

The Society's Casework 2011

Some Ecclesiastical Cases

A Painting, a Butterfly, a Font and a (G. E.) Street

by

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ST STEPHEN WALBROOK, CITY OF LONDON

St Stephen's is acknowledged as one of the greatest of all Wren's City churches. It was built between 1672 and 1679, to a tighter timetable than many of the others (although the steeple was added long after, in 1713-17). It is renowned especially for the geometric purity of the interior, dominated by the full dome. The sculptor-architect, Canova, told Lord Burlington that 'we have nothing to touch it in Rome'. It has also become equally well known in more recent years for the cleansing of later work and the introduction in 1987 of the Henry Moore altar, with its Patrick Heron kneelers, largely under the initiative of Peter (Lord) Palumbo. Palumbo, the quintessential developer with a feel for architecture, not just the bottom line, exhibited a furious passion for Modernism and a lesser one for the Post-Modernism of architects such as James Stirling. He fought the conservation establishment for years to redevelop the triangular site just

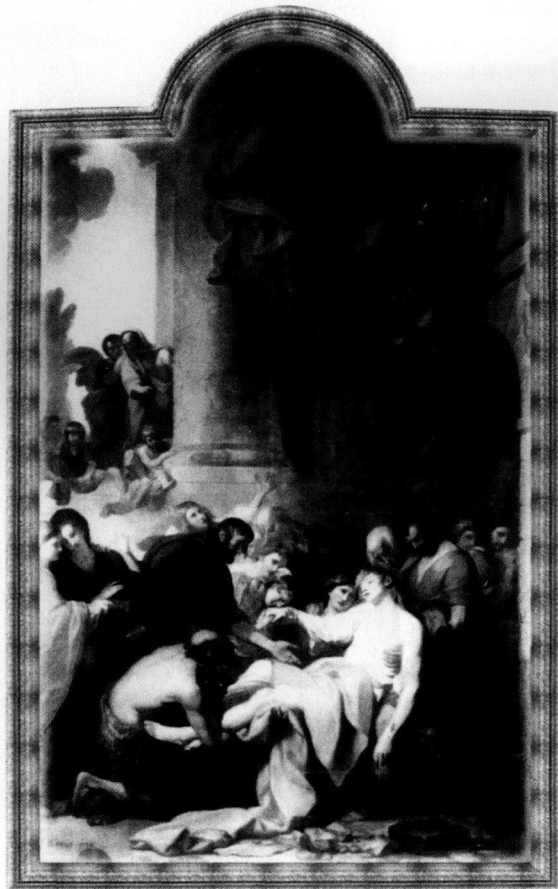


Fig. 1

Benjamin West, 'Devout Men Removing the Body of St Stephen' (1776)

opposite St Stephen's, bounded by Cheapside (Poultry) and Queen Victoria Street and having lost his first choice with the death of the 'pure' Modernist, Mies van der Rohe, fell back on the more wayward genius of Stirling. So intimate was his connection with this part of the city that his office was based in the little house adjacent to St Stephen's. This must have given him a frisson of historical recall for Wren himself had lived in the parish at 15 Walbrook. The remodelling and restoration that he carried out between 1978 and 1987 was largely paid for from his own pocket. However, our story begins two centuries earlier.

In 1776 the then Rector, Dr Thomas Wilson, commissioned the American-born artist and President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West, to paint a huge picture



Fig. 2

St Stephen Walbrook: the Benjamin West painting mounted above the high altar;
18th-century view in the vestry.

Courtesy, St Stephen Walbrook



Fig. 3

St Stephen Wallbrook: a photo-montage showing how the Benjamin West painting appeared between 1847 and 1978

Courtesy, St Stephen Wallbrook

(5.6m high x 3.2m wide) entitled 'Devout Men Removing the Body of St Stephen' (Fig. 1). He placed it, without permission and amid controversy, over Wren's reredos, removing its crest (which was reinstated in 1847) and bricking up the window itself (Fig. 2). It was moved to the north side of the interior in 1847 where it occupied all the wall-space between Wren's panelling and the lunette window (Fig. 3). In 1978, at the same time as a large hole was created on the north side through which to introduce the Moore altar, the West painting was taken out without a faculty (although one was granted retrospectively) and it has been in storage at Sotheby's ever since. The Reverend Chad Varah, high profile rector of the church and founder of the Samaritans, tried to sell it but was stopped the day before the intended auction.

The present PCC is now seeking a faculty not to reinstate the painting, having received an offer of some £500,000 from an American museum which intends it as the centrepiece of a new display on West. Sotheby's (who have the painting in store) had valued it at £100,000. The PCC are well aware that an Export Stop is certain given the value and importance of the painting. They say all the money raised would go on repairs, at a time when they claim that the habit of munificence towards the City churches is in perceptible decline among the present generation of bankers and financial grandees. The church argue in addition that the painting needs conservation and would have to be rolled up to get it through the present west door, which would damage it, although this risk is discounted by some conservators.

The Diocesan Advisory Committee of London has always been consistent in opposing permanent alienation and reaffirmed its objection to the present faculty just before Christmas 2011. The case seems certain to be fought out at a consistory court, the second time since the War that St Stephen Wallbrook will have entered the legal history books – over an altar and a painting.

KING EDWARD VII SANATORIUM, NEAR MIDHURST, SUSSEX

The only possible overlap with Wren is the geometrical precision of the floor plan, but what a difference too! Here at the King Edward VII Sanatorium near Midhurst, of 1903-06, which Ian Nairn rated as 'one of the best buildings of its date in the country',¹ Adams, Holden and Pearson provided a chapel of memorable individuality.

'Butterfly Plans' were one of the leitmotifs of the Arts and Crafts Movement. They meant a lot to E. S. Prior in particular, but here Charles Holden in good lepidopterist fashion cut the butterfly in half, with two splayed wings, not four (Fig. 4). There is a long monastic tradition of divided worship areas – the nave for the people, the chancel for the monks, the latter one step nearer God – and two equal-height naves are what make up the hall church; but two naves set in diagonally aligned spokes is the rarest of configurations. One of the few obvious parallels in this country is the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart at Waterlooville (Hants.) of 1923 by Wilfrid Mangan, closed for worship in Summer 2011 and very much under threat. There two naves were provided, one for an order of nuns, the other for penitent women (i.e. prostitutes). Neither could see each other but they could observe the officiating clergy in a sanctuary common to both. Something similar occurs in the 1850s at Dalbeth in Glasgow and in 1901, at Staplehurst in Kent by Pugin and Pugin. This architectural apartheid was an obligation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity who, in slightly different incarnations, lay behind all three. At the Sanatorium, the two naves are for the men and women respectively, sent to recover from tuberculosis in the Sussex countryside (Figs 5, 6).

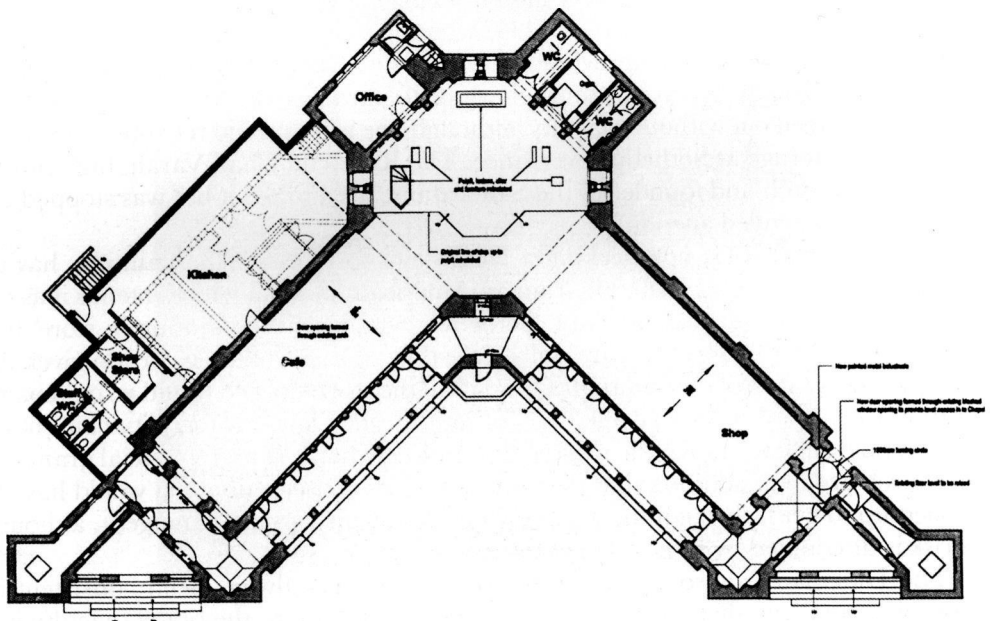


Fig. 4

King Edward VII Sanatorium: ground-plan
Courtesy, Purcell, Miller and Tritton



Fig. 5

King Edward VII Sanatorium: the chapel exterior from the south. The feature concealed behind the bush looks like an open-air pulpit

Photograph, author

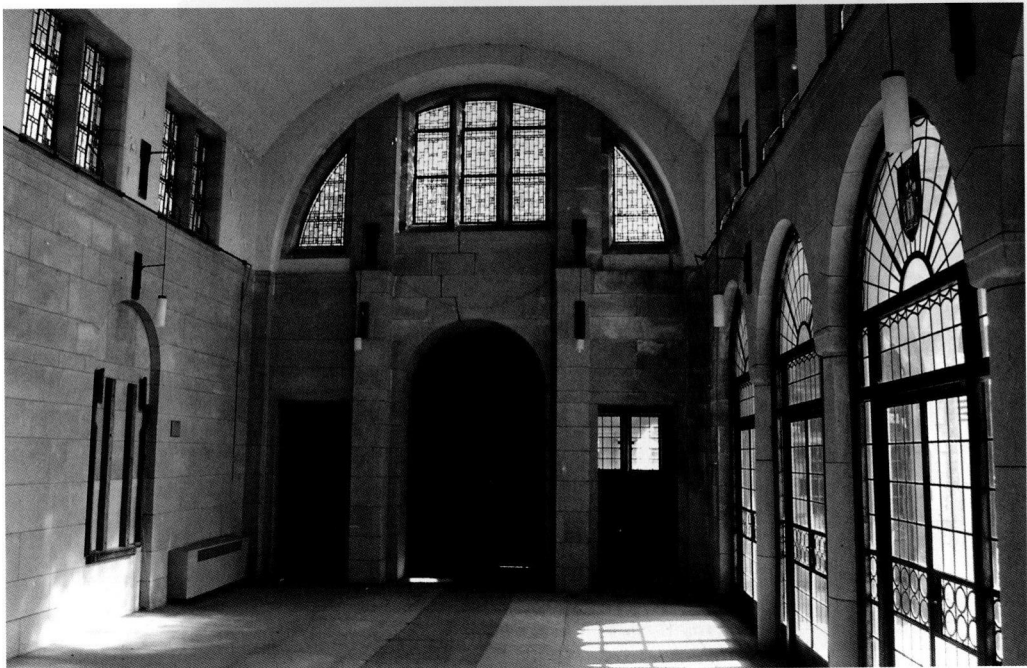


Fig. 6

King Edward VII Sanatorium: the interior of the eastern nave

Photograph, author

The Sanatorium is now closed and has been purchased for residential conversion, after the bankruptcy of two previous developers, by City and Country, the firm behind a number of major conversion projects at Balls Park (Herts.), Bentley Priory and Bristol General Hospital. English Heritage and the AMS have agreed to a limited scheme of enabling development, carefully sited away from any key views and with terracing based on the historical precedent at Bucklers Hard at Beaulieu. It is pulled as far away as possible from the triple SSI which is 400 yards away; there will be a ban on cats in the conversion, to reduce the risk to the protected birds. The total cost of the scheme will be £100m and, with developer's profit of 25%, the enabling development is intended to plug a deficit or shortfall of between £6.5m and £12m. Some brutally utilitarian post-war extensions will be demolished, the gardens by Gertrude Jekyll will be reinstated, some limited plastic windows put in without permission will be expunged, whilst the chapel will be left undivided and adapted in all probability as a café. Whether it will be for the residents or the broader public is not yet decided. The fittings by C. R. Ashbee, like the lectern now in safekeeping, will be reinstated in the interior (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7

King Edward VII Sanatorium: the lectern by C. R. Ashbee in storage, but soon to be repatriated to the chapel

Photograph, author

ELY CATHEDRAL²

There is no firm evidence that there was ever a font at Ely Cathedral in the Middle Ages. Most baptisms were in the town's parish churches and where the cathedral was chosen, they probably took place using a large ewer and basin at the high altar. It was Dean Spencer who left £100 in 1693 for one to be commissioned. What resulted is one of the most exquisite of all 17th-century fonts (Figs 8, 9, 10), the equal of many of those designed by Wren for his City churches. It was placed in the south arcade of the nave, within the third bay east of the west tower. The 19th century regarded its size as puny and its classicism as inappropriate, and in 1866 it was transferred, minus the glorious cover, to the much lowlier surroundings of Prickwillow church in rural Cambridgeshire. This was at the instigation of the architect, Reynolds Rowe, who designed Prickwillow and worked alongside Sir George Gilbert Scott in the major repair campaign at Ely, where the principal triumph was to be the reconstruction of the Octagon. Rowe went

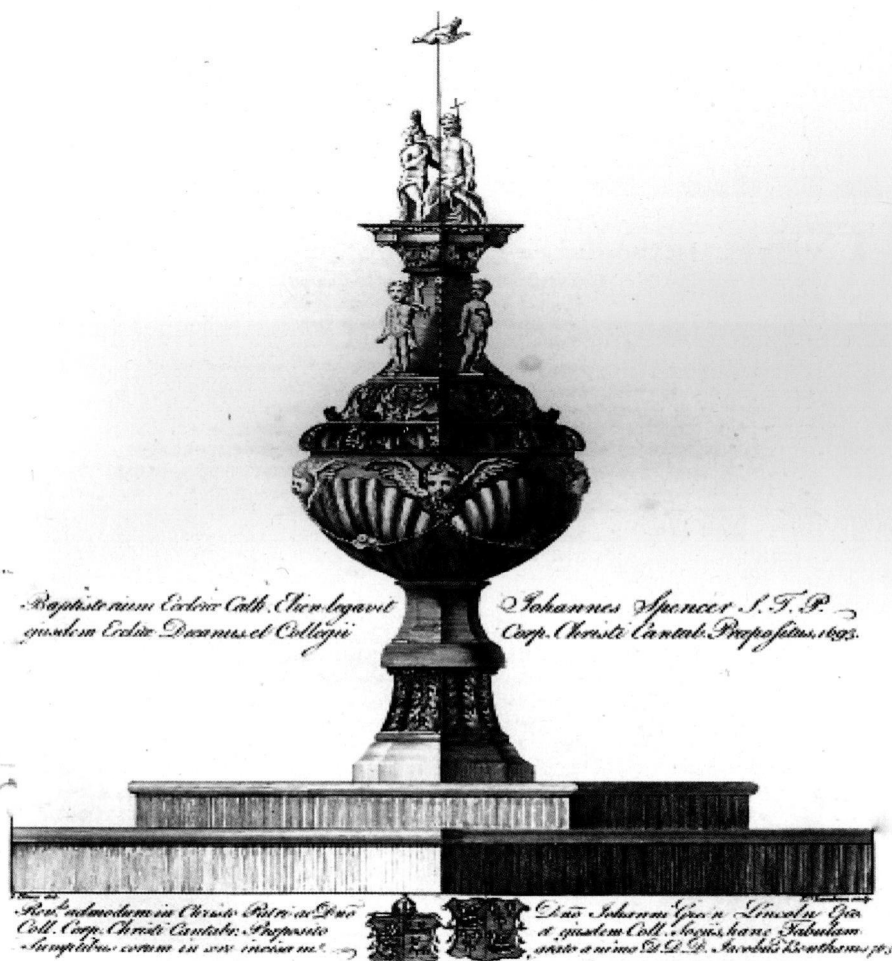


Fig. 8

Ely Cathedral: the Spencer font, as shown on a print of 1763

Courtesy, Purcell, Miller and Tritton



Fig. 9

Ely Cathedral: the Spencer font, details of the bowl
Courtesy, Purcell, Miller and Tritton



Fig. 10

Ely Cathedral: the Spencer font, details of the bowl
Courtesy, Purcell, Miller and Tritton

on to rebuild Stuntney church, where he re-sited some medieval choir-stalls ejected from the cathedral, and St Matthew's, Cambridge, where he relocated the angels from the cathedral's organ case. The latter were repatriated in 2010, as a memorial to Dr Thomas Cocke.

The present font was the gift of Canon Selwyn and dates from 1853 (Fig. 11). Scott's drawing for it, to a slightly different configuration, survives in the RIBA Drawings Collection. It is in a French limestone from Aubigny, which has yellowed and oiled somewhat over the years, with Purbeck marble for the columns. The scale is gargantuan compared with the delicacy of the Spencer font, the style being Early English Gothic at its most monumental. The craftsmen were from the firm of Myer and Sons, so favoured by Pugin. It lies at the west end of the south transept, which had been screened off until the 1840s, to serve as the cathedral works yard.

The present dean and chapter dislike the Scott font thoroughly. In the faintly Vitruvian condemnation of Jane Kennedy, to them it 'seems lumpen and lacks delight'. They say it is cumbersome and unsafe to use, given the number of steps. A local trust has offered to pay for the cost of its removal and reinstatement of the Spencer font, and the cathedral is presently consulting on the proposal. The thoughts of members would be appreciated.



Fig. 11
Ely Cathedral: the Scott font
Photograph, author

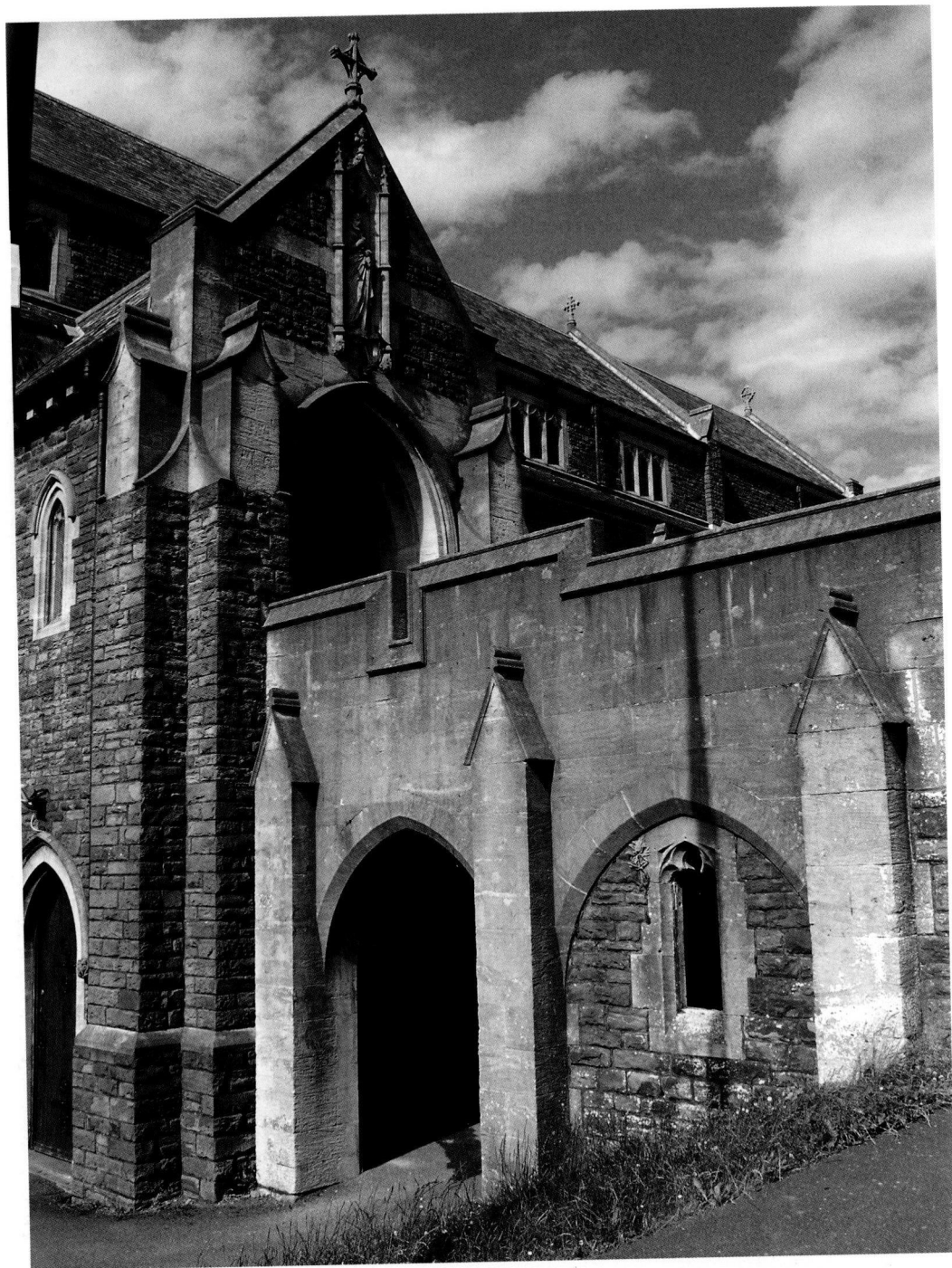


Fig. 12

Llanelli, St Alban's Church. The medievalising bridge adds a note of drama
Photograph, author

LLANELLI, CARMARTHENSHIRE

As local boy, the BBC newsreader, Huw Edwards, demonstrated in a recent book that Llanelli is a town of chapels – and extremely fine ones. He might also have been able to say the same about the Anglican churches. However, the architectural legacy of both traditions is under unprecedented threat.

The Church in Wales has decided, in effect, to retreat to the parish church of St Elli and St Peter, Paddock Street. St David's was sold off in 2006 – now All Saints by G. E. Street (1872-4), St Alban's by E. M. Bruce Vaughan (1911-15) and the less important Furnace Mission Room and St John's (1887) are all to go the same way. St Alban's, dramatically approached by a bridge (Fig. 12) has already been sold, as has St John's, where the Frank Roper east window of 1974 is to go to St Elli. All Saints, easily underestimated by its conventional unfinished exterior set a long way back from the pavement, is internally sublime (Fig. 13). At £11,000 by 1888, when A. E. Street gave up on the spire, it proved the most expensive 19th-century church in the region and it retains lavish fittings: stained glass by Clayton and Bell, more by R.J. Newbery, a reredos of 1879 (Figs 14, 15), and font and font cover of 1874 (Figs 16, 17), all by G. E. Street. The doors will finally close in 2012 – what happens thereafter? The arrangement under which highly graded listed Anglican churches in Wales can be passed to The Friends of Friendless Churches cannot apply to churches of such size in such heavily urbanised settings.



Fig. 13

Llanelli, All Saints Church, the chancel; G. E. Street at his most dignified

Photograph, Martin Crampton

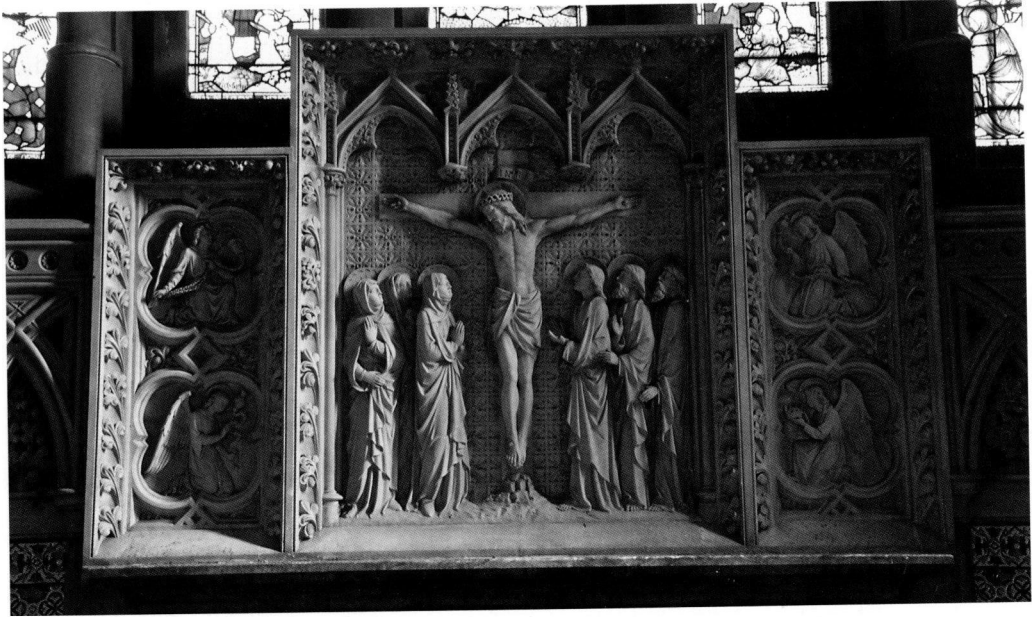


Fig. 14

Llanelli, All Saints Church, the reredos by G. E. Street
Photograph, Martin Crampin

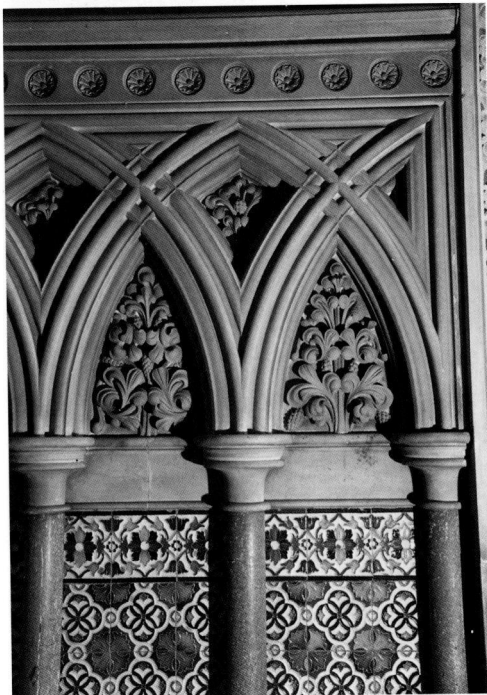


Fig. 15

Llanelli, All Saints Church, the reredos; Street's distinctive 'Spanish' tiles
Photograph, Martin Crampin



Fig. 16

Llanelli, All Saints Church, the font by Street
Photograph, Martin Crampin



Fig. 17

Llanelli, All Saints Church, the font cover by Street
Photograph, Martin Crampin

The story of the chapels shows some way forward. The Glenalla Calvinistic Methodist Chapel of 1909 is now the town's Civic Hall, whilst Zion Baptist Chapel of 1857 is about to reopen as an Arts Centre under the aegis of Trinity, St David (University of Wales), following a substantial injection of funds from the EU Convergence Fund. The magnificent Tabernacle Independent Chapel of 1873 by John Humphrey has received HLF grant aid. Yet Calfaria Baptist Chapel of 1887 and Park Congregational Chapel of 1864 remain derelict, as they have now been for some time.

Soon Llanelli will be drawing conservation plaudits as it reopens the extraordinary Llanelli House of 1714, immediately opposite St Elli, following a multi-million pound programme of repair. It is already being trumpeted as a leading example of Regeneration through Conservation. We hope that the spin-off effects ripple through to the town's significant legacy of places of worship. We shall be encouraging that process.

NOTES

- 1 I. Nairn and N. Pevsner, *Sussex, Buildings of England* (Harmondsworth 1965), 251.
- 2 I am very grateful to Jane Kennedy, Surveyor to the Fabric at Ely, for sight of her paper on the subject, from which all the illustrations (except Fig. 11) are taken.