

The Decoration of Brompton Oratory Church 1928-32

by

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In 1927 Cesare Formilli proposed a scheme of decoration for the church of the London Oratory. The execution of the nave decoration led to misunderstandings and legal proceedings, which were only settled finally in 1939.

The Counter-Reformation Order of Oratorians was set up in Rome in 1612 by St Philip Neri. The first English Oratory was set up in Staffordshire in 1848 by John Henry Newman and Frederick Faber; the next year Newman moved to Birmingham, and Faber to London. After three years in King William Street, the Oratorians moved to Brompton, described by Faber as the 'Madeira of London'. By 1854 they had built a new house and a temporary church, both designed by J.J. Scoles. In 1874 an appeal for funds was launched, and in 1876 a design for a church in the Renaissance style was published in *Building News* by a young architect called Herbert Gribble, who worked in the office of the Catholic architect, Joseph Aloysius Hansom, and was a recent convert of the Fathers. A note stated: 'The architecture adopted ... is the Renaissance - a style for which the congregation have a strong predilection'. It was an obvious choice for a Counter-Reformation Order. In 1878 a competition was held, with Alfred Waterhouse as assessor. No indication was given about costs, a curious circumstance which suggests a certain impracticality such as would later cause so much trouble. In 1878 Gribble was after all declared the winner, and the foundation stone was laid in 1880. The church was consecrated, without dome or façade, in 1884. The façade was added, without its flanking towers, in 1893. Gribble died in 1894. The dome was added in 1895-6, to a design slightly altered by George Sherrin and Edwin Rickards.

Gribble had left detailed watercolour drawings for the decoration of the interior, but little had been executed, and in 1927 it was still comparatively bare (Figs 1, 2). In that year Fr McKee left a legacy for its decoration. Meanwhile, in Rome one of the fathers, Fr Basevi, met Cesare Tito Giuseppe Formilli, who was visiting his wife in hospital. Formilli had recently been appointed a Commendatore della Corona d'Italia. Born in Rome in 1860, he studied both painting and decorative arts. As a painter he was associated with Nino Costa and the 'Etruscan school', and the group 'In Arte Libertas'. He settled

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in London in 1894, and designed interior decoration for grand residences such as Walsingham House (1896) and Rutland House (1906). He was invited down to Cornwall by the Newlyn artists, and painted the interior of a blacksmith's shop with the title, 'Closing the Link'. This was shown at the Royal Academy in 1899, as was 'Reading the Chelsea News ('My Son's Regiment')' in 1903 (now at the Royal Hospital). In 1912 he completed forty-eight mural panels in 'encaustic painting' for the sanctuary of St Anne's Cathedral in Leeds, replaced in 1927-8 with mosaics made in Venice, together with fourteen Stations of the Cross on canvas. In 1915 he provided painted decoration for the Lady Chapel (removed in 1937); in 1920 the War Memorial Chapel; and in 1922 the statue of the Sacred Heart. In 1926 he panelled the Baptistery in marble.

It was suggested to Formilli that he might carry out the decoration at

the Oratory. He was described as being qualified in all the branches of his profession, and also a practical builder and engineer, who personally carried out all his work. When he returned to London he set to, and produced a painting showing his proposals (Fig. 3). Although the Fathers had known nothing of it previously, they were delighted, and the scheme was accepted by the Congregation in October 1927. Formilli supplied 'Notes', in which he explained his ideas. He proposed to use a style 'in perfect unison with the architecture', such as 'would undoubtedly have been adopted by the Architect himself, had he lived long enough'. He referred to St Peter's, the Gesù, S. Ignazio, and the Chiesa



Fig. 1

A design by Herbert Gribble for the decoration of the church (1878).
Watercolour, reproduced in M. Napier and A. Laing, eds., The London Oratory (1984). Neither the baldacchino nor the marble floor was ever executed.

Nuova – all in Rome. As at St Peter's, only mosaic would be used, with 'absolute exclusion of any oil or other perishable method of figure painting'; he was probably thinking of the decay of his Leeds murals. He had a low opinion of the currently fashionable so-called 'opus sectile' (much used by J.F. Bentley): 'pictures executed in an opalescent method on tiles or any other glazed method are most unsuitable and undignified for ecclesiastical work'. Although he realised that a complete marble floor was out of the question, he felt bound to show one. He wrote that the windows were shown 'coloured', but stained glass would not be used, except for a border with a central device. Curiously, though, his watercolour shows figures of saints in stained glass (Fig. 3) The sanctuary should be left till



Fig. 2

An alternative design by Gribble for the decoration. Watercolour, reproduced in C. Napier, *The London Oratory* (1973). Here the floor appears to be tiled.

last. The blue backgrounds of the apse coffering were unhistorical and should be replaced with gold (they are still blue). The large marble panels at the sides of the altar should be decorated with gilded bronze.

In November Formilli presented an estimate and 'agreement'. This was described by Fr Kerr, the Provost, in the rueful 'memorandum' which he wrote later, as 'my or our first blunder', as it was not the sort of legal document a British lawyer would have drawn up. It was especially vague on the matter of paying for extras. It was vetted by the Fathers' lawyers, though they later called it 'impossibly unworkmanlike'. Formilli's total estimate, sent under the title 'Ecclesiastical Marble and Mosaics – Mural decorations of all descriptions/ LONDON ROME/ Studio – 6 Tregunter Road, The Boltons', was £28,000-£31,000. Fr Kerr recorded that in December



By Commendatore C. T. G. Formilli.

DESIGN FOR THE DECORATION OF
THE ORATORY
LONDON, S.W.

Fig. 3
Formilli's design for the decoration (1927).
Print, by courtesy of the Fathers of the Oratory

Congregation unanimously accepted the estimate for £31,000. It included:

Mosaics representing Evangelists under dome; green marble over all existing stucco work of nave up to bottom of first cornice; model and fix 14 original Stations of the Cross in plaster or hard baked clay; model, cast in plaster, and fix 6 groups of Cherubs over centre of arches; model & c 12 allegorical figures representing Virtues in spandrels of 6 arches of nave; paint all stucco work above green marble lining & c; gild all cornices and ornamentation in stucco; provide for 14 mosaic panels at sides of windows of nave – Saints with emblems; also on nave ceiling mosaic panels of flying angels with emblems of Passion; also 4 mosaics in dome spandrels of Evangelists [already mentioned].

Formilli set to work to produce samples of marbles, and cartoons for mosaics, and gave thought to the pulpit.

Fr Kerr wrote that designs for the various parts were to be put to the Community as they came along, and they were mostly exhibited in the house, but the Community did not want to be bothered with endless votes. Fr Denis Shiel warned Kerr that the Community would give no help, and merely acquiesce, but when the work was done they 'will turn on you and rend you'. How right he was. Some votes were taken. For example, when Formilli could not find a 'really bright' green marble for the walls (he had originally suggested *cipollino*), 'a stormy sea green marble' (*verde di mare*) was voted on in March 1928.

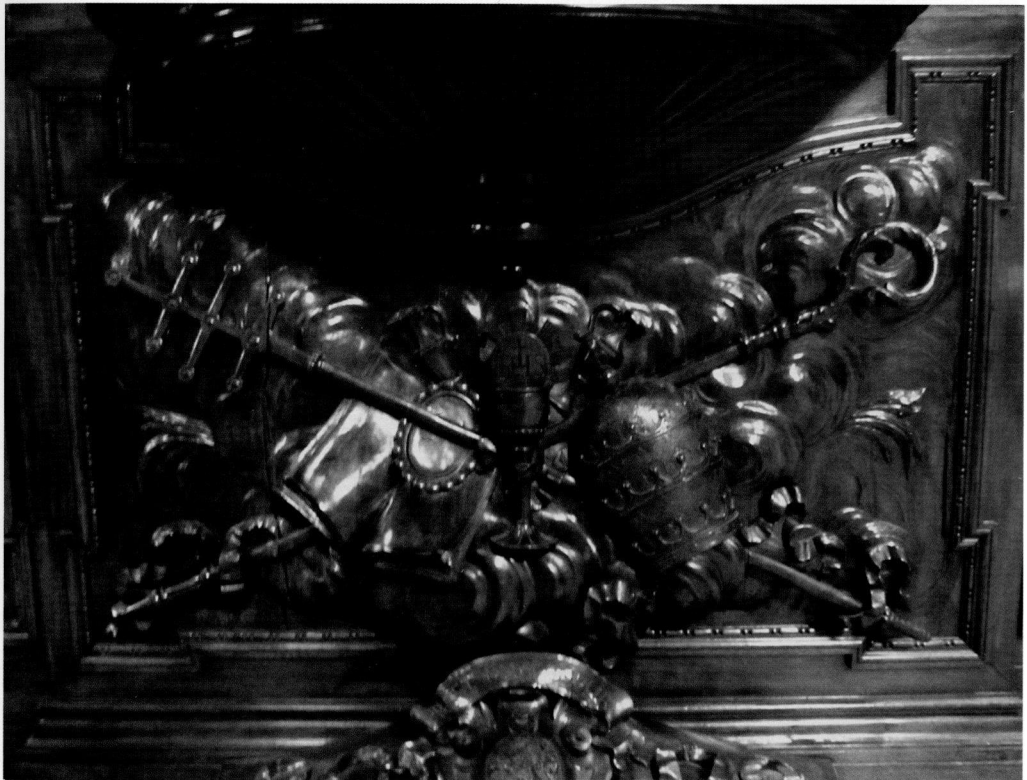


Fig. 4
The pulpit, showing the crack.
Photograph, author



Fig.5
The interior of the church as it is today
Photograph, author

It was also voted that four of the statues of Apostles by Giuseppe Mazzuoli, originally in the Duomo at Siena, should be removed, the niches filled in, and the statues put on the marble brackets which belonged to them. This would appear among the 'extras'.

The first scaffolding was erected in February 1928. It was designed by Formilli, who was contractor as well as artist, and was suspended by steel ropes from skylights or windows, so as not to obstruct the nave. Work began on painting and gilding the bay nearest the altar. Towards the end of 1928, when the sea green marble arrived, Formilli said that he wanted Siena instead. Kerr thought he was right, as the sea green was 'rather sombre', but that he should have realised that earlier. In January 1929 Congregation accepted the Siena, which was also used as lining behind the four Apostles under the dome and the two in the sanctuary. Kerr says that all were surprised when this was charged as an extra. There were constant changes – a little more ornamentation, a little more gilding, and so on. Kerr thought that 'we must give Formilli credit for being carried away by his enthusiasm for his work', and wrote that 'I emphatically do not intend to imply that there was any sort of sharp practice on Formilli's part'. He claimed that what happened was 'rather true to the ways and methods of St Philip', who did not like Talpa's prudence (Fr A. Talpa was one of the first priests at the Oratory in Rome). Furthermore, Formilli 'must have spent very large sums of money over and above the strict terms of the bond, at no charge', two examples being his substitution of a gold background for the mosaics, instead of the cheaper blue shown in his picture, and the filling in of the smaller panels in the ceiling with angels instead of clouds. This must have cost him 'a couple of thousand pounds'. For these he made no charge, and Kerr thought that he probably would not have made large charges for extras if he had not been 'irritated by the lamentably discourteous behaviour of the Community'.

The pulpit was the idea of Fr Talbot, who offered to pay for the 'baldacchino' (£500). Formilli's 'handsome design in carved walnut' was accepted by Congregation in April 1930. It was installed at the end of the year, and was described by Kerr as 'extraordinarily handsome and extraordinarily cheap' at £1,000: an English firm's estimate was nearly four times what the Italians charged. At that time two bays of the nave were complete. Fr Kerr was then taken ill, and had to go away, and it was at the Audit Congregation in January 1931 that 'the first signs of trouble' appeared, some of the Fathers making 'unpleasant speeches'. In May Formilli sent from Venice a bill for extras. It included the marblework for the statues, designing, supplying and fixing four stained glass windows in the nave (later amended to six windows), fixing gilded relief letters for the nave inscription, and four green marble slabs for the donors of the Stations. Kerr claimed that, had it been paid then, they would have saved 'several hundred pounds', as it later grew. Congregation refused to pay until 'a full inquiry' had been made, and this turned into criticism of all involved, but especially Formilli, 'for whom no words were bad enough'. It was claimed that he was deliberately cheating, using shoddy materials and bad workmanship, and making an enormous profit. Kerr, however, while admitting that Formilli was 'casual and un-businesslike', thought he 'put his whole heart into the work'.

The Fathers were particularly incensed about the cracks in the pulpit, only too visible at eye level – as they still are (Fig. 4). Formilli 'airily' said that the defects could easily be remedied, but the Fathers suspected that the whole thing might collapse. Worse, the

ceiling was said to be dangerous. Panic resulted. When Kerr returned in May, he called a General Congregation, which made him feel that he too was being 'impeached': 'I am afraid the Community rather lost its head'. It was then agreed that independent experts should be called in. The lawyers recommended Mr Langhorne. Both he and the distinguished architect, Sir Harold Brakspear, inspected the pulpit. Both condemned the method of construction, the panels being rigidly fixed with no allowance for shrinking. All Formilli had done was to fill in the cracks, which merely emphasised them. The pulpit must be dismantled. Counsel suggested that the Congregation should refuse to pay the bill for its erection, though this might lead to litigation.

In spring 1931 it was rumoured by 'workmen and others' that parts of the decoration of the nave roof were insecure, and Langhorne found that a large piece of plaster came away when touched. He also complained that bronze paint was used instead of gold leaf. In August 1931 Brakspear submitted a report, after a visit with Langhorne, Formilli, Formilli's son and Oswald P. Milne (a pupil of Lutyens). He considered that an architect should have been consulted about the contract. The mosaics, which Langhorne had found 'unlevel', had been made in Italy and fixed in sections. There was no obvious insecurity in the roofs. So far as he could tell, gold leaf was used except in some places where bronze paint emphasised the effect of a moulding. He recommended the appointment of a 'supervising architect', and Ronald Aver Duncan, of Messrs Percy Tubbs and Duncan, was chosen. In December Formilli wrote from Venice that, although he had spent much extra time and money, he would consider making no additional charge, as he did the work for the Church. In January the Congregation accepted the pulpit 'with the repairs lately made'. The Congregation decided that it wanted stained glass in the large window at the west end. Surprisingly, this was not made by Formilli's Italian craftsmen, but by the Leeds firm of Kayll and Reed, who had made glass for Leeds Cathedral.¹

It had been hoped that Duncan might manage to reach agreement with Formilli, but this was a vain hope. There was now a dispute about charges for marble. Duncan thought them excessive, but Formilli refused to produce invoices. Messrs Fenning were called in to value the Oratory marblework. The yellow Siena with very large figures was said to be much more expensive than green; whereas 'ordinary dark Siena of the type used in restaurants' could be found anywhere, Formilli and his son had made special journeys to Italy and Belgium to find out whether more marbles could be obtained. Formilli called in the architect, Sir Frank Baines, who reported in September 1932 that the work was well executed and the prices reasonable. Duncan retorted that Baines was not competent to value marble, and that he preferred to rely on Mr Layton of Fennings, who said that no prices in his catalogue were as high as Formilli's.

In October 1932 Formilli was sent a cheque for £2,976 11s., which he cashed, but that was far from the end of the matter, and he sent a series of complaints. In November he demanded interest, and claimed to have made a big loss when the United Kingdom went off the gold standard. In 1935 he wrote to Fr Munster (then Provost) that he had not sought the work, and would not have agreed to do it unless he could do the whole church. He left all his other work for it. He claimed that Giles Gilbert Scott had been offered £3,000 (he later said £5,000) for his work on an unexecuted scheme for Waterloo Bridge, but the lawyers insisted that it was really for 'the preparation of drawings etc'.²

He pointed out that he had been elected 'Royal Commissioner for the English Exhibition in Rome' (the English section of the International Exhibition of 1911), and said he would put the matter to the English Ambassador to the Holy See, via the Italian Ambassador. In 1936 he contacted the Sacred Rota, and the new Archbishop of Westminster, who thought it best for the matter to be settled by civil law. He also wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Religious, who received a letter from a canon of Velletri Cathedral describing Formilli as 'un cattolico fervente, insigne artista, e gentiluomo perfetto'. In 1939 the case went to the High Court, but it was eventually settled by compromise, the Fathers agreeing to pay Formilli £750. Even so Mr Dent, solicitor to the Fathers, thought this was a 'fraudulent claim'. He had actually been demanding about £5,000. A document in Italian adds that Formilli claimed that he had been asked to decorate the whole church, and it was a blow to his reputation that he did not do it. There were queries about how wealthy he was. It may be added that he did not help his case by claiming that he moved to England because of this commission, when he had lived here for so many years.

The preliminary watercolour which Formilli had produced was reproduced by the Fathers in a print (Fig. 3), but he failed to produce either the original or the second watercolour which he claimed to have prepared to show the decoration of the transepts and dome, and it is not known what became of them. Formilli is known to many for his book, *The Castles of Italy*, published in London in 1933, with illustrations after his watercolours. This is his last known work: he died in London in 1942.

In his memorandum Fr Kerr wrote: 'When passions have died down, it will be, I think, of great interest to look back upon it all'. He admitted that the way things were done was 'arbitrary and high-handed', but there was no other way. He was sure that people would eventually be proud of the work, with which no one had found serious fault (Fig. 5).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. This window was destroyed in the War.
2. This project dated from 1932, but was abandoned, though Scott was again the architect when the project was resurrected in 1934.

