

The Great Screen of All Hallows-the-Great

by

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The finely carved great screen from the church of All Hallows-the-Great is one of two such sanctuary screens surviving in the City of London. Its installation in 1683 as part of the fittings of the newly-completed church in its rebuilding after the Great Fire of 1666 was marked by acrimony between the parish and its most wealthy resident, Jacob Jacobsen, the house-master of the Steelyard, the London Headquarters of the Hanseatic League. In the centre of the screen is a massive double spread-eagle symbolizing the League, positioned below the Royal Arms denoting the protection afforded by his majesty. The screen is now cared for in St Margaret, Lothbury.

The church of All Hallows-the-Great in Thames Street in the City of London was severely damaged although not completely destroyed in the Great Fire of London of 1666. It was rebuilt to the pre-Fire plan under the 'care and conduct' of Sir Christopher Wren, only to be demolished in 1894. The site is now occupied by Cannon Street railway station. It had some fine fittings, but its most distinguished feature was a magnificent oak screen (Fig. 1), now in St Margaret, Lothbury, where it occupies a position equivalent to that of a medieval rood screen, separating the sanctuary from the nave.

It is an example of fine, although not outstanding craftsmanship, with pairs of slender, twisted openwork balusters of two strands on short pedestals rising to support a heavy entablature. The central entrance through the screen is flanked by panels of carved open-work that support an open segmental pediment which, on each side of the screen, originally contained the undifferentiated Stuart Royal arms and below it a massive double spread-eagle (Figs 2 and 3). Subsidiary entrances on each side are surmounted by smaller open pediments, with cherubs and cartouches. It is an architectural tour-de-force with a wealth of fine detail although it now has only one of its original pair of Royal arms.

The screen has long been the subject of speculation concerning its origin and its date. It has been attributed to Dutch and German¹ as well as to English craftsmen and variously to the reigns of Charles II, William and Mary, and Queen Anne. It was widely supposed to have been the gift of Hanse merchants, notably Theodore

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Fig. 1

All Hallows-the-Great

The great screen in its original position across the church, 1884.

Photograph of a watercolour by John Crowther from the Chadwyck-Healey Collection
Guildhall Library

Jacobsen (or Jacobson), house-master of the Steelyard,² the London premises of the Hanseatic League. A close examination of the parish records has resolved both points and confirms that it was made in England and was paid for by the inhabitants of the two parishes, All Hallows-the-Great and All Hallows-the-Less, united under the rebuilding Act of 1670.³ These records reveal that the relationship between the Steelyard and the parish of All Hallows-the-Great in which it was situated, was by no means harmonious: it was one of confrontation, intrigue and antagonism carried from one generation to the next, a vendetta lasting for nearly forty years.

The Great Fire of London destroyed not only the houses and church of the parish of All Hallows-the-Great but also the Steelyard, by then much in decline. The premises were rebuilt by the brothers Jacob and Theodore Jacobsen, merchants from Hamburg, seemingly at their own expense, who then proceeded to trade much as though the Steelyard was their own property. The brothers belonged to the North German

Lutheran community in London and were supporters and Trustees of the Hamburg Lutheran Church built in 1672-3 on the site of the burnt-out church of Holy Trinity-the-Less⁴ whose parish had been united, for ecclesiastical purposes, with that of St Michael, Queenhithe. Jacob Jacobsen was house-master at the Steelyard for thirty-three years, dating from before the Fire. He died in London on 7 November 1680, aged sixty-one, and was buried in a vault in the churchyard of All Hallows-the-Great.⁵ Theodore erected a monument to his memory in the church, since re-erected in the church of St Michael, Paternoster Royal. He then succeeded his brother as house-master of the Steelyard.

In 1681, although the rebuilding of the church of All Hallows-the-Great after the Fire was not yet complete, the parish appointed a committee to join with a similar committee from All Hallows-the-Less 'to treat and to agree with workmen, carpenters and joiners . . . for the beautifying of the church',⁶ i.e., to plan and oversee the furnishing and fitting out of the building. There is no record of the meetings of this joint committee, but they would certainly have included discussion of the cost of the work and how it was to be financed. Theodore Jacobsen seems to have been the most wealthy man in the parish at the time and an approach to him, seeking a contribution to the costs is likely to have been made, but what, if anything, he promised is not recorded.

The work involved in designing, approving, making and installing the furniture and fittings must have begun soon after 21 December 1681, when the committee was appointed, and continued throughout 1682. A list, compiled in October of that year, of the fittings then needed to complete the church included the font, an altar or communion table, two stone tablets for the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and the finishing of the altar-piece. The list did not include the screen which may have been complete by then, in time for the dedication service in December.

Earlier, in January 1682, it was agreed by the two parishes that the cost of the work in fitting out the church should be shared equally between them. The churchwardens of All Hallows-the-Great then produced a schedule⁷ showing what sums they then intended to collect from the inhabitants of the parish, mostly in amounts of the order of £1 or less, but Theodore Jacobson was assessed at £25 4s. 0d. It may well have been this huge assessment that led to the dissension between him and the parish. The churchwardens no doubt considered him well able to pay, as indeed he was, but he considered the Steelyard, and himself as house-master of it, to be exempt from the payment of rates. It was a privilege that he was determined to preserve.

There may have been other contributory causes to the dissension—the extravagance of the parish in fitting out the church may have been one. No expense seems to have been spared. Whereas other City parishes had been content to have painted pictures of Moses and Aaron, All Hallows had them carved in stone. The altar was made, not as a wooden table, but as a marble slab supported by a kneeling figure of an angel. The furniture of the church, including the pulpit and its sounding-board were magnificently carved and the church had a number of carved panels and other decorative woodwork, including a figure of Charity with her children treading on avarice. As a highly successful businessman he may have deplored the extravagance, regarding it as both unnecessary and undesirable. As a Lutheran, he may have objected to a screen separating that part of the church used by the congregation from the

communion table, establishing a sanctuary for the use of the clergy.

All or any of these reasons may have caused him to distance himself from the parish. Whatever promise he may earlier have made he discharged by offering to provide the pulpit, clerk's pew and reader's desk. With the somewhat frosty relations developing between him and the parish, it is perhaps surprising that Jacobsen should have made any gift at all to the parish. His motive may not have been entirely altruistic, perhaps more an attempt to persuade the parish that it had nothing to gain by challenging his tax- and rate-exempt status.

The All Hallows vestry responded by welcoming his decision to donate the pulpit to the church:

And whereas Mr Theodore Jacobson of the Steeleyard had been pleased to promise to bestow a pulpit with a reading desk and clerk's pew upon the Church of All Hallows . . . the hearty thanks of the said vestry be . . . returned to Mr Jacobson for so great and signal a kindness towards the church . . . but no ways prejudicial to the customs of the Steeleyard.⁸

The customs of the Steeleyard to which the vestry referred are nowhere stated, but the refusal of Jacobsen to pay the parish rate indicates the core of the problem. Both sides refused to compromise, and Jacobsen, perhaps unsure of his own position, sought a confirmation of his status from the King, granted by Charles II in a letter of 28 February 1683 (N.S.).⁹ The quarrel deepened in or about 1688 when Theodore's goods were seized for non-payment of the parish rate. He appealed to the King who confirmed his tax-exempt status and ordered the Lord Mayor to secure the release of his goods.¹⁰ A second seizure of his goods was made, probably in 1690, followed by a further appeal to the new King who again confirmed the status of the Steeleyard and ordered the Lord Mayor to take steps to secure the release of the goods concerned and to prevent further such occurrences.¹¹

In 1694 the All Hallows vestry appointed Theodore as a vestryman. The practice of appointing affluent citizens to such offices in the expectation that they would pay a fine to be excused office, and thus contribute to parish finances, was a common one. The parish must have seen this as a way of obtaining a payment from the Steeleyard. Theodore did not ask to 'fine for office'; he ignored the appointment. The vestry records show that he did not attend any meetings, although the vestry continued to regard him as a member, gradually increasing in seniority, with presumably the expectation that he would eventually be appointed a churchwarden and then be compelled to serve or fine for office. Theodore continued to ignore the vestry which responded by setting up a committee 'to endeavour to use all lawful means to bring [him] to pay his proportion towards maintaining the poor of the parish' and it was probably at their suggestion that he was appointed sidesman, although he attended not the parish church, but the German Lutheran Church. There is no record of his serving or fining for this office, and he continued nominally as a vestryman until his death in 1706.

The parish continued its antagonism to the Steeleyard by appointing Jacob Jacobsen, Theodore's nephew and successor as house-master of the Steeleyard, to the vacant place as vestryman. In succeeding years he too advanced in seniority within the vestry, reaching the eleventh position by 1719 without either attending or fining for office. He was knighted by the King in 1718 but that did not stop the parish from



Fig. 2
All Hallows-the-Great

The central entrance through the great screen with double spread-eagle and twin Royal Arms in position
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choosing him for office. In 1720, however:

... a debate arising in relation to Sr Jacob Jacobson, as had happened on a like occasion before in former vestries, it was resolved that to prevent all disputes for the future, the name of Sr Jacob Jacobson be withdrawn out of the list of vestrymen.¹²

The vestry had finally acknowledged the position of the Steelyard. In some respects the forty-year action can be seen as somewhat petty, but it is an indication of how strongly the parish felt about what they saw as the privileged and totally unjustified tax-exempt position of the Steelyard and against which they were unable to do more than pinprick. It provided both the background and the foreground to the installation of the great screen.

In 1683, the sum of £400 for furnishings which the two parishes were setting out to raise, is unlikely to have included the cost of the screen. Such chancel or sanctuary screens were unknown in the parish churches of the Wren period until one was installed in St Peter, Cornhill. It was in place there by 27 November 1681 when, at the consecration of the church, the rector, William Beveridge, gave a sermon on 'the excellency and usefulness of the common prayer', in which he commented:

some perhaps may wonder why this [separation of the chancel from the body of the church with a screen] should be observed in our Church rather than in all the other Churches which have been lately built in this City. Whereas they should rather wonder why it was not observed in all others as well as this.¹³

This sermon was printed and widely distributed. In time other city churches which up till then had seen no need for such a screen, followed the example of St Peter, until, as Bumpus commented:

not one Wrennian church, save St Andrew Wardrobe was destitute of a partition of open carved work answering the purpose of a screen.¹⁴

The first of the City churches to follow was All Hallows-the-Great, where the decision to have a similar screen must have been made early in 1682. These two screens, those of St Peter and All Hallows-the-Great, are the only two from the Wren churches to have survived. Their similarity in design leaves no doubt that the screen from All Hallows was inspired by that of St Peter.

The first record of the screen in the vestry minutes of All Hallows-the-Great occurs on 4 June 1714 when it was ordered that 'the screen dividing the chancel from the nave of the church, being weak and in danger of falling', should be secured by iron supports.¹⁵ A photograph of the church showing the screen in place supported by great iron hoops shows how this was done.¹⁶ The earliest description of the screen dates from 1708 when Hatton reported:

The Chancel is separated from the Body of the Church with a fine Piece of Carved Work, consisting of small open twisted Columns with their Arches, in the middle whereof, are two open Carved Pilasters (on both sides of the Door-case) with their Architrave, Friese, Cornish and large open Pediment of the Composite Order; at the upper part of which Door-case is carved a large Eagle displayed, and over that the Queen's Arms, with supporters &c. and these (on the Cornish of this Partition) betw two smaller pediments, in the middle whereof are two shields with fine Compartments all very well carved in right Wainscot.¹⁷

In the fitting out of the church, the parish of All Hallows-the-Less seems to have followed the lead provided by All Hallows-the-Great, although as far as the screen was concerned, with some reluctance. It was not until December 1683 that their vestry



Fig. 3

The double spread-eagle forming the centrepiece of the great screen shortly after its erection in St Margaret, Lothbury

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agreed to pay their half share for it. The total cost, presumably excluding the cost of the three-decker pulpit paid for by Jacobsen, amounted to £890 12s. 2d., each parish contributing one half in accordance with the agreement between them. The sum is somewhat larger than the figure that had earlier been suggested, partly no doubt from the added expense of the screen, although overspends were by no means uncommon in the fitting out of these churches. As would be expected, the largest bill—£448 17s. 2d.—was for joinery, which included not only the pewing of the church, but the fitting of wainscotting to the walls and probably also the provision of doorcases and work on the screen. This latter would have been the joint responsibility of a joiner and carver. Thomas Powell was paid for all the joinery of the church, and two carvers were named in the All Hallows-the-Less churchwardens' accounts as Thornton and Woodroffe. Woodroffe was probably Francis Woodroffe (or Woodruff), earlier apprenticed to John Woodroffe and on his decease to William Hammond, the man

who held the mason's contract for the church and for the masonry work associated with its fitting out. Woodroffe is known for a number of commissions involving the carving of stone.¹⁸ Thornton (or Thornteton) may have been Thomas Thornton of Claybrook in Leicestershire who had been apprenticed to Abraham Storey. Woodroffe and Thornton may have worked together on the screen.

For over three hundred years the screen has been the subject of much comment, some directed particularly towards the centrepiece with its eagle and Royal arms. In contrast to the rest of the screen, it is cumbersome and disproportionately massive. It inevitably invites the question of why two coats of arms were provided, one facing each way. No other City church was so extravagant. Does the centrepiece represent an adaptation of the original design, perhaps undertaken in the spring of 1684, when the churchwardens' accounts record expenditure with the carver Woodroffe in the setting up of the King's arms?

NOTES

1. Bumpus, T.F., *Ancient London Churches* (1923), 342; Malcolm, J.P., *Londinium Redivivum*, 4 (1807), 43.
2. Norman, P., *Archaeologia*, 61 (1909), 412.
3. 22 Charles II, cap.11 (1670).
4. Gold, S., *Trans. Ancient Mon. Soc.*, NS, 28 (1984), 93-113.
5. Guildhall Library, MS 9310.
6. Guildhall Library, MS 819/1, p. 318; MS 824/1.
7. Guildhall Library, MS 2189.
8. Guildhall Library, MS 819/1, p. 316, 17 October 1682.
9. Norman, P., *op.cit.*, 400; PRO SP 82/16, f.293 and 297.
10. *Cal. State Papers Dom.*, 23 May 1689.
11. *Ibid.*, 31 January 1692.
12. Guildhall Library, MS 814/2, p. 132.
13. Beveridge, W., London, 27 November 1681, Guildhall Library, Pam.4953.
14. Bumpus, T.F., *op.cit.*, 271. His authority for this statement is not known.
15. Guildhall Library, MS 819/2, p. 113.
16. By Charles Latham in Birch, G., *London Churches of XVII and XVIII Centuries* (1896), 90.
17. Hatton, E., *A New View of London*, 1 (1708), 106.
18. Gunnis, R., *A Dictionary of British Sculptors, 1660-1851* (1953), 442.