The Morris Reredoses at St. John the Baptist Church, Findon, and The Church of The Blessed Virgin Mary, Clapham, West Sussex

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The William Morris tiled reredoses at Findon and Clapham churches are not only beautiful, but also unique examples of his work. Many churches contain stained glass windows executed by the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. but there is no record of their having produced any other surviving painted tiles for ecclesiastical buildings. (A third reredos, commissioned three years earlier than Findon for St. Peter’s Church, Bournemouth, had to be removed in 1899 as the tiles were disintegrating.) The reredoses in the two churches were part of the restoration and refurbishment carried out by Sir George Gilbert Scott between 1867 and 1874. His eldest son, George Gilbert Scott Jnr., can probably be thanked for their inclusion as he was a great admirer of the firm’s work.¹ A year before the Findon commission, Sir Gilbert Scott had completed restoration work on Chichester Cathedral, after the crossing tower had collapsed. His son had also assisted his father on that project.² It is possible that local enthusiasm for the work in Chichester caused the people of Findon to think about the fabric of their own church, especially since many other churches were being refurbished.

Standing beside Findon Manor House at the end of a private road, the church is Saxon in origin (c.900) and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086.³ Sometime in the twelfth century, a Norman church was built alongside the original building and in the fifteenth century a large roof was erected to span both of these.⁴ Sir Gilbert Scott was commissioned to carry out major repair and reconstruction work in 1867. He did not make many external alterations, as can be seen from the water colour painted by Petrie in 1805.⁵ Rather he was concerned to put the church into a state of good repair. Evidence would suggest that he preserved what he thought was good and removed anything which he thought likely to destroy the medieval design. For example there are notes in the parish records suggesting that he resisted a request to remove the single-spanned roof and return the building to its earlier form of two distinct roofs to the nave and aisle. He wrote: ‘The alteration in the roof was in all probability made early in the 15th century, at a period when Church Architecture was in full vigour, and is carried out in a massive and generous manner, quite in accordance with the principles of the middle ages... It is a very rare and curious arrangement, and one which marks your church...”
with an individual character'. There is also a reference to another letter, from George Gilbert Scott Jnr., saying: 'My father proposes to keep the large roof over the nave and aisle, which is almost unique'. A photograph of the North West corner of the church, dated 1866, shows the porch in a poor state of repair and a small side door, which was removed. It also shows two windows, one being the small rose window, now set high up on the West wall.

There do, however, appear to have been considerable alterations to the internal appearance. H. R. P. Wyatt, a member of a local family who have been great benefactors of the church, writing in 1926 tells us: 'The church was filled with fixed pews, formed, it seems, with high divisions and doors. The pews were of all sizes and shapes, and appeared to have been designed and put in place by the owners quite regardless of what their neighbour’s was like . . . These were also removed.' This is confirmed by correspondence in the parish records. In the address given on St. John the Baptist’s Day 1868, after completion of the work, the Rev. Dr. Cholmeley remarked: 'The noble span of the roof with all its curious and intricate arrangement of ancient beams was concealed by a flat whitewashed ceiling; and the now free and lofty space was further obstructed by two galleries, one over the font and adjoining sittings (erected in 1771), the other in the north west corner of the Church over the pews by the north door. To enter the latter gallery the beautiful west lancet window had been converted into a doorway, and an incongruous excrescence of brick porch and steps added outside the Church'. This can be confirmed by the previously mentioned pictorial evidence in the Parish records. The lancet window is now high on the East wall.

The cost of the restoration was over £2,400. Lady Bath covered much of the expense, although Cholmeley raised money from a variety of sources. Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. supplied only the tiles. Parish records show that Lord Henry Thynne, of nearby Muntham Court and a member of the Bath family, paid for the ‘encaustic tiles within the altar rails’. The stained glass windows added at that time were not provided by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., but were produced by a number of his competitors.

That there was intense competition between designers is illustrated by the following extract from a letter written – very likely about Findon – by Warington Taylor, who was the Firm’s manager and at that time staying in Cuckfield:

Young Scott comes on Wednesday & wants a panorama to go round the east side of a church.
His game is one of the following:
A. To get ideas – then say too much & hand over to Kempe.
B. To go & suggest and be officious with Cathedral and college dignitaries without any proposal of work.

In fact, Charles Eamer Kempe, a local Sussex man and another leading Victorian decorative artist, painted the panels for the wooden reredos which stood between the Morris tiles, suggesting that Taylor’s fears were not without foundation. Sadly, this was removed in 1982 although it was probably part of Scott’s original conception for the church. A photograph taken by Arthur Ockendon, a Findon parishioner, suggests that the angels on the Morris tiles may have been designed
The tiled east wall, with Morris’s magnificent archangels, in the church of The Blessed Virgin Mary, Clapham, West Sussex.

The Four Archangels, Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Uriel, at Clapham.
Photograph by the late Arthur Ockendon showing the wooden reredos which was removed from Findon in 1982.

The Morris tiles at St. John the Baptist, Findon, West Sussex.
to complement Kempe's paintings of the Annunciation on the decorative panel above the altar.

At the time of the restoration Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. were experiencing difficulty with the glaze of their tiles, caused by an excess of borax in the glazing process. The difficulties were such that Warington Taylor appears later to have been reluctant to carry out the commission. In another letter he wrote: 'About this Findon tile reredos – we cannot do it – see this is settled at once. Must write Lady Bath saying circumstances have compelled us to discontinue the manufacture'. However, the commission was completed and the beautiful Findon reredos put in place. Although the tiles show some evidence of discoloration and fading, they have not suffered the flaking and disintegration which led to the removal of the tiles at Bournemouth.

The reredos consists of two tiled panels, one on either side of the south aisle altar. Both panels have three Minstrel Angels each, almost a metre high, with faces turned towards the altar. William Morris designed a series of twelve such figures; they were used many times, on tiles and for stained glass. Sometimes they were reversed, and for secular commissions their wings were omitted. The Minstrel Angels bear the unmistakable William Morris stamp: the strength of line, the feeling of depth, the grace and movement and the layers of intricate pattern. Jane Morris – the artist's wife – was the model for much of this work. Of the six Angels, four wear garlands of flowers in their hair; they all have graceful swan-like wings and carry musical instruments; all but one have bare feet peeping from beneath their robes – the remaining one has red flowered slippers. The colouring is delicate, predominantly gold and green but with pale blue on the robes and carpet of flowers at their feet. Delicate traceries of typical Morris design are on their robes and fineries, contributing to the overall flow and movement. From left to right the Angels carry the following instruments: a long flared pipe, a dulcimer, a harp, a second long flared pipe, an organ with pipes and a second harp. Whilst only the heads, hands and feet of these figures actually appear, we are made to feel that these Angels have bodies. The background, which is lush, consists of six trees, one of which bears lemons, while the fruit of the others are the Morris favourite – pomegranates. Beneath the feet of the Angels is a profusion of flowers: fritillaries, buttercups, anemones, daisies and a foxglove. Below the Angels are four rows of six-inch tiles with designs known as 'Findon Buttercup' and 'Findon Daisy'. Findon church is very light and airy, almost certainly thanks to the restoration by Gilbert Scott. More recent alterations to the floor and pews in 1994 are in the spirit of a post-'Arts and Crafts' era and also contribute to this atmosphere.

High on the Downs two miles to the west of Findon church, at the end of an unmade road, stands the tiny Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the edge of Clapham village. The list of rectors is continuous from 1257 and inside the church, in the North aisle, rests a gravestone which has been dated to no later than the twelfth century. There are also fine sixteenth century commemorative brasses to the local Shelley family from the nearby Michelgrove estate. In contrast to Findon church, the interior of Clapham church is much darker and has not had the benefit of recent refurbishment. Sir Gilbert Scott carried out the restoration work in 1873-74, seven years after the work at Findon. In his determination to leave the building in a condition sympathetic with its original medieval architecture, Scott
removed the early eighteenth century windows which, whilst giving the interior of
the building more light, had spoiled the purity of the original design. Although the
church guide suggests considerable internal and external alterations, little evidence
is available in the diocesan archives. Most importantly the magnificent tiling at
Clapham was commissioned from Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., presumably
as a result of local appreciation of the tiles at Findon. As with Findon, the designs
are by William Morris alone and they appear elsewhere only as stained glass
windows.\textsuperscript{15}

The tiles at Clapham benefitted from being produced at a time when the firm
had conquered the technical problems in glazing the hand-painted tiles and
therefore their original colouring is better preserved. Large rusty hooks above them
bear witness to the fact that they have almost certainly spent several years covered
by curtains, which may well have helped their preservation. Although the figures,
being placed immediately above the altar, are not as tall as the Findon tiles, they
shine with authority. The Morris tiling extends across the full width of the chancel.
In the centre, above the altar, is the main painted panel depicting four archangels
– Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Uriel – the four best known in Christian and
Jewish literature. Six-inch tiles have been used and the panel is six rows high by
fifteen rows wide. On either side to floor level are alternating rows of tiles showing
grapes, leaves and tendrils: this design has become known as the ‘Clapham Vine’.
Although the tiles show some irregularity and imperfections, they still complement
the strength and perfection of the archangels.

As with the tiles at Findon, the background of this reredos is in keeping with
the atmosphere of the building. The colouring is sombre and rich: there are two
orange trees and one lemon tree, two willow trees, three white rose bushes, and
two white grape vines. Grass with tiny white flowers like wood anemones lies
beneath the feet of the archangels. The fruit and flowers have a raised effect resulting
from a thick application of enamel. On the left of the panel stands Gabriel; he is
dressed in a surplus and cope. The designs on the cope are both ecclesiastical and
also typically Morrisian. The figure has feathered wings and carries a large white
lily, symbolizing Mary’s Annunciation. The border of the cope and the lily are
heavily embossed with paint. Next to Gabriel is Michael in a suit of medieval­
inspired armour. His wings are painted like the ‘eyes’ of peacock feathers. He
carries a spear. In his hair is a cross. This cross, the tip of the spear and the flower
embellishments on his armour are embossed.\textsuperscript{16} Next is Raphael, looking slightly
to one side (with swan-like wings), carrying a stave and wearing a surplice and
cope. The cope is rich in Morris designs and its golden border, clasp and collar
are embossed. Last, on the right of the panel, stands Uriel carrying an elaborate
sceptre and an open Bible. His surplice reveals his ankles; his cope forms a train
behind him. This too has an elaborate leaf pattern and an embossed border. The
sceptre and the illuminated lettering in the Bible are also thick with enamel. Looking
at the reredos in natural light as the sun sets, the raised and embossed areas of the
reredos have a wonderful luminosity. Their pale colours shine out through the
dusky light.

William Morris wanted to revolutionise Victorian artistic taste, which he
believed had become debased. He passionately wanted ordinary people to enjoy
the beauty of his designs. Ironically, during his lifetime only the wealthy could
afford to commission his work. Where more appropriate, then, could his painted tiles be sited than in two small rural churches attended by local country people. That Sir Gilbert Scott – or more probably his son – included these fine painted tiles when restoring and conserving these two Sussex churches should be a matter for our considerable celebration.

NOTES

1 Possibly both restorations were delegated to George Gilbert Scott by his father, as he trusted his eldest son. George Gilbert Scott involved Morris at Cheddleton in Staffordshire, his first important job, in 1864. He also employed the firm at Peterhouse, Cambridge, which he restored in 1868-70. Martin Harrison believes that when a Scott restoration involves work by Morris it is sure to be because of George Gilbert Scott. It is also believed that George Gilbert Scott designed the 'Indian' wallpaper produced by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1868. See Lesley Hoskins, 'Wallpaper', in William Morris, Linda Parry (ed.), (London: Philip Wilson 1996), p. 207.


5 Painting by Petrie, 'Findon' (1805), Michelham Priory, Sharpe Collection, No. 134.

6 'Parish Records for Findon', West Sussex County Council and Diocesan Records Office, Chichester, Par. 84/4/1.


11 The reredos is now at St. Mary’s House, Bramber, West Sussex.

12 For details of the index for these see William Morris Tiles, op. cit., p. 75.

13 ibid., p. 74.

14 The Church of the Blessed Virgin at Clapham (church guide).

15 A. Charles Sewter, The Stained Glass of William Morris and his Circle, (Yale: Yale University Press 1974): St. Mary’s, Kings Walden, Hertfordshire (1869) and St. Mary’s, Bloxham, Oxfordshire (1869).

16 George Wardle, ‘Portfolio of drawings’, National Art Library, E.1400-1411-1933. This figure at Clapham reflects a drawing, made for Morris, copied from a rood screen in St. Michael’s Church, Barton Turf, Norfolk, c.1430.

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