

Violet Pinwill, woodcarver

This year is the 60th anniversary of the death of a woman whose career of more than 50 years produced a body of work that can be seen in more than 300 churches in Devon and Cornwall.

The late Victorian era saw a period of church restoration and renovation across the whole of the country, including a flourishing of woodcarving. Within Devon, three woodcarvers' names are particularly distinguished. Harry Hems, Herbert Read and Violet Pinwill are all now recognised for outstanding contributions to local woodcarving in the second half of the 19th century.

Harry Hems arrived in Exeter in 1866. He was not only a gifted carver but also a very successful businessman. At one time he employed over 80 craftsmen and his business, the Ecclesiastical Art Works, became a worldwide enterprise. Herbert Read, a former employee of Harry Hems, set up his own business, the Saint Sidwell Art Works, also in Exeter, in 1892.

Violet Pinwill was the third force in woodcarving in Devon. Based in Ermington and then Plymouth, she and her sisters carried out work across Devon and deep into Cornwall. Her success is all the more remarkable, given the status of women in Victorian society.

St Peter and St Paul, in Ermington, Devon, has a body of Violet Pinwill's woodcarving stretching across the whole of her working life. She was born in 1874, and her first woodcarving in the church dates back to 1890, when she was just 17 years old. Her final piece of woodcarving in the church is the second-world-war memorial plaque, after 1945, carved when she was 71 years old. Violet Pinwill died in 1957, and 2017 marks the 60th anniversary of the death of this remarkable woman.

In 1880 the Reverend Edmund Pinwill moved from Lincoln and became Rector to Ermington. He raised sufficient funds to restore the church under the guidance of the architect EH Sedding. The restoration was complete in 1889. While the restoration works were under way, Mrs Pinwill engaged the workmen to teach her seven daughters woodcarving. Subsequently, three of the Pinwill sisters, Mary Rashleigh, Annie Ethel and Violet Alice, became professional woodcarvers.

Mary Rashleigh appears to have been the initial driving force. The sisters set up a woodcarving company called Rashleigh Pinwill and Company, and moved to Plymouth in about 1893. Fortunately, the business was continuously patronised by EH Sedding, who commissioned woodcarving from the sisters for his church projects.

The sisters' partnership did not last for long. In 1900 Mary married and she subsequently retired from the business. Later, in 1908, Annie moved to Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, and took up a woodcarving career there. This left Violet in charge of the Plymouth woodcarving business, which she continued up to the age of 82.

She was widely known in the West Country and there



The pulpit at St Peter and St Paul, Ermington

are more than 300 churches in Devon and Cornwall with examples of her work, even after accounting for the loss of much of her woodcarving in Plymouth, destroyed during the bombing of the early 1940s. As well as new commissions, she also undertook restoration of ancient woodwork, and was in demand for carving regimental and ships' coats of arms.

According to her obituary in *The Times* in 1957, Alice Pinwill was modest and unassuming, carried out her extensive business without a secretary, and never owned a car. She was a devout Christian and dedicated her craft to celebrating God's work.

A memorial plaque in the Lady Chapel of the church of St Peter and St Paul, Ermington, reads: 'Remember before God Violet Alice Pinwill... She studied to show herself approved unto God a workman that needth not to be ashamed. She walked humbly with her God all the days of her life.'

The pulpit at Ermington is possibly Violet Pinwill's first piece of woodcarving in the church. It is an octagon in plan with woodcarving panels on six sides, the other two sides remaining open for access. According to the local congregation, the angel faces at the base of the pulpit are based on the faces of the Pinwill sisters themselves. The first panel shows St Peter healing a child at Samatia. The second shows the Pentecost. The third shows Jesus giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to St Peter. The fourth shows the conversion

Sources

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Obituary (1957)
The Times, London
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Jesus and (far right) Judith at St Peter and St Paul, Ermington



of St Paul. The fifth is of St Paul healing a man lame from birth at Lystra. The sixth shows St Peter and St Paul together, giving their defence before King Agrippa.

The panels are interspersed with religious figures. The first figure is Judith from the Book of Deuteronomy. The second is St Lawrence, who was burnt to death over a gridiron. The third is of St Peter, holding the keys to heaven. The fourth is of Jesus himself, with his arms outspread and welcoming. The fifth figure is of St Paul, who was martyred in Rome, and being a Roman citizen was entitled to be executed by beheading. The sixth figure is of Moses with the Ten Commandments. The seventh figure is St Mary Magdalene, recognisable by her long, flowing hair, with which she washed Jesus feet at the Last Supper.

The reredos is Violet Pinwill's grandest piece of wood carving in the church. It has an upper portion featuring carvings of the annunciation, the crucifixion and the descent from the cross. Between these scenes are seated the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All of this is surmounted by the figure of the risen Christ. The lower section houses a large alabaster panel of the Nativity. The panel echoes the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, who was commissioned to paint two monumental paintings for the chancel of the Church of St John the Apostle, Torquay, in 1887.

The first painting is 'The Nativity', in which Mary

reclines protectively around the infant Jesus while Joseph looks on. To the left are three angels bearing the symbols of the Passion and the Crucifixion. The inscription at the top of the painting is in Latin, which translated reads: 'Because of the misery of the poor and the groaning of the needy, now I will arise, saith the Lord'.

The second painting is 'The King and the Shepherd'. The painting combines the voyages of the magi and the shepherds to Bethlehem. Angels have been introduced to lead each traveller by the hand on their journey. In this painting the Latin inscription translated reads: 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us'.

The paintings suggest that Jesus came for the poor and the needy, and they suggest equality, in the face of divinity, between the wealthy king and the humble peasant. In her alabaster panel Violet Pinwill combines all these images from both the Burne-Jones paintings. The panel avoids a realistic approach and captures the romantic dream-like quality of the Burne-Jones paintings.

The simple first-world-war memorial with Christ on the Cross was carved to commemorate the men of the parish who died in the war. The symbolism of Christ suffering on the cross focuses on the compassionate and humanitarian aspects of Christianity. A small plaque has been added below to commemorate those who died in the second world war.

Photos by Grant Elliott

Grant Elliott, an associate architect at LHC Architecture, is involved with heritage projects, including voluntary restoration work at St Peter and St Paul, Ermington.