



INFINITE RICHES  
IN A  
LITTLE ROOM

An account of the interior of the church by

BRIAN BRINDLEY

(revised 1999)

£1

It is 30 years since I wrote this short account of the interior of St Mary's Bourne Street. Only a few passages have needed revision. I asked then "Can St Mary's survive?" The answer is that, as we know, she has to date; and fundamentally unchanged, it seems. I offer this new edition to the new members of the congregation in whose hands will rest the future of this unique 'little room'.

B.B.

## INFINITE RICHES IN A LITTLE ROOM

**S** AINT MARY'S is really a very ordinary church. Although Sir John Betjeman described it as 'stately' and, although Martin Travers in his drawing makes it look like a medieval gem, it is in reality typical of hundreds of low-price red-brick gothic churches that were put up in the 1870s and '80s, in London and all over the country.

But the impression it makes on the casual visitor or the new worshipper is far from ordinary. How well I remember my first visit! Some friends of mine had taken rooms in Graham Terrace, and I wandered in one day to look at the church. It was like straying into another world - or, at least, into another country; I was immediately struck by the soft, remote daylight, by the coolness, the mysterious dark corners, by the stillness (broken every so often by the rumble of an underground train), and by the rich glow of gilded furnishings against red-brick walls. It was an experience akin to entering such churches as San Zanipolo or the Frari, in Venice - despite the difference in scale; and this, I suppose, was the effect it was intended to have.

I knew nothing in those days of the 'Grah'm Street' mystique; and, although I was used to Saint Mary Magdalen's, Oxford, I found it hard to believe that such a church could really be part of the Church of England; it was, eventually, a great rescript, signed and sealed by Bishop Winnington-Ingram, and in those days displayed in a frame, that convinced me. In my naiveté I had not supposed that such furnishings as these could exist outside the Roman Church; this confusion was due, as I now realise, to the 'foreignness' of their style, rather than to anything especially un-Anglican in the arrangements: a life-sized crucifix, six tall candlesticks, even a sarcophagus-shaped altar - these could be paralleled elsewhere; but it is very seldom in English churches that they have the look of being 'right', of belonging. Later I was to learn that both the foreignness and the

thoroughness of the décor were part of a deliberate policy, in origins partly theological and partly historical.

St Mary's church, as it developed between 1900 and 1940 expresses, more perfectly than any other that I know, the convictions and the aesthetics of the (original) Society of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (SSPP): convictions and aesthetics went together - the Church of England was a Catholic Church, her priests were Catholic priests, her services were (despite all) Catholic rites - and her buildings must accordingly look like Catholic churches in which Catholic priests are wont to perform Catholic rites. There was only one way in which this could be achieved (or so it seemed then) and that was by emphasizing, or if necessary creating, within a church the appearance of continuous Catholic occupation and use. There was an opposing school, the readers of Percy Dearmer's *Parson's Handbook*, who expressed their loyalty to the Church of England by painstakingly re-creating the architectural setting of un-reformed worship as it was in 1548, and then using it as the background to services that were first drawn up in 1549; the incongruity was painful, like that of a party of revolutionaries dining in the Palace and in the finery of the aristocrats whom they had dispossessed. Not so the way of SSPP, who sought to give expression to their ideals by the pursuit of Continuity, Simplicity, and Homeliness.

First, Continuity. To the Victorian church-builders and restorers, the idea of consistency had been all-important; from an old church, all 'incongruous' features must be removed; in a new church, all the fittings and furnishings must be in the style of the building. (Time has its revenge: Victorian fittings that were put in because they were 'appropriate' are now removed because they aren't - for example, from Salisbury Cathedral - when their real merit lies precisely in their boldness and originality.) By the end of the nineteenth century it was being realized that this led to dullness and coldness; Sedding's Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, was one of the first to be filled with fittings in all sorts of styles; later the genius of Sir Ninian Comper

was to distinguish between 'Unity by Exclusion' and 'Unity by Inclusion'.

It was by 'Inclusion' that the SSPP desired to bring beauty to their churches - by giving them the appearance, even where they could not give them the reality, of having been prayed in for centuries. For this very reason they were pleased to deal with gothic churches, even nineteenth - century ones, which had an indefinable air of antiquity; some of the old fittings must be kept - the original altar-rails of St Mary's, for example, now on the south side of the Seven Sorrows chapel - but they must be supplemented by others of all different historic styles, and occasionally in modern style as well. If alterations were made to the fabric, they could be quite brutal, because that is the way that alterations have always been made to churches: a striking example of this was St Augustine's, Queen's Gate, where the walling-up of windows and the whitening of walls were carried out with an almost Puritanical fierceness, worthy of William Dowsing.

St Mary's, as it happens, was treated more tenderly; it was at one time seriously proposed to whitewash the interior, but mercifully it was never done, and the faded gilt of the ornaments stands out all the better against the mellow red brick; but there is a deliberate almost naughty pursuit of incongruity in mixing gothic and neo-classical and renaissance and baroque, all in the interests of suggesting that the church has grown slowly over the centuries. It is this which more than anything produces in the visitor the sensation of having walked into a Catholic church that has always been a Catholic church; there is only one other place that I know of in England where it has been so well done, and that is, oddly enough, York Minster.

Next, Simplicity. I admit that to many people this must seem to be a strange word to apply to a gorgeous interior like that of St Mary's; but it is the right word. Simplicity was the effect aimed at and it was the effect achieved. In those days the typical 'high' church was

cluttered up with unwanted bits of rubbish - pairs of unlighted candles on either side of indifferent pictures; altars at which Mass was never said, and banners which were never carried in procession; vases of flowers stood here and there to 'brighten things up', and thick dusty hangings to 'tone things down'. Services were the same: swarms of miscellaneous servers in red cassocks and slippers, cottas draggled with un-matching crochet, and curious ceremonies of unknown origin adorning patched-up fragments from the Prayer Book.

Against all of this, SSPP set their faces: all that was done was to be done by authority, and in the simplest manner decently possible. Look around St Mary's and you will see very little that is not strictly necessary to the worship of the Church, or an ornament with a definite liturgical purpose: altars are few, shrines are few, lamps and candlesticks are placed where they are for a specific reason. Festal adornments are kept for festal seasons, and even then are used sparingly. When I became an occasional server I was amazed at the oddments with which the vestries were crammed, all kept against the day when they would be needed. For nothing might be used unless it was needed - and, if possible, nothing should be used unless it was good.

Thirdly, Homeliness. Again, this is a word which may cause some surprise; but again the right word. There has been a deliberate attempt to make you 'feel at home' in St Mary's; and this is, at least in part, achieved by the sensitive use of essentially domestic styles and details. Not, perhaps, the style of everybody's home; but, surely, the style of those houses in Belgravia from which people would come to St Mary's, and of the country houses which they lived in when they didn't come to St Mary's. There is very little in St Mary's of the specially-designed 'ecclesiastical' furnishings that make other churches seem so dull and conventional; the polished wood-work, the gilded gesso - even the wood-block flooring of the sanctuary - combined to suggest a private house of unusual sumptuousness; and

one, of course, that has been continuously lived in by the same family over many generations.

But there is more to this Homeliness than just the details of the furnishings; for the whole arrangement of the church and its altars and shrines is meant to suggest Home; the Church, the Family of God, is exemplified in the Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the Holy House of Nazareth; of that Holy House St Mary's is an image. This is an idea which became very popular on the continent in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it was taken up by some Anglicans in the early part of this century, and put into practice in a number of churches. (For example, Holy Trinity, Reading which, although it is nothing like so beautiful or so lavishly-furnished as St Mary's, has almost exactly the same arrangement of shrines and altars.)

At St Mary's the High Altar is, of course, dedicated in honour of our Lady; upon it, as Jesus upon her lap, rests the Body of Christ within the tabernacle. To one side is the shrine of St Joseph, her Husband, and the Foster-Father of her Child; facing him, the shrine of our Lady herself as Queen of Peace. (I suggest that this effect must have been much more pointed before the addition of the north chapel, when our Lady and St Joseph stood in directly corresponding positions.) The side altar in the south aisle is dedicated in honour of St John Baptist - a cousin, and so still 'one of the family'; the altar in the north chapel is dedicated in honour of the Seven Sorrows - all, of course, episodes of 'family history' involving our Lord and his Mother. There are other shrines, it is true; but it is amazing how great is the contrast between this concentration on the Holy Family, and the miscellaneous collections of biblical and non-biblical saints to be found in most Anglican churches, whether as statues or pictures or wall-paintings or in the windows. St Mary's is surely, in twentieth-century English terms, just what the Holy House of Nazareth would have been - simple, clean, always tidy, always serene, a fitting home for a skilled craftsman and his pure and sinless Wife.



I think it should be made clear with what great care and thought all these results were achieved; old things must be assimilated into the scheme; well-loved things must be tenderly and discreetly amended. I remember Fr Langton telling the story of how Fr Whitby, wishing to give the figure of the Crucified over the High Altar a more attenuated and 'Spanish' appearance, called in a woodcarver at dead of night, who worked through the hours of darkness to remove the unwanted adiposity, so that all might be completed by the hour of Mass the next day, that the faithful might not be disturbed. Nothing was to be left until perfection was achieved: a study of successive photographs and drawings reveals how the reredos of the High Altar developed, from a conventional 'crucifixion-scene' in a gothic frame, first into a renaissance setting, then little by little into its present baroque exuberance: one year there are pilasters, the next year they have sprouted into scrolls; entablatures are broken up, pediments reared and cleft in twain, cherubs settle, as if they were butterflies, here and there. And with what ingenuity it was all done: an exposition-throne that can be conveniently wound into place; provision for veiling the crucifix in white for Exposition; a convenient cupboard to hide the white candle in at Tenebrae (Eheu! fugaces); what appear to be little rosettes on the gradine turn out on closer inspection to be bell-pushes for signalling to the organist. It was in this way that the reredos reached its present appearance - a classical dignity at ordinary seasons that can easily accommodate the additional exuberances of Corpus Christi; and yet, beneath it all, the original altar of the church remains; and for those who may scramble behind the reredos, the old gothic work is still there to be seen.

It is an ensemble of the greatest magnificence. I do not say that it ought never to be changed, but I hope it may only be changed to be enhanced. I remember the time when one of the original big six candlesticks crumbled away into little more than dust; within a few months they had been replaced by a better set, in superior materials, of the same design but improved proportions, so that it is now better than it used to be. (Four out of the five remaining of the old big six found a home on the altar of Christ the King, Gordon Square, which

in its Catholic Apostolic days had not had candlesticks, using oil-lamps instead.) It always seemed to me, back in the '50s and '60s, the greatest of shames that the work was never completed to cover the walls of the apse; two sets of drawings existed, one by Martin Travers himself; another, an ingenious alternative, done about 15 years ago; no amount of 'treatment' could make the stretched hessian worthy of the company in which it found itself. This omission was remedied in 1974 when Roderick Gradidge's designs for the apse were completed in memory of Fr Stephen Langton.

I regard the nave and aisles of St Mary's as one of the most distinguished and satisfying of pieces of church-furnishing known to me; considering the plainness of what was there to start with, and the simplicity of the means employed, it is breathtaking. The organ-case is a thing of great beauty, though, because of its position, it is seldom noticed; how fine it would have seemed if the plans for a western transept had ever materialised, and it could have stood unencumbered against the west wall of a spacious narthex. The font, too, which seems unhappily cramped in its present setting, would surely have looked much better if this extra space had been found. Even today, it might appear to greater advantage if it could be moved out from under the gallery and stood, by itself, in the north chapel. The most recent addition, the pulpit, fits unobtrusively into the scheme; though I confess a sneaking affection for its predecessor, unworthy though it was - like a play-pen on stilts!

It cannot be doubted that the unity of the original scheme has been impaired by the addition of the north chapel, by another architect, and in another style. Mr Anthony Symondson tells me that, although Martin Travers was much admired as a furnisher, it was not thought that, as an architect, he was capable of tackling the exacting task of replacing the existing north wall with an arcade into the new chapel; and that he, in consequence, refused to design the fittings for it. But there was in any case a new mood abroad; it was sensed that 'continuity' implies 'change', and the switch to H S Goodhart-Rendel was in part an attempt to fall into line with a more

recent expression of continental Catholicism - the earlier phases of the Liturgical Movement. The north chapel is in itself a building of great beauty and subtlety; and the furnishings are in a style that has already passed through a period of being old-fashioned into being once again sought after and admired. I must not be thought of as condemning the choice of Goodhart-Rendel as an architect, or the work that he produced, which I greatly admire; but it is in a very different mood from that of Martin Travers, and St Mary's is, after all, a Martin Travers church.

The same problem has surely to be faced today. The SSPP case has to a large extent been won in the Church of England; in all circles, low church and moderate as well as high church, the liturgical initiative is seen to lie with the Roman Church, and with the Roman Church on the continent of Europe in particular. All the gimmicks which we see accepted without demur in the most official Anglican circles within the Church of England today - evening Mass, 'concelebration', Mass facing the people, 'primitive' vestments - all of them came to us direct from the Roman Church. Even in the matter of liturgy 'understood of the people', where the Church of England has had a few centuries' start, it must be confessed that it has lagged behind the Romans. Church people who travel on the continent now find a very different external manifestation of Catholic continuity from that which delighted Maurice Child and Ronald Knox in the days before the Great War - tabernacles empty, high altars stripped and deserted, statues removed, votive-stands gone, High Mass abandoned, plainsong and polyphony alike cast out in favour of vernacular hymns and trivial melodies; and, everywhere, communion-tables strictly in accordance with Cranmer's rubrics of 1552, in use at Mass. A Belgian or a Spanish visitor, wandering by chance into St Mary's, might well be forgiven for thinking that he had strayed into some forgotten land of liturgical conservatism.

Can St Mary's, as we know it, survive? I think so, but only by a most careful and rigid adherence to the essential tenets of SSPP - by which I suppose I mean an attachment to the spirit of the Book of

Common Prayer to the letter of the current Roman rubrical codes. But the building and its contents must continue to grow and to develop; and here I think it is important to cling to these subsidiary ideals which are so well expressed in St Mary's: Continuity, Simplicity, and Homeliness. It would be a great mistake to suppose that Simplicity could be achieved by immediately throwing out all the fittings-indeed, the nature of the original building is such that, if denuded, it would appear to be actually less simple while Continuity and Homeliness would most certainly be impaired. St Mary's must be accepted as the masterpiece of Martin Travers, just as Wellingborough is of Comper, or All Saints, Margaret Street, of Butterfield, and treated as such - reverently, though not slavishly. Nothing beautiful must ever be removed, and nothing ugly must ever be put in; an easy principle to lay down I suppose, but a difficult one to put into practice. Yet, after all, where something so marvelous has been achieved, surely it can be maintained, and enhanced.

The church-building as the image of the Holy House at Nazareth, the Church as the image of the Holy Family in its relationship of love and care and reverence; that surely is the essential quality of St Mary's, to which we must cling at all costs; from this there emerges, inevitably, the beauty of holiness; by this the church, and its life, and its worship, can be converted into a treasure-chest, 'full of things new and old'.

St Mary's is really a very ordinary church, did I say? O si sic ornnes!