

The Reredos in the Church of St Laurence, Norwich

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In 1995 a gazetteer of all known sites and representations of St Walstan in Norwich both pre- and post-Reformation was published (Twinch 1995). Given the extensive research devoted to Norwich churches there appeared to be little chance of anything new being added, but in 1997 Roy Tricker of the Churches Conservation Trust identified St Walstan on a reredos in the disused Church of St Laurence. The three-part reredos was designed by Edwin Tench and made by John Howard in 1921 as a war memorial.

The 15th-century church of St Laurence hides its size and grandeur, having been built between St Benedict's and Westwick Street on land which falls away towards the River Wensum valley. The church is in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, and the reredos is one of the few remaining pieces of church furniture.

The reredos was dedicated in June 1921 by the Bishop of Thetford (Norfolk Studies Library N940 465). It comprises three sections and includes panels painted on canvas by Kingston Rudd of Wolferton (Court 1990). Unfortunately Rudd died before he could complete the work. The central panels, which show an angel guarding the Garden of Eden and Melchizedech the Priest-King of Salem, were not painted at all. Other scenes appear incomplete, but some, like that of St Walstan, show the high quality of the finished piece (Tricker 1999). Rudd seems to have by-passed much of the background and did not complete the figures before embarking on the final gold over-painting of the crown, belt fittings and a picture of Bawburgh Church. St Walstan's right hand, for example, is little more than a suggestion and the lighted lantern that he carries is basic in outline and lacking definition.

In the southern section, the panel to the right of St Walstan is that of St Withburga, the sister of St Etheldreda, and she, too, is an unfinished painting though her halo and crosier are picked out in gold. To St Walstan's left is surely one of the most extraordinary surviving portrayals of St Petronilla. Petronilla, the legendary daughter of St Peter, is shown as a young child wearing a fur-lined mantle hanging down her back. Her dress is short and draws attention to her white ankle socks and blue shoes secured by a strap and button, a style fashionable in the 1920s. She, too, is part-gilded. Her head is strangely disembodied and has an adult face with a long-suffering and somewhat petulant expression. She carries a single key, presumably from St Peter, and a book clasped in her right hand.

There is no known record of why SS Walstan, Felix, William and Withburga were chosen for the reredos memorial, other than the obvious deduction that they are all East Anglian saints. Petronilla's feast date is 31st May and she could have been included to honour the men lost at sea in the Battle of Jutland (31st May 1916). St Walstan's feast is 30th May, but he is better known as patron saint of farm-workers and his Life contains no element relevant to war or to the dangers of seafaring.

One of the more curious features of the St Laurence reredos is the saints' faces. They appear so realistic that they



Fig 1 The reredos in the church of St Laurence, Norwich, showing Petronilla, the legendary daughter of St Peter

are likely to be caricatures of real people. In the northern section is St Felix, the first Bishop of East Anglia, and Roy Tricker points to the surprising likeness of St Felix to Archbishop Randall Thomas Davidson, who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time. Next to St Felix is St Edmund, who bears a more than passing resemblance to King George V. St William of Norwich, the 12-year old boy who was said to have been murdered for ritual purposes by the Jews in 1144, is dressed in short trousers, long socks and walking shoes. He could have been any early 20th century schoolboy. An onlooker is stoking the flames below St Laurence and the artist has added apparently classical sculptures behind the scene. It is tempting to imagine that the onlooker was based on someone known to Rudd. It is not clear if the artist's intention was to compliment his models or if there are artistic jokes to be discovered, possibly the cartooning of prominent politicians or churchmen.

There is no immediate choice of candidate as model for St Walstan, though he is featured with an open, kindly face. He carries a lantern to lighten the darkness, his scythe as his specific emblem, and a painting of the north wall of Bawburgh Church, where his Shrine Chapel stood until the Reformation, hangs by a chain from a buckle. The painting is contained on a Bible cover suspended from an ornate waist belt, with part of its right side hidden behind Walstan's cloak. The rounded spine of the Bible can clearly be seen with the first letters 'Ho' and 'Bib'. In his right hand, he carries a peculiar dome-shaped object (possibly intended as his generic emblem of a crown) which resembles the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, again picked out in gold.

It is tempting to think that at least one of the faces portrays, if not the notorious Father Ignatius himself, then at least some identifiable member of his Order of St Benedict, or even Bishop Pelham under whose jurisdiction the Church was when Ignatius arrived in Norwich. The Reverend Joseph Lyne – '*Father Ignatius*' of the Elm Hill community – and his monks used the Church of St Laurence as their place of worship in the 1860s and it became the centre of protest on more than one occasion. In 1864, Ignatius took exception to the pew rents: the pews were, he told the Reverend Edwin Hillyard, vicar of St Laurence's, to be removed. Following the vicar's refusal, Ignatius sent his monks to the Church to rip out the pews and reduce them to firewood (Calder-Marshall 1962). The pews had been given by the parishioners of St Laurence's and there was a furious reaction to this act of vandalism. While many deplored the practice of pew rents, the event brought the Reverend Hillyard into disrepute and made the Church of St Laurence notorious for many years afterwards.

The reredos paintings of St Laurence are currently grimy and suffering from the damp, but they will, in time, be cleaned and kept in the church. The Churches Conservation Trust is having the roof repaired and a service is planned for 2001 – the first congregation gathered at St Laurence's in over 30 years.

Bibliography

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