

Chapel of St Mary & St George, 1892-6, Henry Prothero O.C

Introduction

College Chapel is a building that has given many generations of Cheltonians and staff, great and unadulterated joy. On the cusp of a town renowned for its Georgian Regency architecture, the soaring verticality of the Gothic arguably looks incongruous. It's fabric speaks of community; both in its creation and in its congregation.

The building has enjoyed a colourful history – the earthquake of 1896; the tremors of which are still manifest in the broken wall-joins of the clerestory, the Crypt was formerly used for the storage of rugby posts, and the gallery host to a colony of Pipistrelle bats (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*). The Archbishop of Canterbury set to inaugurate the Chapel, died suddenly the day before his intended duty....

History

The first Chapel was built by D.J Humphris (now the dining hall). It faced north/south, the acoustics were appalling and the decoration was unremarkable. The south window was known for its grotesqueness. The original Chapel was, in fact, never consecrated.

In 1891, to mark the College's fiftieth anniversary (College Jubilee), the Principal, Rev Dr Herbert James started giving funds towards a new Chapel to celebrate the first fifty years of College's history.

The commission brief for the new chapel stipulated that it was to be built in the tradition of Eton or King's College, Cambridge; therefore in the style of Perpendicular Gothic, yet in its revived form ie 3rd Phase Neo-Gothic. Elements of the original Perpendicular style can be cited in nearby Gloucester Cathedral at the time of Edward 111.

The competition attracted architectural heavyweights Sir Thomas Jackson, designer of elements of Oxford College buildings such as Brasenose, and Sir Reginald Blomfield, architect of Sherborne School. But instead the job fell to Old Cheltonian, Henry Prothero of Hazelwell House, known up to that point only for a wing of Cheltenham Ladies' College, dismissed by eminent Architectural Historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as an aesthetic disaster. Prothero, who was a partner in a firm in Cheltenham, was to collaborate with John Middleton who had previously designed Old Junior, the current Maths & History block, as well as the plans for Christowe boarding house. Middleton was in contact with that guru of the Gothic Revival, Sir George Gilbert Scott, and also the chief exponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris. A member of the *Guild & School of Handicraft*, Middleton is largely responsible for the beautiful handcraftsmanship in the Chapel's interior.

Built in an age of thriving industrialism, the extant hand-carved naturalistic detailing is the antithesis of the machine-age, and an essay in Arts and Crafts' ornamentation, inspired by Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, and adhering to contemporary critic John Ruskin's doctrine '*joy in hand labour.*'

Thomas Collins was appointed to build the Chapel to Prothero's design, with a budget of £10,000, yet it cost a total of £12,235. This was still a relatively meagre amount, however, given Marlborough had just spent £33,000 on their new Chapel (Bodley & Garner, 1886).

The Chapel was dedicated on Tuesday 13th October 1896 by the Bishop of Gloucester and the Public Opening celebration on the 16th December presided over by the Archbishop of Dublin, Lord Plunket, O.C. Rather dramatically, an earthquake struck Cheltenham that evening, damaging the roof and wall joins of

the new Chapel. Evidence of this can be seen today, splitting the ceiling on each side from end to end.

In 1907 the stalls and the organ were completed; this date also marks the Chapel interior's actual completion. The cloisters were added 1919-21.

Dimensions

The building's scale is impressive for a school Chapel, and its lofty proportions and light interior never cease to impress visitors. At 164 feet long (148 feet inside), an interior width of 34 feet, the Nave or central aisle is wider than many cathedrals, including Worcester. The ceiling height is 55 feet; the vaulting is just 4 foot lower than that of Tewkesbury Abbey. The west gable is 75 feet high and the cross on the cupola is 122 feet above the quad. The east window is an impressive 26 feet wide.

The Exterior

The exterior is a hybrid of Lancing and King's, whilst the miniature cloister with its fan-vaulting, doffs a cap to its arguably grander local ancestor, Gloucester Cathedral.

The west end door is guarded by a baleful Queen Victoria and the then Prince of Wales (later Edward V11).

The principal door of carved oak is a monument to Rev. Arthur Sim, OC. Above the door is Christ the Good Shepherd in benediction, flanked by angels and below, the four apostles, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The commemoration stone laid on 9th November 1893 signifies the date of the dedication of the Chapel.

On the west door, the various Coats of Arms represented are the Royal Coat of Arms, those of G.S Harcourt and Captain J.S Iredell (Founders of College), the College Arms, the Arms of Lord Sherborne (first President of Council) and Rev Dr Arthur Phillips (first Principal) and Arms of the town of Cheltenham.

There are 8 bays on the exterior, separated by massive buttresses, crowned with small pinnacles.

The east window on the exterior represents Christ blessing; the four corner buttresses emblematised the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

On the north side, a series of portrait heads runs from east to west, charting the history of the town whilst honouring Queen Victoria also. The first seven College Principals are depicted, and there are further head-stops, of Chapel architect H. Prothero and Rev Dr C. Ellicot; the aforementioned Bishop of Gloucester. On the south wall, literary legends Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning are featured, adjacent to the Duke of Cambridge and Lord James of Hereford; the first College pupil. The south door is dedicated to E. Osborne, O.C, Lieutenant in the 16th Lancers. To the left of the door is a memorial to C.C Tanner, O.C and former Housemaster of Christowe, who won five caps in playing rugby for England.

The Cloister links the choir-room and the vestry with the Chapel, and commemorates the 700 Old Cheltonians who gave their lives in the Great War. The fan vaulting and roof tracery is in the Perpendicular style and executed by Mr L.W Barnard. This is possibly the last example of fan vaulting in this country, which in turn pays homage to the first, in Gloucester – it is thus, a fitting tribute. Here we also find the foundation stone of the cloisters laid by Lord Lee of Fareham, O.C on the 4th of July 1919 and a quote from the Aeneid, which when translated reads, appropriately: *With crowning tribute grace these splendid souls, whose life blood won for us our fatherland.* There are words too by former Principal and Dean of Hereford, the Very Rev. R. Waterfield.

The Interior

In the **Narthex** or ante-Chapel, the north bay is a memorial to two nineteenth century Principals, Bishop Barry and Canon Kynaston (in the honorific roof bosses) and the south bay is a memorial to C.C Turnbull, O.C and member of College Council. Just beyond the west door is a memorial to Geoffrey Burton, O.C. and to the right, memorials to former masters at College, including T. Southwood, Head of the Military at College for thirty-six years. The memorials have been transferred from the original Chapel.

The small windows were given by the Cheltonian Society, and are in memory of Lieut.-Colonel Ce. Troughton, O.C and Secretary of the Cheltonian Society. Troughton was also Secretary of the old Cheltonian Lodge of Freemasons; the windows were given by the Public School's Masonic Chapter, and the Masonic lodges of ten public schools, including Charterhouse, Cheltenham and Clifton, initially founded to promote and disseminate Public School Freemasonry. The arms of the schools are included, along their founding date and the initials of the founders. Two of the window lights on the north side show Masonic emblems. The stonework of the narthex is the work of Messrs Boulton of Cheltenham. The porticus which leads from the narthex to the Chapel is a memorial to Henry Prothero, O.C and architect of the Chapel. Above this is the King Solomon mosaic. Within the tesserae of Venetian glass, King Solomon is depicted making an offering to the Temple. Esoterically, this perhaps represents Prothero presenting the Chapel.

For many, however, the most enduring image of the Chapel is the clarity of the **Nave** space; an architectural form derived from an upturned boat (from the Latin *Navis*) and based on J.L Pearson's great Gothic Revivalist work at Truro Cathedral, whose intentions were to 'bring the congregation soonest to

their knees'; a sentiment equally applicable to the soaring ecclesiastical space we share here. Aside from Truro, no building in England was built in the latter half of the nineteenth century with a stone roof on this scale. Yet College Chapel lacks the High Victorian swagger synonymous with Rugby and Radley's structural polychromy, for example, and the prevailing fad of 'Muscular Gothic' synonymous with 19th century public school Chapel architecture aimed to turn the minds of young men towards good reflections.

The **roof vaulting** is arranged in the "Union Jack" configuration: a quadripartite system of four half bays divided by intersecting ribs. In the centre of each compartment the ribs converge in a carved boss. There are eight **bosses** which run from west to east, chronicling the life of Christ. Chronologically, they represent the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost and the Last Judgement.

The limited **stained glass** and the prevalence of bone and honey-coloured Cotswold stone, means the resultant effect is anti-Victorian clutter, and an example of the late grace and restraint strongly felt in Perpendicular Gothic architecture. In its original form, the 3rd and final phase of the Gothic was architecturally more ascetic, as so many craftsmen of the preceding phase of Decorated Gothic had been wiped-out by the Black Death of 1348.

The stained glass didactically instructs, with the 'Parable of the Good Samaritan', yet also pays homage to posthumous OCs such as the polar explorer Edward Wilson.

The **windows** along the north and south sides have four lights in two rows separated by stone transoms. On the north side the windows depict the eight Christian virtues; on the south the eight Beatitudes (blessings). In each window the upper

lights detail the virtues, and the lower lights provide illustrations from history and legends. Often one window on one side is the counterpart to that on the other.

Of the windows that have been filled, the window of the Merciful and the window of the Pure in Heart, commemorate respectively, Harold Stables and Harry Coghill; Old Cheltonians who gave their lives in the Great War. Both windows are by Mr Louis Davis of Pinner. Represented are the Ark, David sparing Saul, the parable of the Good Samaritan, in addition to illustrations from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Prospero from *The Tempest*. Joseph, Isiah, Joan of Arc and Sir Galahad are also featured. On the north side the third window from the west depicts Fortitude, and is a joint memorial of General J.A Tanner and Captain W.A Gardiner; OCs who fought in the War. The window was commissioned by Baddeley St Clair of Painswick, and the glass provided by Sir James Hogan. Dr E.A Wilson, OC, doctor and naturalist of Scott's expedition to the South Pole in 1912 is commemorated in the scenery of the Antarctic in a stunning window designed by Mr Homan and executed by Messrs. Powell.

The great **east window**, at 26 feet across, is divided into groups of three lights each. The stained glass was presented to College by patrons of the arts Baron and Baroness de Ferrieres. The Baron was former Mayor of Cheltenham and gave the town its Art Gallery. Heaton, Butler and Baynes are responsible for the glass, which represents the Adoration of the Magi, the Ascension and the Presentation of Christ.

In the recesses, the **lunettes** or painted panels illustrate the ministry of angels, and are the work of local artist J. Eadie Reid, with the exception of two.

On the south side from east to west are the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, the Ministry of Angels to Christ after the

Temptation, the Agony in the Garden, the Resurrection and the Ascension.

On the north side the lunettes feature scenes from the Old Testament and face scenes from the New Testament on the other side of the nave. Running from east to west are the Expulsion from Eden, the Escape from Sodom, the Vision of Jacob, the Offering of Isaac by Abraham, Hagar and the Angel and the Burning Bush painted by a Mr Batten. All of the works are also memorials to Cheltonians.

There are, of course, many memorials in the Chapel. There are nearly 700 names of those lives that were lost in the Great War, engraved in brass plaques on the walls. Architectural Historian A.S Owen describes it as “a great and inspiring record of duty and sacrifice.” The finely carved pulpit is a memorial to G.F Adami, a member of a family who attended Hazelwell; the lectern commemorates J. Whipple of Cheltondale; the sedilia are in memory of Lord Plunket, Archbishop of Dublin and O.C, who died shortly after officially opening the Chapel; the altar rails commemorate A.C Thomson, a Leconfield O.C who captained the College XV in 1890, who was killed in an African War.

The **reredos** is by the firm Boulton of Cheltenham, and is of Clunch stone from Cambridgeshire. The design is partly based on that of Magdalen College Oxford, and fittingly celebrates those giants of Christian education and social reform, such as John Keble and John Wesley. It was made as a memorial to Old Cheltonians who died in the Boer War. There are four groups comprised of those who established Christianity, great figureheads of the church, the men who gave us the Bible in our native tongue and those that paved the path for education and social reform. The four groups are separated by buttresses or pilasters with six smaller figures on each, thus there are 24 in total. These figures represent men in various fields of

vocation: representatives of art and science, literature, leadership and so on, some of whom have local affiliation. For example, Tyndale, translator of the Bible was from Gloucestershire. National emblems the rose, thistle, shamrock and leek are carved into the vertical panels. On the north side are the patron saints of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Under the Crucifixion is a bas-relief (*basso rilievo*) of the Adoration of the Magi. Decoratively, plant form serves symbolically in the design: the oak as a symbol of national unity, and the vine the symbol of the unity in Christ's Church.

The altar was bequeathed to the Chapel by Mrs Southwood in memory of her husband, Rev. T.A Southwood, Head of the Modern Department. The altar contains gilded wood with a front panel painted by Sir W. Richmond, representing the finding of Christ in the temple by His parents. Behind the altar there is a retable (a shelf behind an altar with depicted images) of brown and white alabaster, commemorating Clarence Moores, O.C.

The craftsmanship around the **South door** is arguably the zenith of the building's interior schema; the 'Tree of Life', handcrafted in sycamore and detailing allegorically, the triumph of life over death. The craftsman responsible: Harry Dean of H.H Martyn & Co. has been compared to the great Grinling Gibbons of St Paul's fame. The piece is, in part, a memorial to distinguished Old Cheltonian F.W.H Myers, a scholar and poet.

The memorial was dedicated on All Saint's Day, 1907. The wild rose in the design is a reference to such a tree that grew in Myer's childhood garden in Keswick. The tree is adorned with several ornithological representations, of robins, the kingfisher and swallow among them. The crossbills featured, according to legend, gained their name from trying to pull out the nails from the hands of Christ on the cross, and their red crests were died

red from the blood which poured forth. The robin is a known symbol of martyrdom with its red breast. The zoomorphic carving is intricate and is, in some cases, esoteric to Myers, but collectively symbolises the triumph of life over death. The mole emerging at the base is significant on a personal level, as Myers' first encounter with 'the awfulness of annihilation' as a child, was when he encountered a dead mole.

Interestingly Prothero was a competent **organist**, and he is responsible for the instrument's decorative encasement of our organ, which was originally built in 1897 by Norwich firm Norman & Beard and housed in the magnificent 40 foot tall Prothero case. At the apex; the figure of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, is flanked by trumpeting angels. The organ was rebuilt and extended by Harrison and Harrison of Durham, first in 1930. An instrument capable of achieving a wide range of colour and dynamics, its three manuals (keyboards) and pedals encompass a well-balanced traditionally voiced instrument which is very well suited to the liturgical and choral needs of an independent school with a renowned and highly regarded musical tradition. It is therefore to these fine qualities of the instrument, which is also fantastically versatile in recital, that the recent addition of a 32-foot 'Double Ophicleide' stop dramatically lends itself. The carved screen behind the organist's seat is a gift of Mr T.C Waterhouse, the father of two boys who were in Leconfield.

Glossary of Architectural Terms:

Bas-relief

A moulding which projects from the surface to a lesser extent; low relief

Boss

Ornamental carving covering the point where ribs in a vault or ceiling cross

Buttress

An external load-bearing wall support

Clerestory

Upper part of the nave, containing windows (clear storey)

Cupola

A decorative and crowning feature, which admits light

Head-stops

Decorative moulding in the form of a small portrait head or bust

Light

A window or opening to let light in

Lunette

Semi-circular alcove containing a painting

Nave

The central aisle of a church or religious building

Narthex

An antechamber or area at the western entrance of a church

Perpendicular

Third & final phase of Gothic, characterised by fan vaulting and vertical tracery

Pilaster

A rectangular column, projecting from a wall

Pinnacle

A small pointed turret built as an ornament on a roof

Porticus

Entrance-porch of a church or Chapel

Reredos

An ornamental screen covering the wall at the back of an altar

Retable

A shelf enclosing decorated panels or revered objects above and behind an altar

Sedilia

A group of stone seats for clergy in the wall of a church, usually three in number

Tracery

A delicate pattern in a window – often lead or stone

Transom

Horizontal crossbar in a window, usually of stone

Vaulting

Ornamental work in a roof or ceiling