

Sculptures by Grinling Gibbons and Quellin

originally at Whitehall, later in Westminster Abbey,
now in the Church of Burnham-on-Sea

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THE history of the Renaissance sculptures preserved in the Church of Burnham-on-Sea seems still to be little known. However in 1914 the late Mr. Avray Tipping published full accounts of their provenance in his monograph on Grinling Gibbons, and in an article, entitled 'The Rise and Fall of an Altar-Piece', which appeared in *Country Life* for 21 March of the same year. Unfortunately the article, which is particularly interesting, was relegated to a position among the advertisements in the supplementary pages generally destroyed by book-binders.

The following notes are drawn partly from Mr. Tipping's descriptions, but additional references are quoted, for some of which the writer is indebted to Mr. A. F. Kendrick, formerly of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The subject deserves fuller treatment than can be given here, and no account of the Burnham sculptures could be considered more than cursory without photographic illustrations. Owing to unsuitable lighting, satisfactory photographs of the reliefs and figures are difficult to obtain. Mr. Tipping's plates, the same both in the monograph and in the article, are not altogether successful, and he gives no picture at all of what may be considered the most remarkable of the series.

The reason why these fragments of a great work of art are now in a country church in Somerset may be found in any local guide book, but their early history is generally forgotten. Charles II died on 6 February 1685, and his successor, James II,

at once set about the task of making a private chapel in the Palace of Whitehall which should be a splendid and worthy setting for the elaborate services of the Roman Catholic faith. For this chapel Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned by the King to design the altar-piece, and in the *Parentalia*, collected by the great architect's son, No. 7 in Section X is the 'Design of the Marble Altar-Piece with the original Ornaments and Statues erected in King James the Second's Chapel at Whitehall, which was saved from the Fire and given by Queen Anne to the collegiate Church of St. Peter in Westminster'.

The chapel must have been extremely ornate. Verrio received £1,200 for painting the ceiling and walls. Grinling Gibbons carved the case of the great organ, the pulpit, the King's seat and the doors. To Grinling Gibbons also was entrusted the design and execution of the white marble reliefs, of the two large figures of angels and of certain other large statues for which Sir Christopher's architectural altar-piece provided the setting. It is thought that Gibbons had some misgivings as to his powers as a sculptor of large figures in the round, though pressure of work may have been a further reason, and he therefore called in one of his assistants, an Antwerp artist, Quellin the Younger, who clearly was made entirely responsible for the great angels. These are now at Burnham; they have exactly the same peculiarities of style and entangled rhythm as Quellin's recumbent figure of Thomas Thynne of Longleat, still to be seen in the south aisle of Westminster Abbey. Thynne was assassinated in 1682, and his monument may have been erected some three or four years before Quellin was working at Whitehall. It is worth noting that the child-angel at the foot of Thynne's effigy has a more direct and simple rhythm throughout, even in the treatment of the hair, than is found in the effigy itself, and it may be suggested that this smaller figure, so reminiscent of certain surviving work from the Whitehall altar-piece, though less characterized, may have been modelled by Gibbons or one of his assistants other than Quellin.

The contemporary record concerning payment, dated 1686, does not specify for what particular detail each of the two chief sculptors engaged on the work in the Whitehall chapel

was independently responsible ; indeed it implies no responsibility for design. It reads as follows :

‘ The said Grinlin Gibbons and Arnold Quellin, for making and carving the great altar-piece of white marble, veined, wrought according to a design and contract, they finding all the materials and workmanship, with two marble columns under the throne, fluted, with capitals and bases (besides 14*l.* 18*s.* 2*d.* abated for a square white marble pillar delivered them),—1,875*l.* 1*s.* 8*d.*’

In 1687 Gibbons sent in a bill for the erection and completion of the great piece which we may suppose had been brought to perfection in all its details late in the previous year, for Evelyn wrote in his diary for 29 December 1686 :

‘ I went to hear the musiq of the Italians in the New Chapel, now first open’d publicly at Whitehall for the Popish service. Nothing can be finer than the magnificent marble work and architecture at the end, where are four statues, representing St. John, St. Peter, St. Paul and the Church, in white marble, the work of Mr. Gibbons, with all the carving and pillars of exquisite art and greate coste. The altar-piece is the Salutation ; the volto in fresca, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin according to their tradition, with our Blessed Saviour, and a world of figures painted by Verrio. The throne where the King and Queen sit is very glorious, in a closet above, just opposite to the altar.’

With the accession of William and Mary the services in King James’ chapel ceased, and shortly before the disastrous fire of 1696, which destroyed so large a part of the Palace, Gibbons had removed the altar-piece to Hampton Court by order of the new sovereigns. He charged £130 for ‘ taking down the Marble Altar-Piece, with the Columns, Ornaments, and Figures thereto belonging, in the late King James the Second’s chapel at Whitehall, and loading the same into barges, and delivering thereto at Hampton Court, according to contract ’. Evidently the Protestant King intended to erect this, perhaps the greatest artistic production of his predecessor’s reign, in the Tudor chapel at Hampton Court, but the project was abandoned. A few years later the heavy marble-work was carried back to Westminster by order of Queen Anne and placed behind the high altar of the Abbey. Certain modifications of detail and design were made, and a dedicatory inscription was added : *Anna Regina, Pia, Felix, Augusta, Parem Patriae, D.*

Tipping quotes from the description of the altar-piece given in Malcolm's *Londinium*, published in 1802. Perhaps even more interesting, though not so lucid, is the following account, under St. Peter's, Westminster, taken from *A New View of London*, published in 1708 :

'The Altar-Piece is very curious and magnificent, of several kinds of fine polished Marble, as white, white vein'd with blue, and Porphyry. The lower Order consists of 10 Pilasters with their Entablature of the Doric Order ; the Intercolumns here are a rich Hanging betn. 2 Niches with Enrichments of Cupids, and these betn. 2 Apertures with Arches and the like Enrichments. The upper Order consists of a large Quadrangular Space or Table adorned with 2 Demi-columns in a circular Range with an Entablature and pitched Pediment of the Composit Order ; under this Pediment (which is between 2 Cartouches) is an Imperial Crown enriched with Palm-branches, and above it is a Glory in the semblance of a Dove, within a circular Gruppa of Cherubims under a compass Pediment, whereon is placed the Figure of a Bible surported by 2 Cupids ; all which parts above the Cornish of the upper Order are situate between 2 Angels, placed at a small distance in a descending Posture (respecting the Altar below) excellently represented in full Proportion.'

Apparently the four large figures which so impressed Evelyn were not included.

There is also a description in Ackermann's *Westminster Abbey* which indicates, by comparison with the earlier description quoted above, that some minor alterations were made during the eighteenth century. Some idea of the general effect may be gathered from Dart's plate of the nave ; the view in this picture is taken from the west, looking towards the Confessor's tomb.

It was about 1820 that the Dean and Chapter removed the altar-piece in order to substitute a reredos of a design then considered more in keeping with the thirteenth-century architecture of the Abbey. Walker King, Bishop of Rochester, who had been many years vicar of Burnham, obtained some of the marble reliefs, the 'figure of a Bible supported by Cupids', and Quellin's large angels. King had these fragments set up in his Somerset Church, and in 1826 published a pamphlet about them which contains an illustration, now of particular

value as probably the only surviving record of the manner in which they were first arranged at Burnham. Regardless of the height or angle from which they were intended to be viewed, Quellin's angels were placed on pedestals on either side of the chancel, and the reliefs, surmounted by the 'figure of the Bible' with its supporters, were crowded in narrow framing above the altar, completely blocking the east window. The effect must have been extraordinary. But posterity should be grateful to Bishop King for his preservation of these sculptures when Wren's setting was destroyed: only a few fragments are known to have been kept at Westminster.

A Victorian architect removed certain of the marbles from Burnham Church; some of these were found by Prebendary G. L. Porcher in a lumber room at the old vicarage. In course of the second nineteenth-century arrangement of the sculptures, 'the Gruppa of Cherubim' and Quellin's angels were placed under the tower, and the remaining reliefs inserted in a row below the level of the restored east window. The panels of the censuring angel and of the angel with the paten and two cruets were used as a reredos.

Bishop King's pamphlet contains the Latin inscription which he caused to be carved below the assembled fragments of the altar-piece. It is regrettable that he stated in this inscription that the sculptures were the work of Inigo Jones. In King's time everything connected with Whitehall was associated with Inigo Jones in the popular imagination. This erroneous attribution is still quoted, although the architect of the Banqueting House had been dead more than thirty years before the fittings of James II's chapel were designed.

The heads of the six figures of child-angels now in the chancel of Burnham Church, and the heads of the ten cherubs in the group on the south wall of the tower were clearly all adapted from portrait studies of two children. They have an individuality quite unusual in seventeenth-century amorini, and it is suggested that Gibbons may have modelled them from his own family. The baptisms of several of his children are recorded in the register of St. Paul's, Covent Garden. His son, Charles, was christened there 13 June 1683.

Between 1708 and the date of Ackermann's description the

Dove was removed from the glory in the centre of the 'cherubim' panel, and the Sacred Name in Hebrew characters substituted : this alteration woefully injured the composition. Some of the heads of the ten cherubs are of great beauty, but with one exception the six child-angels in the chancel have a struggling, almost tortured expression, common in many other works of the seventeenth century in which the vitality of the period was trammelled by convention. However in the bas-relief of the angel with head bent in prayer, placed now immediately to the north of the altar, Gibbons rose above his usual limitations and the mannerisms of his time. It would be hard to find a more lovely representation of a child. Possibly Sir Joshua Reynolds was inspired by this figure when he painted the once famous picture of the Infant Samuel.

Had Queen Anne given the altar-piece to St. Paul's Cathedral, where it must always have been considered in keeping with its surroundings, instead of to Westminster Abbey, the tragedy of the dismemberment and almost total destruction of this great work of art might never have been enacted.