthony Thorold, Bishop of Winchester, for instance, sponsored the statue of St Paul, Dr and Mrs Spooner the statue of St Cecilia, the Reverend Edward Fox of Upper Heyford the statue of St Catherine, and the Classics fellow and librarian William Courtney the statue of St Peter.



Hitch's statue of St Peter, sponsored by William Courtenay (NCA 3140/2)

Pearson's choice of sculptor for the reredos was Nathaniel Hitch, who had a workshop at Vauxhall in London. Despite Jackson-Stops's comment in 1979 that Hitch 'was not especially skilled and the sculptures hardly bear close inspection' (Buxton & Williams, 264), Hitch was a much sought-after architectural sculptor and modeller who carried out much work for Pearson and his pupil W.D. Caröe, as can be seen from Gordon Lawson's illustrated study of Hitch's work (NCA Acc. 2011/9). Indeed Hitch was highly enough regarded by Pearson and Robinson for them to refuse applications to employ the All Souls sculptor Mr Geflowski. Hitch was extremely busy during the 1880s and 1890s, and his tardiness in getting on with the New College commission can be monitored throughout 1890 in apologetic letters from himself and Pearson to bursar Robinson, that he had been called away to carry out urgent work at Peterborough Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and St Augustine's Kilburn; and in January 1892 he was called for lengthy jury service at the Central Criminal Court (NCA 3140/1 *passim*).

Spooner had taken to heart the plea of old members that the sculptures should, as near as possible, be modelled on the finest examples available, and supplied Hitch with photographs or engravings of those he favoured.

Thus the Virgin and Child of the reredos should have been modelled on Raphael's Madonna in the Sistine Chapel, and St George on the Donatello sculpture in Florence. The dean of Winchester gave Hitch permission to take a plaster cast of William of Wykeham's face from his tomb effigy in Winchester Cathedral, and Spooner supplied an accurate image of the crozier, which proved the one thing that Hitch did copy faithfully. Otherwise, there is little to suggest that Hitch paid much attention to the examples provided. His head of William of Wykeham, for instance, supposedly based on a cast of the original from the Bishop's tomb in Winchester Cathedral, looks only slightly like the original.

Address  
 14, 5, 9, 10  
 Messrs Robinson  
 17, Broad Street  
 London  
 Dear Sir  
 I have just got up to a large  
 bill for the purpose of having a  
 countenance to be made with material,  
 & let him come to me, & let me  
 have leave to take a proper cast  
 of the great Bishop's countenance -  
 we have had this done in the case  
 of one statue - I mean a bust of  
 King the highest I can get  
 of it -  
 If this could be managed, the  
 all else if I can get you a copy of it



The dean of Winchester's letter to Robinson inviting Hitch to take a 'proper cast of the great Bishop's countenance' from his tomb effigy (NCA 3140/1, letter dated 17 Mar. 1890); the Winchester Cathedral effigy of William of Wykeham; Hitch's statue for the New College reredos, 1890-91 (NCA 3140/2)

In one letter to Robinson, Hitch admitted 'I have modelled the S. George, quite overlooking when I did so your wish that it should be after that by Donatello, and after my own design. I am sorry for this. The Donatello would not however adapt itself to the niche without much alteration, so much so as to almost destroy its identity. I have it before me and have studied it well. One leg is very much extended and would not come at all on the pedestal - all the figures in this row will have to stand on a pedestal to lift them up above the battlemented cornice. Nevertheless if it is your very particular wish I must model a new figure and do the best I can with it. The same applies to the figure of S. Mary after Raphael which is modelled on the picture, but must be modified considerably, it being a picture treatment and not sculptural. Hitch's St George is certainly quite different to the Florentine original: Hitch gave him a small moustache and also simplified his armour and shield, which gave a much more austere look to the sculpture. Nevertheless, the sponsors, the family of Hector MacLean (matriculated 1885, rowing blue and President of the Oxford University Boat Club, died of typhoid in January 1888), were very happy with it, and it was dedicated to his memory.



Hitch's studio photographs of his statues of St Matthew (with sword), St James the Greater (pilgrim to Compostela), St Bartholomew (with the flaying knife of his martyrdom) St Andrew (with the saltire cross of his martyrdom). (NCA 3140/2)

Hitch provided the college with good quality photographs of his statues, often in groups of four figures lined up in his London workshop (although not necessarily in the order in which they would appear on the reredos), and so the college archives contains an image for each statue apart from the Trinity with Angels (NCA 3140/2). Given that it is very difficult to see the detail of some of these statues in situ, the photographs are of great interest.

Pearson arranged the statues in five tiers, designed to lead the eye upwards from the Prophets at the lowest tier to The Trinity (God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, surrounded by Seraphim and angels) at the top where they filled the gap left by Scott's raised roofline. The centre of each row depicts, in an upward hierarchy, Moses, the Virgin and Child (flanked by King Richard II and William of Wykeham, in acknowledgement of the dedication and foundation of the college in 1379), the Crucifixion, the Agnus Dei, and The Trinity. The other niches contain statues of Prophets (lowest tier), martyred saints and venerated Church leaders (flanking the Virgin and Child), the Apostles (flanking the Crucifixion), and Angels bearing censers or musical instruments (flanking the Lamb of God). Many of the saints and prophets carry objects associated with them, including – quite endearingly – St Ambrose and his beehive, Elijah and his raven, and our Founder with crozier and a tiny model (of the college chapel?), together with the well known symbols of status, pilgrimage, and martyrdom, or the holy books held by many of the statues.

Hitch completed the creation and installation of the reredos statues in October 1892; the project had taken him four and a half years. He was proud of his work, even though he gained no immediate recognition for it: in a letter to Robinson, he noted 'I am much obliged for your letter and the cutting from a newspaper ... They name the Architect, I notice, but not the sculptor' (NCA 3140/1, letter dated Nov. 1892).

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**See reredos plan on next page**

				The Trinity surrounded by angels								
	Kneeling Angel with censer	Angel with trumpet	Angel with harp	Angel with portative organ	Angel with censer	<b>Agnus Dei &amp; kneeling angels</b>	Angel with censer	Angel with lute	Angel with cymbals	Angel with rebec	Kneeling Angel with censer	
St Matthew (sword and almsbox)	St James the Greater (Compostela pilgrim)	St Bartholomew (flaying knife)	St Andrew (saltire cross)	St Peter (keys & book)	St Mary	<b>Christ crucified &amp; weeping angels</b>	St John (book)	St Jude (cross and book)	St Simon (saw)	St James the Lesser (club)	St Thomas (spear)	St Philip (cross and book)
St Alban (palm leaf & sword)	St Catherine (wheel & book)	St George (shield)	St Cecilia (palm leaf & portative organ)	St Stephen (stone & book)	<b>King Richard II (orb &amp; sceptre)</b>	<b>Virgin &amp; Child</b>	<b>William of Wykeham (crozier &amp; college building)</b>	St Augustine (crozier & book)	Bede (quill & book)	St Anselm (crozier & book)	Archbishop Warham (crozier)	Bishop Ken (preaching with book)
St John the Baptist (cross & book)	Elijah (raven)	King David (harp & sceptre)	Samuel (staff & scroll)	Jeremiah (scroll)	Isaiah (scroll)	Moses (tablets of stone)	Ezekiel (scroll)	Daniel (scroll)	St Paul (sword and book)	St Jerome (basilica)	St Chrysostom (book)	St Ambrose (crozier & beehive)
				Westmacott's five panels of 1793 depicting scenes from the Annunciation and Nativity to the Resurrection and Ascension								