

The North and South Aisle statues

From St Mary's Church News November 2011 by Hamish Walker

Ken Dixon having taken retirement from the corps of church guides, it now seems to have fallen to me to answer the odd e-mail queries about the church which come in to the Parish Office from time to time.

One such recently came from someone who is writing a biography of a sculptor, Nathaniel Hitch, and who had discovered in Hitch's studio reference (and pictures) to two statues apparently made for 'the Saffron Walden Church'. Did we have these statues? I confirmed to him that they were indeed sited on the south wall of St. Mary's and, further, that there were three others in the same style on the north wall. Did he think that these were possibly also by Hitch?

He replied that there was every likelihood that they were and did we have any reference in our records to the statues?

This sent me - as it should have done in the first place of course! - to the Parish Magazines of the period and I e-mailed him back as follows:-

I quote from an article in St. Mary's Parish Magazine of February 1919 headed 'A Church Improvement':

'The empty niches on the north and south walls near the side chapel and choir vestry have long been a silent reproach....

'The big niches on the south wall are particularly fine and in them we propose to place the patron saint, S. Mary the Virgin and S. James, the patron saint of the old Abbey of Walden. Those on the north side are smaller and these, it is suggested, should be filled by John Leche and his sister Jane (sic) Bradbury (and)... S. Nicholas ...

'We have obtained an estimate of the cost from Mr. Nathaniel Hitch, of Vauxhall, an eminent sculptor, who has done much similar work at Westminster Abbey, Truro Cathedral, Beverley Minster and All Saints Maldon. He has also sculptured the memorial to Archbishop Temple in Canterbury Cathedral. He tells us that roughly the figures on the south side will cost £25 each and those on the north side £20 each.'

I went on to tell the enquirer that a sponsor had been found for each statue but unfortunately the accounts for the year in which the final bill was paid to Mr. Hitch had gone missing so that I was unable to confirm the eventual costs but that the cost of raising the statues into place had been a little over £11.

The church guides have always told visitors that the figure of St. James was modelled on a young officer killed in the First World War and the Parish Magazine for June 1919 confirms this. In November 1918 Lt. James Renault Saunders of the Coldstream Guards was killed and the statue in question was given by his mother in his memory. Mrs Saunders had been married in the church in 1894. Much further detail of the life of Lt. Saunders is available in that edition of the parish Magazine.

The Vicar's letter in the December 1920 Parish Magazine completes the story:

'At last our long-looked for statues are in their niches and excite general admiration.

'The Bishop of Chelmsford most kindly offered to dedicate them ... and kept his promise on November 13th (1920) when he gave a deeply interesting address on the men and women the figures commemorate.'

The Vicar in his report glossed over the fact that there had been a good deal of controversy amongst the townsfolk more than 600 of whom, (headed by Alderman Ernest Tanner whose name appears several times in Malcolm White's History of the town as a rabble rouser!), alleged 'idolatry and popery and superstitious reverence!' The matter had to be referred to the Diocesan Chancellor who, after a Court held in the Parish Room, finally ruled in the church's favour.

Hamish Walker