

More about the South and North Aisle Statues – No 6 in Parish News November 2012 by John Read

Over a year ago, Hamish Walker wrote an article in this magazine about an approach he had received from someone interested in the life of Nathaniel Hitch, sculptor of the five statues sited in the niches in the south and north aisles, which were placed there in 1920, representing the Virgin Mary, St James, St Nicholas, John Leche, and his sister Dame Bradbury. At the end of the article, Hamish referred briefly to objections which were raised at the time by a group opposed to the statues on the grounds that they were idolatrous.

A few weeks ago I came across a local newspaper report about the affair and the church's application for a faculty which was dealt with in the church court. The report was actually carried in two local newspapers, and the following is based on the report in the Saffron Walden Weekly News of 17 February 1920. (This can be found on microfilm in the Library).

The court proceedings took place in the Parish Room, which was crowded with spectators, presided over by Sir Alfred Bray Kempe KC, Chancellor of the Diocese. The application was presented by the Vicar, Revd Leonard Hughes, and opposed by Mr Ernest Tanner, a well known local grocer who had been a councillor since 1905 and a JP since 1917. He was also a prominent Nonconformist. Tanner had hired a barrister to represent the objectors in court.

The barrister said that a petition against the statues had been signed by over 600 people, and whilst he conceded that these were mainly nonconformists, he suggested that the Vicar had put undue pressure on one Mr Joseph Prime to support the application, by threatening to turn him out of the choir, and have him removed from membership of the Burial Board. The barrister said he would be calling Mr Prime to give evidence later. However when Mr Prime was called, he failed to show up. The next line of attack was to suggest that an illegal altar had been erected at the west end of the church, but this fell flat when the Vicar responded that the "altar" was a war-shrine, which he had ordered to be removed when he had first come to the parish.

When Mr Tanner himself was called, he said that his opposition was to the statues of the Virgin Mary and the two saints, and he would not object to those of John Leche and his sister. He was concerned that superstitious reverence would be paid to the statues, and quoted passages of scripture on the question of images. He had himself witnessed bowing and crossing in the church on more than one occasion, and mentioned a picture which had been placed as a background to the Lords Table, which should not have been done without a faculty. During his evidence, the Chancellor interrupted him several times to remind him that the court was only concerned with the legality of the statues. The only other witness opposing the application was Mr Harry Baker, a Wycliffe preacher, who said that the statues were illegal, as also were the mixed chalice elevation and lighted candles.

The Vicar himself presented the case for the application, saying that the vestry meeting was unanimously in favour, and that the object was simply to make the church more artistic in the completion of the nave by filling the niches which were already there. There was no reason to suppose that superstitious reverence would be paid to the statues, and in any case to get to them one would have to walk from the aisle through the pews. The weight of the church establishment was then brought to bear with evidence being given by the two churchwardens and a former churchwarden (two of the three being themselves aldermen and JPs), by Dr Atkinson (he is commemorated in one of the stained glass windows), and last but not least by Lord Braybrooke.

The Chancellor concluded proceedings by saying they really had to consider how the law stood. To him it seemed that the figures were harmless and there was nothing about them even to suggest they were for worship. He therefore granted the faculty, each side to pay its own costs.

I looked at other issues of the local paper for weeks before and after the case was reported, to see if there was any other comment, but all I could find was one letter mentioning the practice in the church of "bowing and genuflexion towards the cross" and deploring the fact that "the previous rapprochement between the state church and the free churches" had ended. Mr Tanner, himself a JP, seems to have accepted that there was nothing more he could do.

John Read