

***The Organ, The Painting &
The Panels of St James
Church Bermondsey***





The Painting of the Ascension

In 1839 John Harcourt, one of the founders of our Church, died. In his will he left "£500 for a painting of the Ascension to be placed over the Communion Table of St James' ". His Executors decided to make this a prize competition, and advertised in the Times inviting artists to send in sketches, and promising the commission to the painter of the sketch selected:

***"TO ARTISTS.-** The TRUSTEES of ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, BERMONDSEY, SURREY, desire to make public that a Legacy of £500 has been bequeathed by the late John Harcourt, Esq., for the purchase of an appropriate SCRIPTURE PAINTING to be placed in the recess over the Communion Table of that Church; and no appropriate painting having been found, the Trustees are prepared to receive finished sketches of a Painting from Artists who may be disposed to prepare them, upon the understanding that the Artist whose production is selected would be engaged to paint a Picture, and be paid the said Legacy of £500, provided (as required by the Testator) that two persons of competent judgment and knowledge shall pronounce it to be of that value.*

The sketch is to be 36 inches in height

by 17 inches in width. The Subject is to be the ASCENSION OF OUR SAVIOUR. The painting to have a frame to be provided by the Trustees and with such frame to be of the following size- viz. 11 feet in width by 23 feet in height.

The sketches to be sent without the name of the artist but with some motto or initials, for the inspection of the Trustees, at the Committee room of the Workhouse, in Russell Street, by Wednesday the 4th of December next."

Seventy-three sketches were submitted, and exhibited in the Leather Market, and Eastlake, President of the Royal Academy and Hayden of the Academy, were asked to judge. All were anonymous, but after the decision was made, it was found that fifteen of the competitors had been Royal Academicians, including Etty, the greatest artist of the day, Herbert, who painted the frescoes in the Houses of Parliament and Howard, Professor of Painting., but the sketch chosen proved to be by John Wood, a quite unknown artist, and the newspaper critics who attended for the exhibition, agreed with the judges' choice.

By March 1846 the picture - 23 feet high and 11 feet wide - was complete and in position. The Times praised it highly, saying it "should satisfy the eye of the critic and the feelings of the Christian."

The Picture was beautifully restored in time for the Thanksgiving Service for the restoration of the building on 2nd May, 1971, by Mrs Wysocka, a Polish artist, with advice from the Whitechapel Art Gallery.



The Organ built by J.C. Bishop was described in 'Grove's Dictionary of Music' as the most complete GG pedal Organ ever made, both as to compass and stops. It was opened on April 23rd 1829 with a stupendous Sacred Concert. The Three best known Organists in London sat side by side on the organ stool, playing Bach's Fugues as a trio.

To cope with the new large building, the organ builders of the 1820's built larger instruments than had been usual in the 18th century, and chose to emphasise the deeper tones by providing a small pedal board (until then a rarity in England) and large scaled wooden pipes to provide a grand effect.

Bishop's Organ at St James had at the time the largest number of Pedal pipes (75) in the south of England. The pedal pipes could be played from either the pedals or a small manual keyboard to the left of the manuals. At the time such an arrangement was not unique, but it is

now generally held to be the sole survivor. Other unusual features were the arrangement of the swell box which sends the sound upwards along the ceiling and the twin bellows, one solely for the pedal organ.

Bishops carried out modernization work in the 1880s but left almost all the original features of 1828-9 untouched. The small keyboard for playing the pedals by hand was disconnected, but carefully left in place for future use. For 50 years or so the organ lay partly dismantled with much of the original parts strewn around the hidden parts of the west end. In the 1960s and 1970s Maurice Merrell of Bishops and John Bowles led a restoration project culminating in the re-opening of the great organ with a recital given on 3rd September 1975.

Then in 2000/2001 the Heritage Lottery Fund gave grants for the total rebuilding of the whole organ as much as possible to the 1829 specification. The work was carried out by Goetze and Gwynn, who remain involved with ongoing maintenance.

The organ is a wonderful survival, and will illuminate a period of music when church music was becoming more elaborate, classical forms were being expanded for greater expressive content, and the music of J.S.Bach explored for the first time in Great Britain.

The Scriptural Panels



Over time, the bible texts inscribed on the west front of St James had gradually weathered away, and could now barely be read.

It was clear, however, there were two sets of texts. An earlier version was painted over by a replacement version at some point in the long history of St James.

The earlier version read '*We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord*' from 2 Corinthians 4.5 and '*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*' from 1 Timothy 1.15

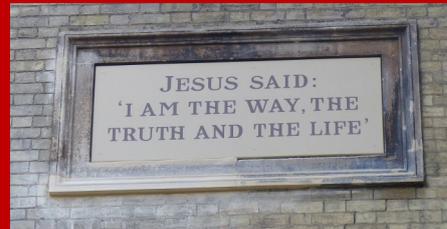
These were subsequently replaced by '*One Lord, our faith, one baptism*' and '*One God and Father of us all*' from Ephesians 4.5-6.

The stonework repairs which took place

in 2018 provided the opportunity to restore the Scriptural Panels with new texts inscribed on boards, preserving the original texts underneath.

The aim was to communicate the faith in a less biblically literate world, where the Scriptural origin of the texts might not be immediately obvious. In the new version, this was made explicit by the addition of the words 'Jesus said.'

The first text proclaims who Jesus is: the way the truth and the life: (John 14.6)



The second text proclaims his offer to bring rest to everyone who comes to him (Matthew 11.28):



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