

## **L. Oppenheimer Ltd and the Mosaics of Eric Newton**

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The firm of Ludwig Oppenheimer Ltd, Blackburn Street, Old Trafford, Manchester was established in 1865 and ceased business in 1965. During those one hundred years they produced a vast quantity of mosaic schemes, many of which have managed to survive the passage of time. However, the Church of St Augustine in Manchester, which had a large apse mosaic, was a casualty of the blitz in 1940 and most certainly there were others. The firm was fortunate to have as its foremost designers both Ludwig's eldest son, Lehmann and then Lehmann's son Eric, who later changed his name to Newton.

I first knew of Eric Newton in the late 1960s by way of the numerous books he had written on art, many of them published as Pelicans, but only became aware of him as a mosaic artist in 2002 when I received a letter from Marianne Dickinson, a parishioner of the church of St John the Baptist in Rochdale, who was trying to find out about the mosaics in her church and how they were made. Since then, I have been in contact with Eric Newton's granddaughter, who now lives in Canada, and others who are interested in Oppenheimers and the work they produced.

Eric Newton worked as a designer for the company during 1913-14 and from 1918 until 1933, although a few works were later than this. The large apse mosaic in the Royal Naval Hospital School at Holbrook in Suffolk was commissioned by the Admiralty and finished in 1937. There is a photograph of him working on this mosaic with another craftsman from the company. Many Oppenheimer mosaics are described as being by Italian craftsmen so presumably the company employed Italians trained in Venice, Ravenna or Spilimbergo.

The firm of Ludwig Oppenheimer was founded in Manchester in 1865 and operated until 1965. Ludwig Oppenheimer was born in 1830 in Brunswick in Germany. His family were merchant bankers in Hanover and he was sent to Manchester to improve his English. He lodged with a Scottish couple and fell in love with their niece, Susan, who was from Montrose. He was an orthodox Jew but converted to Christianity and his family cut their ties with him. He spent a year in Venice studying mosaics as an apprentice. On his return to England he married Susan and started the mosaic workshop.

They had six sons, five of whom eventually worked for the firm. The eldest, Lehmann, was born in 1869 and went to art school and won a scholarship for a year's study in Florence. On his return he married a fellow student, Edith Newton, in 1892. He worked in his father's firm from a boy and was the main designer. On his father's death in 1900 he took over the firm and ran it with his brothers. He exhibited paintings at the Royal Academy in 1906 and 1907 and, according to his daughter, would have loved to concentrate solely on his painting. His passion was mountaineering and he wrote a book in 1908, which is still in print and considered to be a classic. His younger brothers Louis, Albert and William all worked in the business. They travelled in Europe and Ireland seeking and gaining commissions, including many important projects. Another brother, Charles, followed Lehmann to art school and studied under Walter Crane at the Manchester College of Art. He also

designed mosaics for the firm, but painting became his career and he exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and eventually moved to Kirkcudbright. His works can be found in many galleries in Scotland, England and abroad.

Their brochure of 1905 illustrates some of the commissions that the firm carried out in the last quarter of the nineteenth century including the floor of the Grande Palais des Beaux Arts, Paris; the Cathedral of Notre Dame de la Treille in Lille; the floors of the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin; and many churches and cathedrals throughout Ireland. The cathedral in Lille was one of their most prestigious commissions. The ring of apsidal chapels has walls and floors in mosaic and some of the altars have inlaid mosaic. The most elaborate of these is the one in the chapel of St Anne. Thomas Newnham Deane and his son built the National Museum of Ireland. It opened its doors to the public in 1890. The Oppenheimer floors of the museum have a variety of classical and mythological themes; in the Rotunda it is the signs of the zodiac. The images follow the Roman pattern of using black and white mosaic almost like drawing. The figure of Aquarius is particularly fine and incorporates many classical motifs including a foreshortened view of a scallop shell beneath his feet into which water from a dolphin's mouth is falling. The dolphin encircles his seated figure.

In Ireland their main church work was done in conjunction with the architect George Ashlin. Between 1856 and 1860 he was articled to E. W. Pugin, whose sister Mary he married in 1860. In 1859 Pugin received a commission to build the church of SS Peter and Paul in Cork and he made Ashlin a partner with responsibility for their work in Ireland, a position he retained until 1870. Their most outstanding commission was for the building of Cork Cathedral. After the partnership broke up in 1870 George Ashlin practised on his own. Many of the churches he built have mosaic by Oppenheimers.

In Cork Cathedral their work was on the floors of the chapels and the sanctuary and on two shrines. The ceramic mosaics in the aisles, transepts, baptistery and porches were by Edwards of Ruabon. The floor of the sanctuary was the subject of recent controversy. It was going to be destroyed with other floors in the reordering of the cathedral proposed by the present Bishop. The case has been the subject of an enormous amount of interest in Ireland and the Friends of St Colman's Cathedral have been recently successful in their appeal to the Irish Planning Board to halt the reordering.

The sheer scale of work on the cathedral of St Patrick in Armagh is quite breathtaking. The walls of the nave and transepts, the spandrels of the crossing, the baptistery and the tower, and the floors throughout are all covered in mosaic although some of the floors have been casualties in the reordering of the cathedral. Two other cathedrals, those of Dundalk and Newry, have mosaics by Oppenheimers as well as over twenty-five Irish churches. The floors of Newry Cathedral and others show the use of Celtic scrollwork in Lehmann's designs.

The culmination of more than forty year's work in Ireland came with the Honan Chapel of the University of Cork. This repository of the Irish Arts and Crafts movement is full of wonderful things - none more so than the mosaic floors. Deanes were the builders and again used Oppenheimers for the floors. Building work started in 1914. As Eric Newton joined his father in the firm in 1913 it seems likely

that they worked together on translating their ideas and designs into mosaic. Oppenheimers also made the opus sectile Stations of the Cross. Their work on the Honan Chapel was never acknowledged by Sir John Robert O'Connell, administrator of the Honan family bequest and prime mover of the design of the church, in his 1916 guidebook to the chapel. They were the only non-Irish firm employed in a project that O'Connell wanted to be by local firms, using local materials.

The west end again uses the zodiac as a starting point with a sun surrounded by the constellations in the heavens. The surrounding patterns rely heavily on the Irish illuminated manuscripts. A River of Life, full of fish, flows down the aisle from a strange head of the river mouth at the start to the writhing sea creature in the chancel step mosaic. Animals, including a stag drinking from the river and birds flying in the sky, surround it. The words of the Psalms are in beautiful Irish script. Among the birds, which include geese, a stork and a striking parrot, the peacock and the pelican both have significance in Christian mosaics and they are magnificent images, both highly decorative yet recognisable. This mosaic is followed by the one in the chancel in front of the altar. It depicts an image of the world surrounded by symbols of creation and encircled by the words of the psalm. The chapel was finished and dedicated in 1916 – a symbolic year for Ireland - by which time the First World War was into its second year.

In 1914, when war broke out, Lehmann and his family were on the Isle of Arran on a climbing and sketching holiday. Without passports and with a German name they had difficulty in leaving the island. They arrived home to find that the mosaic factory had been stoned and the windows smashed. Eric decided to enlist straight away and was accepted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment and fought at Paschendale and on the Somme. According to his sister he hated violence and discipline. The sight of blood made him feel sick and patriotism was not a term that filled him with awe. On the other hand, Lehmann was extremely patriotic and longed to join up. He was, however, at forty-six, eleven years older than the age of enlistment; also his wife was a Quaker and he had a daughter and a business to run. His wife told him he must follow his conscience and in 1915 he joined the Artist's Rifles. In the following year he was gassed on Vimy Ridge. On receiving the news his wife and daughter crossed to France and nursed him for the week it took him to die. During this time a cable arrived from his brother Louis to ask his permission to sell the business. Lehmann was too exhausted to make a decision and indicated that Louis must decide what was best. On their arrival home they found that Louis had, indeed, sold the business, but at a very small amount to his brother Albert. This caused some bitterness as the firm was based on Lehmann's gifts as a designer and Eric should have inherited a major portion.

The First World War is commemorated in a chapel at the church of SS Peter and Paul in Bolton. The parish priest, Reverend Father William Leighton, had been a chaplain in the war and had won a Military Cross. The chapel is dedicated to his memory and was consecrated in 1932. In 1918 Eric returned to the family business and had changed his name by deed poll to his mother's maiden name of Newton. So these designs are presumably his – maybe using panels already in the design book of the company. One wall has an Annunciation and the other a Crucifixion. Certainly

neither of these panels has the strong design element he developed and used in later mosaics, but the overall decoration surrounding them is quite impressive, as it is in the apse mosaics in the Dominican Convent in Cabra on the outskirts of Dublin. In the lower panels gold mosaic surrounds the images of the passion of Christ. The mosaic in the semi-dome is powerful with the gold nimbus around the image of the Christ child and above a Michelangelo-inspired God the Father.

In the early 1920s he began to write art criticism and deputised for the regular critics on the Manchester Guardian until 1930 when he was appointed a regular critic. The first of his books was published in 1935 and he pursued a career of art historian, lecturer, writer and broadcaster, as well as painting and drawing. In 1934 he married Stella Mary Pearce who became a costume consultant at the National Gallery and they moved to London. Their house in London has a step with a mosaic by him making a play with words on his surname. The move to London followed his break with the firm of Oppenheimer in 1933.

Before that, however, there are several churches that have mosaics that are undoubtedly designed by Eric Newton. The Church of St Joseph in Heywood, Lancashire, has mosaics that span the period from when it was built in 1914 until the 1960s. The four large panels, two each side of the altar, are opus sectile and they and the panels of mosaic set into the floor of the sanctuary and at the entrances to the chapels appear to be the earliest work. The mosaic in the semi-dome seems later and has a much stronger design element, like the one at Cabra. It shows a real knowledge and understanding of Byzantine and later Christian mosaics. The mosaic is lit from above and the pale blue dove almost appears spotlighted. A rainbow surrounds the central panel of Christ crowning his mother. St Joseph and St John the Evangelist stand either side on islands surrounded by water, beautifully stylised, and set against the shining Venetian gold of the rest of the dome. The entrance to the church contains another portrait of St Joseph, which looks to be a much later work – perhaps of the 1960s. The figure composition shows none of Eric or Lehmann's mastery and is very awkwardly drawn compared, say, to the figure of St Joseph that Eric Newton did for Hillsborough in the 1930s.

The Church of Our Lady and St John, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester was built in 1927. The whole of the chancel arch is covered in mosaic. The iconography is the same as that of St Joseph's, Heywood, except that Mary is already crowned and an angel orchestra surrounds the circle enclosing the figures, their wings in colours that could have come from a Fra Angelico painting. St Joseph and St John are again on either side surrounded by scroll-like foliage picked out in gold. Below them, what appears from the back of the church to be stonework or fresco turns out to be mosaic, subtly coloured, when one gets close to it. On entering the chancel one is confronted by two mosaics – one on either wall – both with imagery from the Book of Revelations. The mosaic covers the whole wall and around the windows surrounding the two figured panels, which have black as the main background colour. The subject on the one on the left illustrates the passage starting:

'I, John was in Patmos and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.'

The one on the right the passage:

'... a throne was set in heaven, and one sat upon the throne. And there was a rainbow around the throne...'

it then refers to the Book of the Seven Seals, the lamb with seven horns and:

'... lo, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became as black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars fell unto the earth.'

The subject of these two panels frees Eric Newton from standard imagery and he is able to use all the skills that he had acquired from working with his father from an early age and from his study of art and travels abroad.

The church of St John the Baptist, Rochdale, was built in 1923-5 and between 1930 and 1933 a brilliant mosaic scheme by Eric Newton was installed. The central image is of Christ the King while on each side are two scenes from the life of St John the Baptist – the Baptism of Christ and the Beheading of John. The lower level is richly patterned with images of four saints, Henry of Germany, St Bridget, St Catherine of Sienna and the Venerable Bede, two on each side and magnificent pairs of peacocks. Higher up, the imagery is of the Day of Judgement, one side the blessed being received by St Peter and on the other the damned being consigned to Hell. The latter has a wonderful Blake-inspired image of a black and green Satan presiding over the condemned souls. High above, in the centre of the arch are two angels proclaiming the Day of Judgement, surrounded by jagged imagery suggesting the cataclysmic ending of the world. This mosaic scheme, I believe, shows Eric Newton at the height of his powers.

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Hillsborough in Sheffield was built in 1936 and the imagery of the mosaics was done in conjunction with Canon Dunsfold, the parish priest. The main scheme above the altar is of the Sacred Heart with a supporting angel on either side. He stands on a rock from which water flows. On either side are deer drinking from the stream. Unfortunately, the image loses some of its power by being surrounded by so much brick. On either side are smaller panels of Mary and Joseph above their respective chapels. It was intended that the wall of each chapel above the altar was to have a mosaic and although this was discussed and Eric Newton made drawings in 1945, the Canon died before seeing and approving the designs. So the project was abandoned. As part of the Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1961 the project was resurrected and the chapels were mosaiced. The Lady Chapel mainly in blue decorated with Marian symbols and the Chapel of St Joseph mainly in red. This design seems to be so much of its 1960s period that I think new designs might have been drawn up for this project.

A generous gift of land in Holbrook in Suffolk to the Admiralty enabled them to move the Royal Naval Hospital School from Greenwich to the new site. They commissioned, for the chapel, a mosaic and marble scheme from Eric Newton. It fills the whole apse behind the high altar and makes a great impression as you enter the chapel. The main mosaic fills the apse above an altar and its subject is the Nativity of Christ. When I made a visit there in 2002 the Bursar told me that there was a story about Eric Newton being very particular about the materials used in this mosaic and that the angel's wings contained lapis lazuli – they are certainly a very intense blue. There is a central tree with roosting birds, it stands on a rock from which a leopard and a black, hooped creature emerge from one side with a squirrel on the rock and a lion and a deer from the other with a rabbit on the rock. Above this are the central

figures of the Holy Family in the stable with the Three Kings on one side and the Shepherds on the other. Palm trees flank these and the background of gold has the biblical inscription referring to the events depicted. Below the main mosaic are four smaller panels, the Annunciation; the Visitation; the Flight into Egypt; and Christ in his father's carpenter's shop - craftsmen at work - a subject that would have appealed strongly to the artist. The decorative motifs and patterning inlaid in the marble below the mosaics is based on that used in Monreale Cathedral in Sicily. Above the altar and below the main mosaic is a wonderful Madonna and Child inlaid into the marble and surrounded by strips of patterning highlighted in gold. Along the side walls are four angels carrying attributes of Mary - a Tower for Chastity; a lily; the Rose of Sharon; and the Star of the Sea. The latter is most appropriate in this building commissioned by the Admiralty.

There are other churches that have recorded mosaics by Oppenheimers (some in the period which makes it likely they were designed by Eric Newton) I have not yet visited, so this is by no means a complete survey of the mosaics he created and executed. In the absence of an archive of the firm one is reliant on other sources of reference. However, the output of the firm seems to have been of a consistently high quality during the whole period of its existence.

Oppenheimers continued manufacturing mosaics until 1965 when they ceased business. The mosaic outside the Merrion Market in Leeds must be one of the last made by them. It was commissioned in 1964, made in 1965 and installed on site by a Leeds firm. The owner of the site wanted the outside of the building to be brightened up and commissioned the mosaic from the then Head of Leeds College of Art, Eric Taylor. Before starting on the commission he gained a Leverhulme Research Award to travel to Italy to study mosaic design in relation to current painting and art in Northern Italy. He also visited mosaic manufacturers and suppliers and the schools in Ravenna, Milan, Spilimbergo and Venice. The design was his and illustrates the produce that was being sold in the market, cereals, flowers, fish, poultry and meat - the latter in its live state - at the time it was built. It is signed at the bottom corner of one of the panels among the fish swimming in a river. Oppenheimers translated his designs into mosaic and fixed them on to paper panels. He records that the work was carried out by:

'Mr Finlayson with female assistants laying out large areas on the studio floor. I visited the studio several times to adjust drawing and colours but the interpretation on my painting was excellent. A greater use of good Italian Mosaic material would however have given a better result.'

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Material used in the preparation of this paper

1) *Full Circle* by Ethel Knoblich, unpublished autobiography of Eric Newton's

younger sister.

2) 1905 brochure of Ludwig Oppenheimer Ltd.

3) *Mosaic for Church Decoration*, 1920s publicity booklet produced by Oppenheimers.

4) Teehan, V. and Heckett, E. W. (eds) (2004) *The Honan Chapel – A Golden Vision*.  
Cork University Press.