

L. OPPENHEIMER LTD AND THE MOSAICS OF ERIC NEWTON ROBERT FIELD



I first knew of Eric Newton in the late 1960's by way of the numerous books that he written on art, many of them published as Pelicans.



I only became aware of him as a mosaic artist four years ago 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 that they produced.



Eric Newton worked as a designer for the company from 1913-14 and from 1918 until 1933 although a few works were later than this. This mosaic in the Royal Naval Hospital School at Holbrook in Suffolk was commissioned by the Admiralty and finished in 1937.



Here he is working on the mosaic with another craftsman from the company. Many Oppenheimer mosaics are described as being by Italian Craftsmen so presumably the company employed many 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

and 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 prestigious 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 and his works can be found in many Galleries in Scotland, England and abroad. This picture of his garden is in the collection of the Gallery at Oldham.



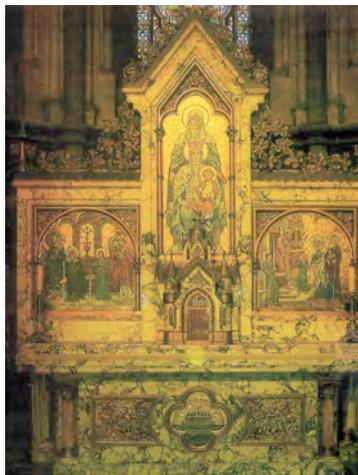
A look now at some of the commissions that the firm carried out in the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century. One of the illustrations in their brochure of 1905 is the Floor of the Grande Palais des Beaux Arts, Paris



The Cathedral in Lille, one of their most prestigious commissions. The ring of apsidal chapels have walls and floors in mosaic.



The design for one of the floors. Besides the walls and floors some of the altars have inlaid mosaic in them.



Here is the one in the chapel of St Anne.



In Ireland their main 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. This is the church of St Augustine and St John in Dublin begun in 1862 and not finished until 1895.



The typical overall richness of their work can be seen on the walls of this alcove and its floor.



The most important commission they received was for the building of Cobh Cathedral. After the partnership broke up in 1870 George Ashlin practised on his own. Many of the churches he built have mosaic by Oppenheimers.



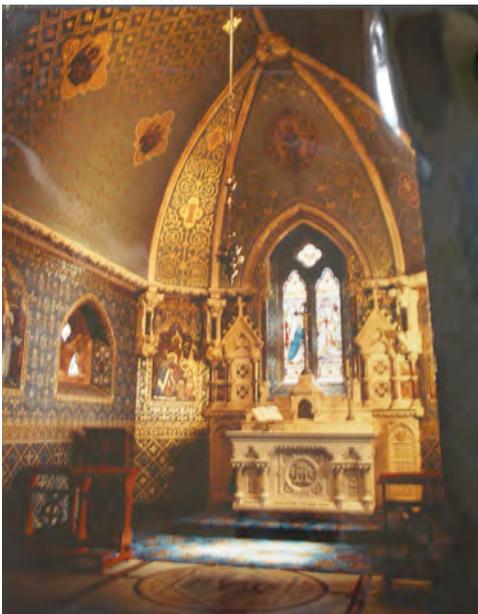
In Cobh Cathedral their work was on the floors of the chapels and the sanctuary and on two shrines.



The ceramic mosaics in the aisles, transepts, baptistery and porches are 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 re-ordering of the cathedral proposed by the 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.



The Lady Chapel at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. The chapel was finished in 1879 and designed by J.J. McCarthy, the walls have four panels from the life of Mary -



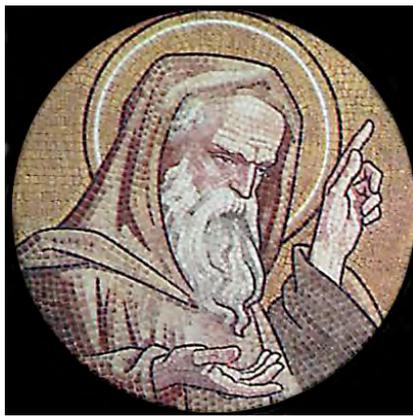
The Annunciation and the Nativity -



The Assumption of Mary into Heaven and the Coronation of Mary.



The sheer scale of work on the cathedral of St Patrick in Armagh is quite breath-taking where the walls of the Nave and transepts, -



- the spandrels of the Crossing,



- the baptistery and the Tower are covered in mosaic and the floors throughout although from this picture it looks as though the sanctuary floor has been a casualty of the re-ordering of the cathedral.



This picture of the sanctuary of Dundalk Cathedral gives some idea of the effect of the Venetian gold smalti amongst the mosaics on the walls, not only in the pictorial compositions but also in the strips of decoration and acanthus like scrolls.



Here is a floor in the National Museum of Ireland built by Thomas Newnenham Deane and his son. It opened its doors to the public in 1890. The floors of the museum have a variety of classical and mythological themes – here, in the Rotunda, it is the signs of the zodiac.



This is Aquarius – a wonderful image incorporating many classical motifs including the foreshortened view of the scallop shell beneath his feet into which the water from the Dolphin's mouth is falling.



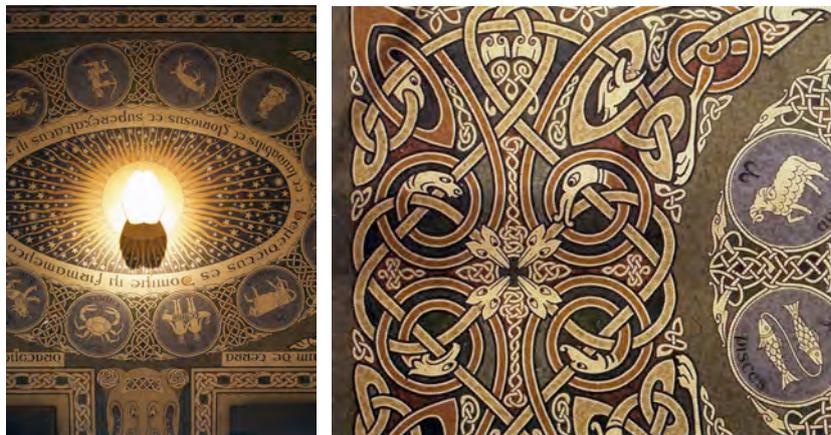
And this picture of Newry Cathedral shows the use of Celtic scrollwork in Lehmann's designs for the floors.



The culmination of this 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 used Oppenheimers again 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.



The Opus Sectile Stations of the Cross were also made by Oppenheimers. 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 which O'Connell wanted to be by local firms using local materials.



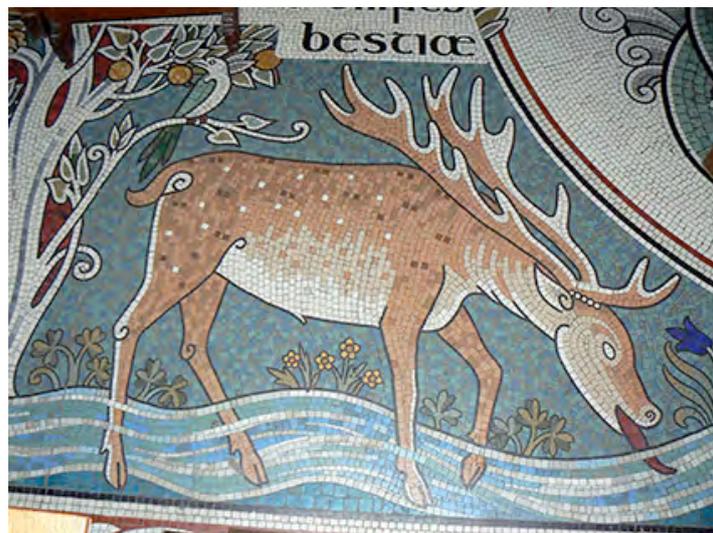
The west end again uses the zodiac as a starting point with a sun surrounded by the constellations in the heaven. The surrounding patterns rely heavily on the Irish illuminated manuscripts.



The River of Life, full of fish, flows down the aisle from the strange head of the river mouth at the start -



- to the sea creature in the chancel step mosaic. It is surrounded by animals drinking from the river and birds flying in the sky. The words of the Psalms are in beautiful Irish script.



The stag is a popular image on early Christian mosaics like those at Ravenna.



The peacock and the pelican both have significance in Christian mosaics and what wonderful images they are here – both highly decorative yet recognisable.



The same can be said of these geese, stork and the wonderful parrot sitting in the tree in the top left hand corner.



The First World War is commemorated in this chapel at the church of SS Peter & Paul in Bolton. The Parish Priest the 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 had changed his name by deed poll to his mother's maiden name of Newton and returned to the family business. 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 striking.



As it is here at 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 striking with the gold nimbus around the image of the Christ child and a Michelangelo inspired God the Father above.



The background trellis pattern of gold around St Patrick makes this image a strong one. In the early 1920's he began to write art criticism and deputised for the regular critics on the Manchester Guardian. In 1930 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, a costume consultant at the National Gallery and he moved to London. Their house in London has a step with a mosaic by him making a play with words on his surname. This move to London followed his break with the firm of Oppenheimer in 1933.



However, before that there are several churches that have mosaics that are undoubtedly designed by him. This is the Church of St Joseph in Heywood in Lancashire. The semi-dome in the apse is mosaic and the panels below are Opus Sectile.



These look as though could do with a good clean. It would appear to me that they -



- and the panels of mosaic set into the floor of the sanctuary and at the entrances to the chapels were put in when the church was first built in 1915.



The mosaic in the semi-dome seems later and has a much stronger design element like the one at Cabra. The design shows a real knowledge and understanding of Byzantine and later Christian mosaics.



The mosaic is lit from above and lights the pale blue dove. The central panel of Christ crowning his mother is surrounded by a rainbow. St Joseph and St John the Evangelist stand each side.



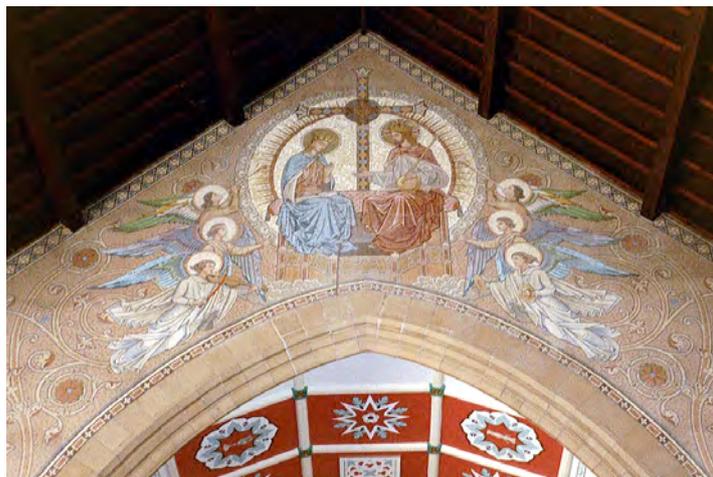
They are on islands surrounded by water, beautifully stylised and set against the shining Venetian gold of the rest of the dome.



The entrance to the church contains another portrait of St Joseph which looks to be a much later work still – perhaps of the 1960’s The figure composition shows none of Eric or Lehmann’s mastery and is very awkwardly drawn – compare it to the figure of St Joseph that Eric Newton did for Hillsborough in the 30’s.



The Church of Our Lady and St John, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester 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 here Mary is already crowned and an angel orchestra surrounds the circle enclosing the figures, their wings using colours that could have come from a Fra Angelico painting.



Here again St Joseph and St John are 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 round the windows surrounding the two figured panels which have black as the main background colour.



The subject on the left illustrates the passage – ‘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’ – it illustrates vividly the rest of this passage.



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.’



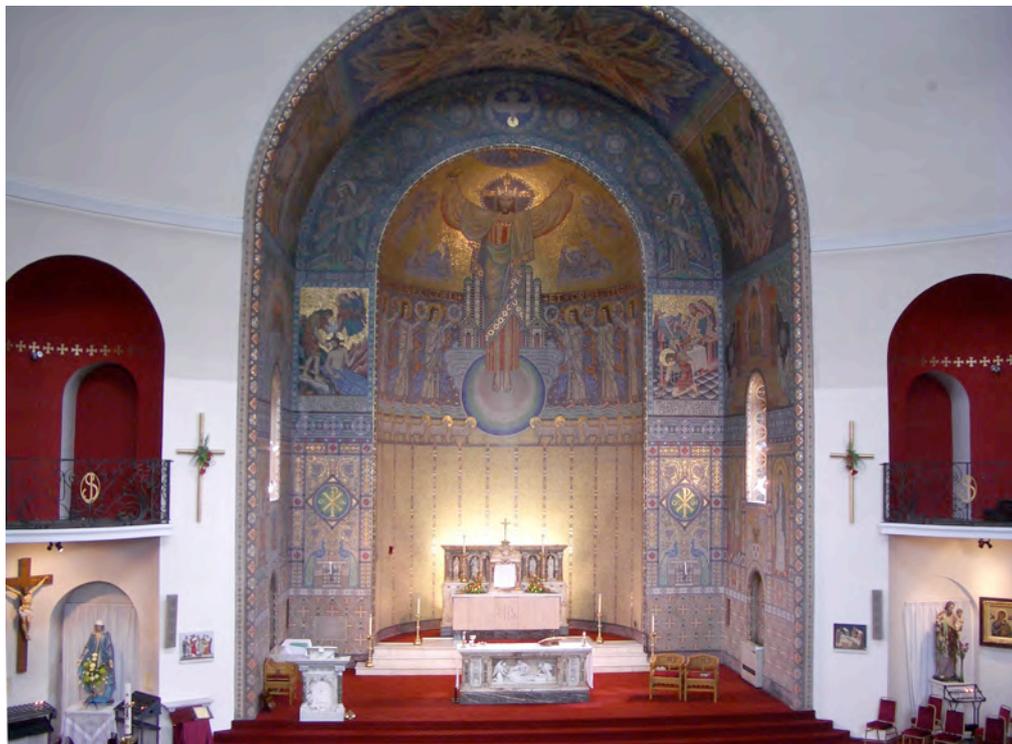
The subject of these two panels frees Eric Newton from standard imagery and he is able to use all the skills that he had acquired from working with his father from an early age and from his study of art and travels abroad.



This is the church of St John the Baptist, Rochdale, built between 1923 and 1925.



In 1925 the apse looked like this.



Between 1930 and 1933 this wonderful mosaic scheme by Eric Newton was installed.



The central image of Christ the King. Each side are pictures 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 – two on each side.



Higher the imagery is of the Day of Judgement – on this side the damned being consigned to hell.



It has this wonderful Blake-inspired image of a black and green Satan presiding over the souls of the damned.



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 built in 1936.



The imagery of these mosaics was done in conjunction with Canon Dunsfold the Parish Priest.



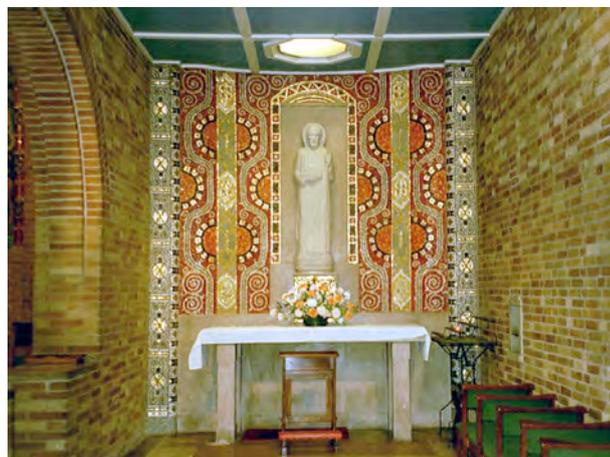
The main scheme above the altar is of the Sacred Heart with a supporting angel on either side. He stands on a rock from which water flows. On either side are deer drinking from the stream. The image loses some of its power by being surrounded by so much brick.



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.



The Chapel of St Joseph mainly in red. This design seems to be so much of its 60's 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 here 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. The light streaming down from the star also contains several different golds.



The shepherds on the left seem very well dressed for such a humble occupation.



The kings on the right being suitably resplendent in their costumes.



Below the main mosaic are four smaller panels – the two shown here are the Annunciation 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.



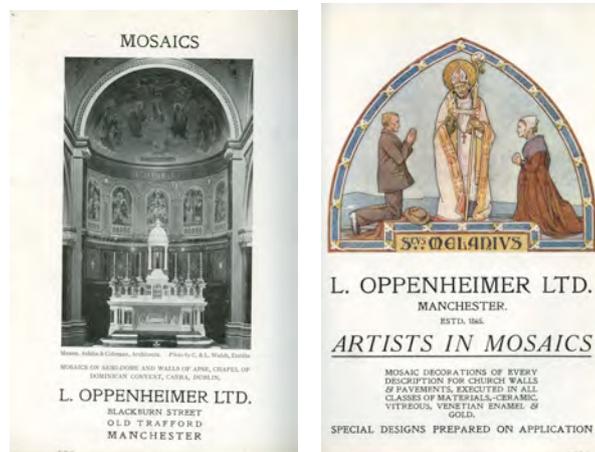
Shown here.



Above the altar and below the main mosaic is this 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 – here a Tower for Chastity and the Star of the Sea. The latter very appropriate in this building commissioned by the Admiralty.



Oppenheimers continued manufacturing mosaics until 1965 when they ceased business.



This mosaic outside the Merrion Market in Leeds must be one of the last made by them. It was commissioned from the artist in 1964 and made by Oppenheimers in 1965 and installed on site by a Leeds firm.



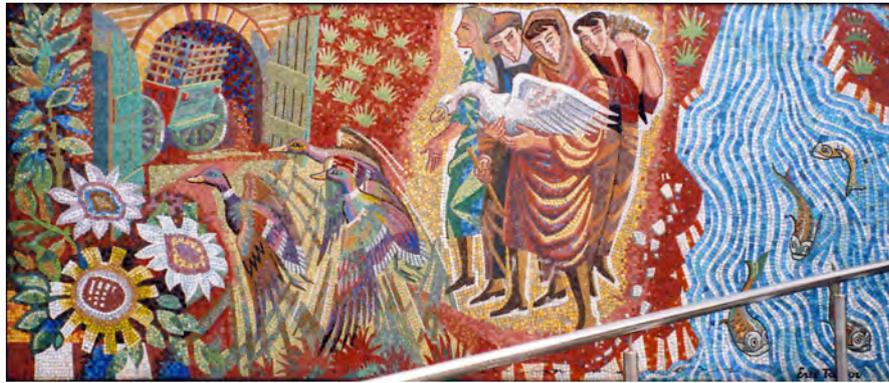
The owner of the site wanted the outside of the building to be brightened up and commissioned the mosaic from the then Head of the Leeds College of Art, another Eric - Eric Taylor.



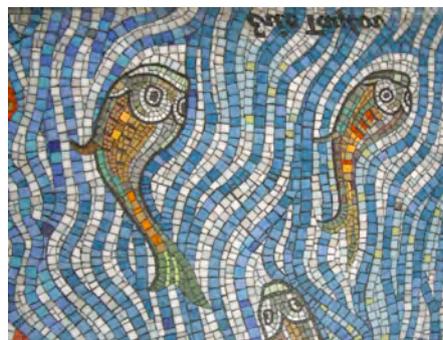
Before going ahead with the commission he gained a Leverhulme Research Award to travel to Italy and study mosaic design in relation to current painting and art in Northern Italy. He also visited mosaic manufacturers and suppliers and the schools in Ravenna, Milan, Spilimbergo & Venice.



The design was his and illustrates the produce that was being sold in the market at the time it was built. 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.'



His signature appears in the bottom corner among the fish.

Talk given at the Tile and Architectural Ceramic Society's conference on Church Ceramics on Saturday 7th of October 2006 at Ironbridge.