

Patronage and Politics in a Leeds Parish - the story of the Brangwyn Mosaics in St. Aidan's Church, Harehills

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When Penguin Books produced the second edition of Pevsner's *Buildings of the West Riding* in 1967, they chose for its dust jacket illustration not some familiar ikon of West Yorkshire such as Leeds Town Hall, but a detail of Frank Brangwyn's mosaic cycle at St. Aidan's. For many including even those living in the Leeds, this was an unexpected discovery. In the post-war years, Brangwyn was largely a forgotten figure, St. Aidan's Church itself was situated in a run-down part of the city and the building, like so many of today's churches, remained locked except for Sunday services. To many eyes, the romanesque exterior of the red brick church appears dull, perhaps even rather forbidding, and certainly gives no clue to breath-taking mosaics within. Taking visitors round the church, one always is met with the same response of amazement and delight: the mosaics shimmer in a blaze of colour and as one draws closer, the eye is drawn to the abundance of detail reminiscent of the medieval tapestry. The creation of what is arguably the finest example of 20th century wall mosaic in Britain, was dependent on a number of factors: the apsed basilican plan of the church, the interests of one of the great entrepreneurial families of Leeds, the Kitsons and particularly the close friendship between Robert Hawthorne Kitson and Frank Brangwyn, and finally 'the providence' of Leeds' polluted atmosphere which meant that the first decorative scheme for St. Aidan's was abandoned.

The church was built between 1890-4 in an area to the north east of the city centre, rapidly being filled by working-class back-to-back housing. The architect was R.J. Johnson of Newcastle, the inheritor of the old Dobson practice, but the proposal for the basilican form came from Dr. Francis Jayne, the Vicar of Leeds who believed that such an open plan would encourage congregational forms of worship in keeping with the missionary endeavours of the church. Rapid suburbanisation had entailed a massive church-building programme, St. Aidan's cost £10,000 and there was little money available for embellishment, for example, the 200 foot campanile at the west end was never built. In these straightened financial circumstances, the church initially lacked all interior decorations and fittings. 'Its nobutt a factory' declared one early

worshipper and only gradually over the years were fittings acquired through the munificence of wealthy patrons.

The story of the Brangwyn mosaics really begins as early as 1897 with the appointment of the second vicar, the Rev. Arthur Swayne. The Rev. Swayne was to marry Eva Kitson, the daughter of James Kitson, the great railway engineer and the sister of Sir James Kitson, the city's leading liberal politician. The family previously worshipped at St. John's, Roundhay, their home parish, but the Rev. Swayne's incumbency was to bring with a Kitson connection with a vengeance. Architectural commissions, the design of new fittings and even repairs, all seem to have been handled by Mrs Swayne's brother, the architect, Sydney Kitson, whilst the ladies of the family busied themselves with the usual round of church bazaars, concerts and picnics at Elmete Hall, the family mansion in Roundhay. In 1908 following the cleaning and repainting of the still unadorned chancel, the Rev. Swayne wrote in the parish magazine, 'our old hangings will look dreadfully dingy against the gold (of the half dome of the chancel apse) and the new colour. Will not some kind person have compassion on us?'. It was perhaps hardly



Figure 1 *St. Aidan's Church, Leeds, designed between 1890-4 by R. J. Johnson of Newcastle. The original plans included a 200ft. campanile at the north-west corner but lack of funds meant that this was never built.*



Figure 2 Interior of St. Aidan's from the west end looking towards the apse and the Brangwyn mosaic cycle. Massive columns and an arcade of clerestory windows dominate the nave; the rood beam with carvings of the Virgin and St. John flanking the Cross, were designed in 1897 by Crawford Hicks, a partner in Johnson's practice. To each side of the sanctuary steps are the parapet walls with mosaics by Brangwyn. The St. Aidan's mosaics on the apse walls cover an area of 1,000 square feet.

surprising that the 'kind person' who came forward was another member of the Kitson family, Robert Hawthorne Kitson.

Robert Hawthorne Kitson (1873-1947) was the nephew of Mrs Swayne. Delicate health following a bout of rheumatic fever meant that R.H. Kitson was unable to participate in his family's business concerns but his inheritance was sufficient to enable him to devote his life to the arts. An amateur painter of some accomplishment, he shared painting tours with Sir Alfred East, Wilson Steer and George Clausen. It is believed that the former was responsible for Kitson's introduction to Brangwyn though the precise circumstances remain unknown. In 1900, Kitson had settled in Taormina, Sicily where he designed his own villa between 1905-7, and Brangwyn was invited for a prolonged visit towards the end of 1908, returning again in 1910 to design a new dining room, furniture and fittings. Kitson's relationship with Brangwyn certainly predated the 1908 visit, he bought his first Brangwyn



Figure 3 St. Aidan's mosaics depicting four scenes from the life of the Saint; from left to right: Feeding the Poor, St. Aidan landing in Northumbria, St. Aidan preaching (in the centre) and on the right, the death of the saint. The dado tiles were also designed by Brangwyn.

picture in 1900 and was influential in obtaining for the artist the commission for the design of the British Pavilion for the Venice Biennale of 1905. Later further paintings were purchased and he commissioned Brangwyn to design the mace for Leeds University. We can perhaps safely presume that the ideas for the decoration of the St. Aidan chancel first germinated whilst Brangwyn was a house guest in Taormina and certainly by August 1909, the Vicar was able to announce in the parish magazine, 'the generous offer' of a series of tempera frescos depicting the life of St. Aidan to be painted by Frank Brangwyn and paid for by R.H. Kitson. The congregation was subsequently informed that Brangwyn had few equals among living painters, and that the artist was sympathetic to the unusual architecture of the church².

Apart from their close personal relationship, Kitson's choice of artist was an appropriate one. Brangwyn's father, Curtis Brangwyn, a follower of A.W.N. Pugin, had set up as an architect and designer of church fittings in Bruges where Frank Brangwyn was born in 1867. As a young man, Brangwyn had worked in William Morris' workshops (he was introduced to Morris by A.H. Mackmurdo), producing tapestry cartoons and enlarging Morris' designs for carpets and wallpapers. Although he left Morris' employment after two years, he imbibed some of Morris' aesthetic philosophy, believing that art should be for the people rather than a narrow circle of wealthy individuals; Brangwyn always maintained that the larger a painting, the more pleasure it would give more people!. Although committed to the arts, Brangwyn did not feel that the artist occupied some special elevated position in society: art, he defined, as: 'the honest work of a skilled craftsman who has mastered his tools'³. Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that he saw little distinction between art, design and craft. Like Morris himself, Brangwyn

worked in many different media and in no sense regarded his oil paintings as more worthy than his furniture designs or book illustrations. The years between 1888 and 1895 were spent in extensive travel, often financing his trips by working his passage and it is during this period that he developed a life-long love of Venetian art and his own work correspondingly became more vigorous and richly coloured. But the decorative did not completely disappear from his practice: in 1895, he was commissioned to undertake the interior decoration of Samuel Bing's home in Paris and connections made here led to designs for the New York firm of Tiffany's, and an invitation to become a member of the Vienna Secession in 1897. Brangwyn's reputation as a muralist was first established in 1902 when the Worshipful Company of Skinners commissioned the artist to furnish eleven panels depicting the history of the company to decorate their hall. In the years immediately following, there were commissions for the Royal Exchange and Lloyd's Register of Shipping. Brangwyn's approach to his mural practice varied, sometimes his designs echoed the rich orchestrations of the Venetian masters, but particularly when working in tempera, his work has the linear delicacy of Puvis de Charvannes. One other aspect of Brangwyn's life deserves to be noted in the context of the St. Aidan cycle: he was a man of strong religious beliefs, a practising Roman Catholic who believed that one of the duties of the artist was to glorify God. One of the satisfactions of the St. Aidan's commission was that it at last gave him the opportunity to put these beliefs into practice⁴.

Despite a caring and supportive patron, Brangwyn's experiences at Leeds were not entirely happy - a situation not helped by his own highhandedness, Kitson's frequent absences in Taormina and the Rev. Swayne leaving the parish in 1911 for an incumbency in Canada. Well before this date, Brangwyn and the Vicar had agreed the subjects for the frescoes, the first preliminary sketches were ready



Figure 4 *The landing of St. Aidan illustrates Brangwyn's use of verticals and horizontals which act as a grid uniting the whole cycle, but the rigidity of this framework is balanced by the variety of poses and expressions of the figures and vivid areas of local colour.*



Figure 5 *St. Aidan feeding the Poor. The rich attire of the King and his attendants contrasts with the simplicity of the Saint and his monastic companions, and the rags of the poor and crippled.*

by November 1909. The Rev. Swayne had also agreed to heighten and paint the chancel parapet walls, the cost to be borne by Kitson. Together Brangwyn and the Vicar decided that these paintings should depict groups of figures with expressions of toil and sorrow, making their way to the altar. It was not until 1911 that any of the designs were made accessible to the congregation at St. Aidan's, and even then not directly - readers of the parish magazine were advised to consult the February edition of *The Studio* which contained five of illustrations of the cartoons! By December 1910, Brangwyn was ready to paint the central panel of St. Aidan preaching to the poor and he wrote to Kitson, 'It looks an awfully big bit of stuff to cover up. Anyway I live in the hope of making it my best work'⁵. Brangwyn worked intermittently on the frescoes for two years, visiting Leeds on two or three occasions to study the layout of the church, check the lighting and the colour of the interior stonework. According to Herbert Furst⁶, the best part of the painting had been completed when Brangwyn made the sudden decision to discontinue and convert the tempera designs into the mosaic medium. In a later conversation with William de Belleruche, Brangwyn explained the change: 'I went to Leeds to take the mace designed for the University, a silver and enamel affair presented by Kitson. It was a bright summer day in London but when I got to Leeds although the sun still shone - it was like seeing things through moulded glass - no shadows were cast on the ground. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it. On my return I suggested to Kitson that no painting could exist in such an atmosphere and that it would be well for him to have the job done in mosaic'⁷. Brangwyn's letter to Kitson on the matter is dated April 1913, he wrote, 'Do you think the Vicar would agree to do the whole job in mosaic and marble, rails steps etc. and that we would do it at our own cost and that he will pay us so much a year of the sum? I could give him an estimate for the whole job and the cost would not be great'⁸. Here

Brangwyn is being disingenuous, he already had an estimate for £5000 and he must have known full well that such a sum was beyond the means of a working class parish - perhaps his casual attitude was motivated by the belief that Kitson would agree to shoulder the additional expenditure. There is no record of the reply to this letter but subsequent developments reveal that although Kitson was prepared to pay an enhanced sum (the cost of the fresco was to have been £1000), he was not prepared to finance the whole project. Brangwyn then suggested that he would make a loan of his own money and that the parish could repay this later. But the Rev. Swayne's replacement, the Rev. William Mason, would not agree to pay a penny and responded that he did not want a mosaic cycle and was very happy with his modest church as it was!. Even without official approval and with no idea of who would pay for the scheme, Brangwyn continued to work on the conversion from fresco to mosaic. To have done otherwise would be a waste of time and effort 'on what in a year or two would be like brown paper'⁹. Already his panels on British Industry required cleaning after only four years of hanging in the City Art Gallery¹⁰. Relations with St. Aidan's were obviously deteriorating and Brangwyn complained by letter to Kitson, 'The Vicar is a poor kind of fish. He will not help in any way and writes foolish letters'¹¹.

This souring of relationships between the Vicar and artist had wider reverberations, drawing into the conflict members of the curacy and other parish officials. Some had already suggested that there should be only two frescoes placed either side of the reredos, leaving the altar as the central focus of worship. Thus the frescoes became embroiled in a liturgical debate about whether the altar should be moved to the centre of the chancel or remain against the east end of the church. In 1913, at the February meeting of the Church Officials Committee, a Mr Robinson had complained about being dictated to by Mr Kitson, and a month later the Committee reported that 'affairs regarding the frescoes were in rather a muddle'. In March the question of the chancel dado surfaced when Sydney Kitson suggested that it might be executed in marble, a suggestion Robert Kitson and Brangwyn surprisingly rejected given the artist's letter to Kitson in April. Now arguing that marble was too cold, Brangwyn wrote to Sydney to inform him that Robert would prefer the dado in mosaic and enclosed a sketch and estimate of £300. Perhaps artist and patron were pursuing a gradualist strategy hoping that a mosaic dado would pave the way for a mosaic mural programme. Meanwhile, Robert Kitson tried to win over the Vicar, personally taking the Rev. Mason to see a small mosaic erected in a new building in Leeds. This is presumed to be the mosaic designed by Gerald Moira for the exterior of Sydney Kitson's College of Art & Design (1904). The Rev. Mason was won over and agreed that if the question of finance could be settled, he would accept the conversion of the fresco to mosaics. The firm responsible for the mosaic panel was traced, Rust's Vitreous Mosaic and Tile Co. of



Figure 6 *A detail from St. Aidan preaching to the people showing Brangwyn's use of black outlines to separate and contain, his consistent interest in drapery and a mannerist exaggeration of certain human features particularly the hands.*



Figure 7 *A detail from the edge of the preaching scene, and as example of the use of rich colours. The garments, clothing and figures are entirely fanciful; the green slouch beret shown here, would obviously have been unknown in 7th century Northumbria!*

Battersea (the firm known to be responsible for the execution of the Moira mosaic). Fresh estimates were sought and these were considerably lower than Brangwyn's original estimates (£800-900 against the earlier estimate of £5000). The reason for this massive reduction was, as the name of the firm indicates, that the mosaics were no longer to be executed in Venetian glass but a synthetic vitreous compound. A jubilant Brangwyn wrote to Kitson, now back in Sicily, and received by return of post, instructions to engage the firm and a cheque for £200. It was now six years since Brangwyn had embarked on the project. To aid with the task of converting the designs into the mosaic medium, Brangwyn employed the glass painter, Sylvester Sparrow who had worked for Rust's previously. In September 1913, Brangwyn's proposal that the parapet walls be executed in mosaic was accepted by the Church Officials Committee and a month later they also agreed to a mosaic dado.

Despite these decisions, the Officials Committee were still under the impression that the major decorations were to be in tempera. In January 1914, the Committee reported a letter from Brangwyn promising the frescoes by April, and the Parish Magazine informed its readers that they would be installed at Ascensiontide. Later issues write of 'great disappointment', 'the long awaited pictures'. It was not until October 1914, twelve months after the engagement of Rust's that Sparrow wrote to the Committee, 'A great revolution has taken place in the scheme for the decorating of the apse. The cartoons were to be carried out in mosaic to correspond with the choir walls instead of tempera'.¹² Sparrow informed them that Brangwyn had long hoped for a mosaic cycle but had been prevented by the question of cost, but now a cheaper alternative was available and Mr Kitson was willing to pay the increased costs and the artist would forgo his own fees in order to facilitate the scheme. The advantage of mosaics, Sparrow explained, were their permanence, luminosity and richness of colour. This attempt to assuage the



Figure 9 *Brangwyn produced over 100 preparatory drawings for the fresco cycle, five of which were published in The Studio (February 1911). These bear little resemblance to the mosaics with the exception of the drawing illustrated here which can be compared with a figure to the right of the Saint in the preaching scene.*

Committee was followed by a reminder that the Church had long agreed to pay £60 towards the frescoes and that this figure would now have to be increased to £100. The response of the Committee focused on the financial issue. Subsequent letters written by Sparrow were deemed by the Committee, to be 'very insulting'. Even after a conciliatory letter from Kitson in which he suggested that his sister was responsible for the change of plans, and that he would bear the increased costs, the Committee remained obdurate. Despite their lack of approval, in November Kitson wrote to the Rev. Mason, presumably now an ally, that the cartoons were in the process of being translated into mosaic. Flurries of letters between Sparrow, Kitson and the Committee continued into 1915 and at its March meeting, there was a subdued acceptance of defeat.

As the correspondence suggests, Brangwyn distanced himself from the irksome problems of the commission and left these and the practical problems to Sparrow. It was he who selected and trained forty women and girls to work on the project. Fullsize pastel cartoons in reverse were hung around a shed and the women cut the mosaic tesserae and glued them face down on to brown paper templates. Brangwyn found relationships with the workers difficult, Sparrow was, he felt much better at dealing with them, but he has left us a description of their mode of working: 'The way they set the tessers was most interesting. Some would follow the lines of the drapery; others ran counter to this, setting the colour into patterns of bits of the same colour . . . the effects in all cases being the same; only the setting of the bits of



Figure 8 *A colour sketch printed in Herbert Furst's 'The Decorative Art of Frank Brangwyn' (1924), described as 'first sketch for the mosaic decoration of St. Aidan's, Leeds'. If this attribution is correct, then Brangwyn's early ideas were considerably revised before the execution of the mosaics.*

colour varied as each girl liked'¹³. Completed sheets were then cut into manageable pieces and taken to Leeds along with a master plan showing their location in the over-all design. By the autumn of 1915, a year after Sparrow had informed the Officials Committee of the 'great revolution', two panels had already been completed and all told the execution of the four panels took two years. They arrived in Leeds in July 1916. A cement screed was prepared, the sheets of mosaic applied to it and after being fixed in position, the brown paper was dissolved away, the mosaic pieces were washed down and grouted with cement. Their unveiling took place on 13th October, appropriately the Rev. Swayne who was now back in Leeds after five years in Canada, was invited to perform the ceremony.

The apse mosaic relates four incidents in the life of St. Aidan, but there are no direct divisions in the composition. A continuous frieze of figures dressed mainly in beige garments is set in the centre ground; the background is similarly marked by the strong horizontal lines of sea, shore, sky and clouds. From deep blue at the top, the sky graduates through a variety of blues and turquoises punctuated by pink-buff clouds and a russet sunset where sky and horizon meet. Set below is a faraway landscape and then the paler blue and golds of the sea. The horizontal emphasis furnishes cohesion to the design but the story-telling function of the cycle might have been lost but for the piercing of the horizontals by the slender, sun-dappled trunks of decorative trees which act as framing devices for the particular scenes. The vertical thrust of the trees is strengthened by the upright posture of most of the figures, and the whole design assumes a grid-like pattern of verticals and horizontals.

The unity of the cycle is further enhanced by the general treatment of the figures: Brangwyn's consistent interest in drapery, the black outlines and the flatness inherent in the mosaic medium which the smoothness and size of the vitreous tesserae further emphasises. This formal rigidity of design is offset by a wealth of local detail - differing poses, facial expressions, varied and often fanciful clothing. Particularly delightful is the foreground arrangement of flowers, grasses, ducks and ducklings. Notes of vivid colour - oranges and reds have the same effect of lightening the austerity of line. The over-all harmonies and balances of colour, the melting of tones into one another, is perhaps the most remarkable feature of the work. Always a feast of colour, one's perception of the cycle changes according to the available lighting. Recently installed spot lights provide an over-all brilliance; natural light from deeply-splayed clerestory windows produces dramatic contrasts but perhaps best of all, when there is a strong west sunlight (despite Brangwyn's experience of Leeds' summers), the mosaics though not made of glass, take on a jewel-like iridescence.

Brangwyn's masterpiece, his only executed work in the mosaic medium, was the work of eight years, and illustrates the vagaries of patronage and parish politics. In 1908, artist, patron and Vicar, all the mem-

bers of a social elite were largely in agreement but once one member of the triumvirate was removed from the scene and decisions were changed, then different interests came into contention. The lesser clergy and lay officials of the church clearly felt that their views on matters were being marginalised. Artist and patron pursued strategies which were in turn threatening, conciliatory, patronising and deceitful. What is perhaps surprising is that in all the various confrontations, no one seems to have consulted, let alone try to mobilise the general congregation. Their reaction to the Brangwyn mosaics when they were unveiled in 1916, has gone unrecorded. Though perhaps we may glean something of their feelings from the words spoken by the Rev. Swayne during his sermon of dedication: 'The conservative tendency in art to imitate the Greek search for the ideal is gradually giving way to the modern school in its efforts to visualise the beauty of the actual'¹⁴. It is difficult to view Brangwyn's work as avant-garde, but in provincial Leeds, in a working class parish, one can imagine that Brangwyn's refusal to conform to the saccharine conventions of religious idealisation, may well have caused bewilderment or offence. There are no sweet or saintly figures; even St. Aidan, for example, appears as an ordinary mortal. The great gnarled hands of so many of the figures may well have signified for Brangwyn, the dignity of labour, but such an emotion and illusion no doubt lost on many Leeds factory workers; their actuality was anything but beautiful. ❖

Notes and references

- 1 *St. Aidan's Parish Magazine*, October 1908
- 2 B. Pepper, *A Goodly Heritage*, Alewords, Leeds, 1994
- 3 H. Furst, *The Decorative Art of Frank Brangwyn*, Bodley Head, 1924
- 4 R. Brangwyn, *Brangwyn*, Kimber & Co., London, 1978
- 5 R. Brangwyn op. cit.
- 6 H. Furst (1924)
- 7 W. de Belleruche, *Brangwyn's Pilgrimage*, Chapman & Hall, London, 1948
- 8 R. Brangwyn (1978)
- 9 W. de Belleruche op. cit.
- 10 The panels depicting British Industry were exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1905. It was Robert Kitson who persuaded the Leeds manufacturer, Sam Wilson to purchase them and present them to the Leeds Art Gallery in 1906. Kitson was a member of the Art Gallery Committee between 1904-47. The panels are still on display in the Sam Wilson room.
- 11 R. Brangwyn (1978)
- 12 *St. Aidan's Officials Committee Minutes*, October 1914
- 13 W. de Belleruche (1948)
- 14 *St. Aidan's Parish Magazine*, November 1916