



Royal Holloway Chapel



ROYAL
HOLLOWAY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON



The Chapel

The Chapel at Royal Holloway, University of London is one of the highlights of the magnificent Founder's Building. As you look at the monumental clock tower front from the main gates, the Chapel forms the left hand wing of the Founder's Building front under the clock tower while the right hand wing contains the Picture Gallery.

Thomas Holloway employed William Henry Crossland (1835-1908) to design the Renaissance Revival building, based on the Chateau de Chambord in France. Construction began in 1874 and was finished in 1881 but the College was not formally inaugurated by Queen Victoria until 1886.

Something of a puzzle

College chapels were a central feature of the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges. Since medieval times, the daily life of the staff and students who were mostly resident, revolved around the chapel, the refectory and the library and were closely connected to the Church of England.

However, University College, London and Bedford College for Women, with their strong non-conformist connections had neither chapels nor chaplains. Royal Holloway's Chapel is usually attributed to the inspiration of Jane Holloway, Thomas's wife, at whose suggestion first the Holloway Sanatorium and then the College were founded. In the College's original statutes, the day was to begin with 'a simple service of readings, prayers and hymns of a Christian household' that suggest the evangelical piety of Jane. However the size, the grand design and gilded interior of the Chapel are much more reminiscent of the Chapel of the Palace of Versailles than that of an English non-conformist domestic



Victorian puginesque decoration on the walls

chapel, and with more than a hint of Renaissance Catholic taste.

What is extraordinary about the Chapel is the lavish interior decoration. The walls are covered with a green and gold painted pattern. The ceiling is a gilded feast for the eyes and both sides are decorated with highly coloured bas-reliefs which are now beautifully lit so that the figures really seem to reach out from heaven towards the visitor.



The organ and Founder's box where important guests could view the service

The Chapel is designed in the classic collegiate pattern, with pews facing each other across the aisle. This pattern goes back to the early monastic foundations of the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges when most of the students were training to be priests and their pattern of worship involved the recitation or chanting of the Psalms from the Old Testament by two choirs seated opposite each other.

Bas-reliefs and altar paintings

On the right hand side as you look toward the altar, the figures represented are the great Prophets of the Old Testament. On the left hand side are depictions of the four Gospel writers and St. John the Baptist from the New Testament.

The clear theological message that these figures proclaim is the fundamental belief that God speaks to humanity through his Prophets, as they are recorded in the Biblical Old Testament and in the Gospels, in the New Testament.

These bas-reliefs which are sculpted in plaster and highly coloured are the work of Ceccardo Egidio Fucigna (1834-1884). He was an immensely successful Italian sculptor, born in Carrara, the centre of the Italian marble industry, who studied in Florence and Rome and was a major figure in the revival of Renaissance sculpture in Victorian England. He exhibited 12 times at the Royal Academy and his sculptures decorate the Albert Memorial opposite the Albert Hall.

He worked extensively with W H Crossland in the monumental carvings that decorate both quadrangles of the Founder's Building. Unfortunately, he died before he could complete his work on the Chapel and his assistant Baldini was left to complete the apse ceiling and the painted figures of Christ the Good Shepherd, Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Saint Cecilia, patron of music in the three niches over the altar.

Fucigna's bas-reliefs, represent the high point of polychrome sculpture in the Chapel.



Paintings of Mary, Mother of Jesus, Christ the Good Shepherd and St Cecilia

The figures depicted looking from the altar end are from the left:



Moses in prayer

Moses is depicted with his arms outstretched in prayer. This recalls the incident when Israel's armies faced the Amalekites and only prevailed as long as Moses' arms were stretched out in prayer. As a result his companions Aaron and Hur (depicted here), held up his arms while Moses prayed until the battle was won.

For Christians, this is sometimes seen as the pre-figuring of Jesus' arms stretched out on the cross while he prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do".

Daniel is shown reading the 'writing on the wall' predicting the fall of Babylon during Belshazzar's Feast, while in front of him is the Lions' Den where he remained untouched when maliciously accused by his rivals at the Persian court of disobeying the King.

Daniel's vision of one like a Son of Man, is often seen by Christians as pre-figuring the final Judgement.

Jeremiah is shown dictating his prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem to Baruch the scribe, because he was unable to go to the Temple to proclaim his prophecy. For Christians, Jeremiah's innocent suffering prefigures the suffering of Christ because the King and priests thought his message of doom would discourage the besieged city.



King Saul and the Prophet Samuel

Saul the King of Israel is depicted with the Prophet Samuel who anointed him king. Here Samuel comes to rebuke Saul and tell him he is deposed for disobeying God's command and taking the spoils of war for himself and his followers instead of offering them as a sacrifice to God. 'What the Lord wants is obedience not sacrifice', which reflects the Christian view of Christ's teaching. In the original sketch the title is 'Samuel speaks to Saul', which fits better with the overall composition of the bas-reliefs.



The prophet Elijah on the Mountain of God

Elijah is shown covering his face as he went to the entrance of his cave to hear the voice of God speaking to him in the gentle breeze.

These five Old Testament figures reflect on the theme of prayer as a communication between the believer and God. In prayer the believer can intercede for others, can gain insight and strength to face trials, can receive unpopular messages, can be rebuked and in quiet reflection can come face to face with God

In the College archives among large scale sketches of the Prophets there is another sketch of the Prophet, Ezekiel with his vision of the dry bones. This very vivid cartoon with a skull and skeleton clearly depicted was never made into a bas-relief and may have been thought too graphic for the young ladies of the time.

On the left hand side looking from the door:

Mark the Gospel writer is seen with the opening words of his Gospel written in Latin: “the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the Prophet, I will send my messenger ahead of you to prepare my way, a voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare a way for the Lord”. At his feet lies the winged lion which is associated with the wild beasts Jesus faced in the wilderness and also symbolises Jesus’ struggle with suffering and death.

Luke the Gospel writer, is depicted with the opening words of his Gospel, “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed”. At his feet is the winged ox, which appears in the crib with the ass and which is seen as the beast of sacrifice.



Luke the Gospel writer with his symbolic ox

John the Baptist is depicted baptising Christ when the Spirit appears in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven declares, “This is my beloved Son...”

John the Evangelist is seen with the opening of his Prologue written in Latin, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”. John is depicted with the eagle, who symbolises the soaring theology of St John about Christ’s divinity.

Matthew is also shown with the opening words of his gospel, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham”.

In the archives, we have a sixth sketch for another New Testament bas-relief of the Stoning of St Stephen. Here we see two powerfully muscular figures in the act of throwing large boulders at the prostrate Stephen. Here the very virility and violence might have been considered too shocking for Victorian taste.

One of the unfinished aspects of the Chapel are the niches that have been left empty. In an original sketch of the Chapel signed by Crossland it is clear that his plan was to have the niches filled with Renaissance style statues. The untimely death of Fucgina clearly prevented their completion.



The apse bas-relief of the creation of woman

The apse puzzle

Above the altar is a major and possibly deliberate puzzle. It is clearly a depiction of the story of creation from Genesis Chapter 2. What is interesting is that here instead of the creation of Man depicted on the Sistine chapel ceiling what we have here is the creation of woman. This choice must reflect the fact that the College was founded for women.

At the centre is the sunburst which doesn't appear in the Genesis 2 account. In the lower foreground is the very distinct image of a large hare or rabbit, which is very far from the biblical account. Its counterpart on the extreme left foreground is a tortoise. What we seem to have before us is a reference to Aesop's fable of *The Hare and the Tortoise*, but its relevance remains obscure. Traditional interpretations would suggest the moral is make haste slowly.

The Chapel was designed and built during the controversy caused by the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and the *Descent of Man* in 1871. The traditional understanding of the biblical narratives of Creation were very much challenged by the idea of Evolution and also by the rise of Biblical Criticism which suggested that these narratives were to be understood as myths or fables. This is clearly the view suggested by *The Hare and the Tortoise* in the apse.

One possible interpretation of the apse fresco is that it contains a hidden code that would be understood by a group called the Freemasons. They were very significant in the 18th and 19th centuries and saw themselves as the voice of modern enlightened rational thinking, Thomas Holloway may have been influenced by their thinking, if not a member himself.



The puzzle of the white hare and the tortoise

More convincing still are the names carved on the corbels of the chapel. Those on the outside are conventional religious figures, St George, St John, Salvator Mundi (Saviour of the World), and St Peter. On the North Quad side of the Chapel the names carved are other philosophers and religious figures like Confucius, the great Chinese Philosopher (551-479 BC). These are very unusual figures for a Christian building. Another figure, Savonarola, a major religious reformer in the Florentine Renaissance, was burned as a heretic for denouncing the corruption of the Papacy and Julius II was the renaissance Pope who cultivated art more than religion. All of these would however, be considered 'enlightened' and pre-figured the world-view of the Freemasons.



Carved head of Confucius

Angels

The main ceiling has images of six angels' starting with Michael the archangel near the altar. He is pictured carrying the sword, ready for battle with evil.

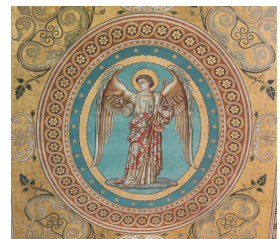
The second angel pictured is Gabriel the archangel with the words, "Hail Mary full of grace", from the annunciation story in Luke's Gospel.

The third angel is Rafael from the story of Tobias. Rafael is pictured as a traveller who guides Tobias and has a fish in his hand that Tobias catches and uses the gall from the bladder to cure his father's cataract.

The fourth angel is pictured with a chalice, perhaps reflecting the story of the angel with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane where he prays, "Father, let this chalice pass me by".

The fifth angel is pictured with an open book, reflecting the angel from the Book of Revelation who cries out, "Who is worthy to open the book and break the seven seals?" The answer comes, "Worthy is the Lamb...".

The sixth angel is pictured with the flaming sword reflecting the angel set at the gates of Paradise with a flaming sword after Adam and Eve were expelled in the Book of Genesis.



The fourth angel

The jewelled cross

Above the altar is a jewelled cross which is a precious piece of College heritage. It was given by Emily Bishop, the first Principal of Royal Holloway (1887-1897). She was a devout Anglican and resigned when the College Council insisted on having non-conformist services on alternate Sundays. The Byzantine style cross is decorated with her family jewels and on the base there is a lovely silver carving of a female figure shielding a group of young people with her cloak.

This is a traditional Catholic image of Mary Jesus' mother, protecting the young entrusted to her care, which one suspects was principal inspiration for this work.



Mary Mother of Jesus



Emily Bishop's jewelled cross



Creation bas-relief



Mary, Jesus the Good Shepherd, St Cecilia



John bas-relief



Moses bas-relief



Matthew bas-relief



Daniel bas-relief



John the Baptist bas-relief



Jeremiah bas-relief



Luke bas-relief



Saul bas-relief



Mark bas-relief

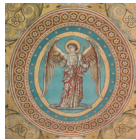


Elijah bas-relief



Altar

Jewelled cross



Ceiling – six angels



Founder's box

the organ

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