

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 23: THE ARCHITECTS OF THE NEW CHURCH

While the New Church may be unlikely to become a regular stop on Britain's heritage trail, its architects were of the first rank. We will, in the next few episodes, be looking in some detail at the design and building of the New Church but, before doing so, I thought it was worth providing a little background on the two main architects.

The New Church nave was designed by Sir John Ninian Comper, described by The Comper Trust as:

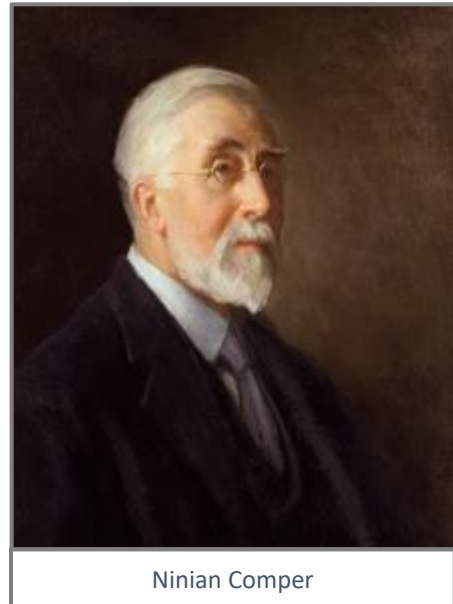
“one of the major church architects of the 20th Century, if not the greatest. He marries the many ecclesiastical styles down the ages with a very modern and accessible approach to the importance of the liturgy, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament (the practice of which Comper was influential in making practically possible) and the teachings of the Gospel, all of which lead us to the numinous - or put another way encompassing the spiritual, indicating the presence of divinity or simply awe-inspiring.”

Ninian Comper was born in Aberdeen in June 1864. His father was a leader of the later Anglo-Catholic phase of the Oxford Movement in Scotland, and his godfather was the liturgist and hymn-writer John Mason Neale (perhaps his best-known hymn is *Good King Wenceslas*). Late nineteenth century Anglo-Catholicism - with its tradition of enriched liturgy, altar lights, vestments, the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, the eastward position and mixed chalice - was therefore the natural religion for Comper to express himself within when he decided to pursue a career as a church architect.

With the exception of the Welsh War Memorial in Cardiff, all Comper's work was ecclesiastical. His first independent building was a chapel - known today as "the Comper Aisle" - added to his father's church of St Margaret of Scotland, Aberdeen in 1889. Over the course of seventy years, he was the architect responsible for fifteen churches, but he also restored and decorated scores of others; and he designed vestments, banners and windows in places as far apart as China, North America, France, India, and South Africa. The bulk of his work, some five hundred commissions, was undertaken in the field of church furnishings.

Comper had two distinct styles: Beauty by Exclusion (1889-1906) using a single style - usually Late Gothic revival - throughout the church, as seen in St Cyprian's in Clarence Gate in London; and Beauty by Inclusion (1906 onwards), a marrying of a variety of styles into a perfect and practical whole, as seen at St. Mary's Wellingborough (where a perpendicular nave, middle-gothic side chapel, Spanish screens, and classical baldachino combine brilliantly in one harmonious riot of colour and gilding). It is worth noting that Comper's change in style coincided with his design of our New Church, although it might be pushing it a bit to say that Holy Trinity represents the apogee of his Gothic revival style!

Comper believed that a church should exist "as a roof over an altar". Believing this, he built from the altar outwards, personally designing every detail of the furnishings, even down to the candlesticks, which had to fit in with his design. While bitterly opposed to 'modernism', he nevertheless anticipated by many years the changes that were to come: for example, his use of free-standing



Ninian Comper



Ninian Comper's ashes in Westminster Abbey

right of the window). His rather unusual choice of signature is linked with his high regard for his father, who demonstrated his great devotion to the poor in many practical ways. Fr John Comper died suddenly in the Duthie Park in Aberdeen, on the banks of the River Dee, while giving strawberries to poor children.

The architect of the New Church chancel, Frederick Charles Eden, was almost equally eminent. He specialised in restoring churches to an ornate style and designed only two churches from scratch - St George the Martyr at Wash Common, Newbury, and St John's Harpenden. Like Comper, he sought to introduce a more imaginative version of neo-medievalism, and was happy to mix medieval, classical and even baroque concepts in his designs.

Eden is especially associated with the restoring of Cornish churches. Simon Jenkins, in his book "England's Thousand Best Churches", delights in Eden's re-creation of a pre-Reformation interior at Blisland, on the western side of Bodmin Moor; Jenkins comments that churches like Blisland "come as close as any English church to recreating a sense of pre-Reformation colour and busyness, with crowded altars, chapels and screens". Jenkins also remarks of Eden's work at St Mary's Elham in Kent that it is "not a restoration but a recreation of a Gothic interior by a scholar with a feel for the past".

All in all, there's room for a little smug satisfaction in our choice of architects! Over the next few episodes we will look more closely at their work at Holy Trinity.

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 24: "THE NEW CHURCH".

- Be taken back to the time when seating for 170 was insufficient for the needs of Holy Trinity.
 - Find out how much it cost to extend the church capacity to 370.
 - And what didn't we build?

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altars, of pure white interiors and strong clear colours, especially the typical Comper rose and green, and the combination of gilding, blue, and white. Sir John Betjeman – who adored Comper's work - said of him in 1948: "His ecclesiastical tastes are rococo as well as his architectural ones; he is perfectly satisfied so long as gold leaf is heaped on everywhere."

Ninian Comper was knighted in 1950. He died on 22 December 1960, and his ashes were buried beneath windows designed by him in Westminster Abbey.

His unique signature of the strawberry can be seen at Holy Trinity in the wonderful memorial window to the son of Canon J. N. Philpott in the north wall of the New Church (in its customary place at the bottom



Comper's signature strawberry on stained glass at Holy Trinity