

FROM THE PARISH ARCHIVES

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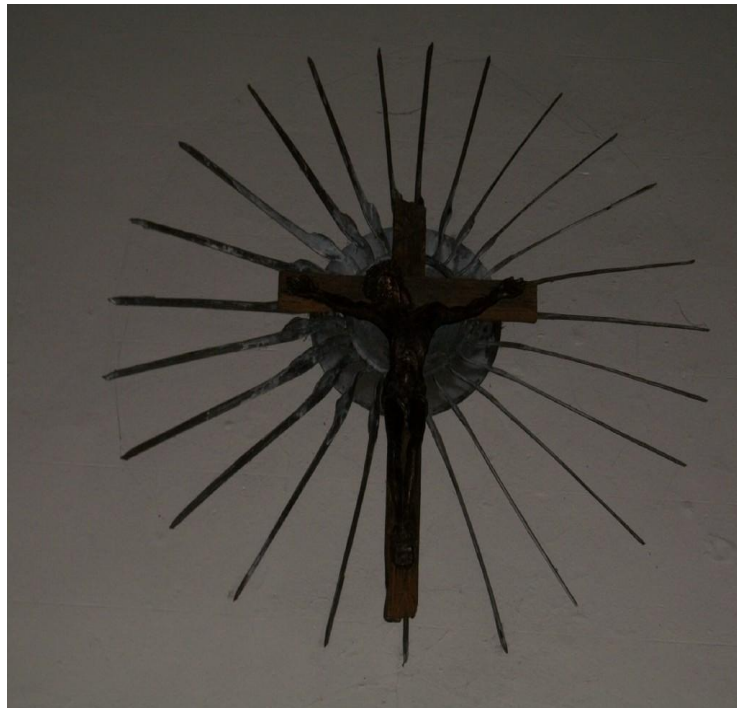
The Matcham Skipper Crucifix

Welcome to the fifth edition of "From the Parish Archives". We hope that you will enjoy reading about the history of the Parish. This is especially so with the 150th anniversary in 2011. This version was slightly revised in September 2011.

The "From the Parish Archives" aims to be factual. However, any opinions expressed are personal and may not be necessarily shared by other parishioners.

Geoffrey A Sandy, Parish Archivist and Historian.

The Matcham Skipper Crucifix



Introduction

When the author joined the St Margaret's Parish in the early 1980s I was strongly attracted to the magnificent Crucifix above the altar. There were two reasons. First, as an artistic work it worked for me and I know this is the case of many other parishioners then and now. I also thought how typically "Eltham" it was. However, I have been ignorant of its history until very

recently. Second, I thought how unusual to have a Crucifix in a Church of England and especially above the altar. I think I will like this Parish. In seeking the Crucifix's history through interviewing long-standing parishioners there are differing accounts that have not yet been completely reconciled. However, fortunately there is archival document evidence although there is probably more to uncover.

Commissioned or Not

One version is that the Vicar Donald Longfield (1964-1969) commissioned the Crucifix from Matcham Skipper on Montsalvat. He duly informed the Vestry that it would cost \$800 at which point some members may have gasped and fell off their seats. A variation is that Longfield was visiting Montsalvat and saw the Crucifix and resolved it would be good to have for the Church. Yet another version is that Skipper offered the Crucifix to Longfield for the Church but it was short of funds. Skipper then gave it to the Church on permanent loan. However, the website of *Eltham Then and Now* list our Crucifix as a commissioned work of Matcham Skipper. Our Archives reveal that it was loaned for a time but the Church expressed an interest in its purchase. They also reveal that it was ultimately gifted to the Church by three families.

The Meaning of the Crucifix

A Crucifix is a Crucifix. Well, yes and no. When one looks at the work it is clear that it depicts a body crucified on a cross. But, is that all? Now to use a cliché "art is in the eye of the beholder". To me and I believe many parishioners it is not just a Crucifix. Again, the radiating spikes may be symbolic of a crown of thorns but they may also represent radiating light and be a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. If so the work represents both crucifixion and resurrection. No reference can be found about what was in the mind of its creator. Contact with Matcham Skipper has not been possible as he has been ill for a while although there is still some hope that its meaning intended by its creator will become known. Whether a Church of England should have a Crucifix was controversial in the 1960s and is still so now in certain quarters. Hanging it directly behind the altar was and is even more controversial.

The Crucifix Controversy

The June issue of "The Way", our Parish Magazine, refers to the loan of the Crucifix by Matcham Skipper and discusses an interest in purchasing it. The November 23 issue provides background information about the Crucifix of which purchase is contemplated. It also requests parishioners to register their approval or disapproval of it. A page (undated) but clearly titled lists 12 names that registered disapproval. It is probably the final list but there is no certain way of knowing. The Pew Leaflet 5 November 1967 states that three families gifted the Crucifix to the Church. On the 9 November 1967 a Faculty was given by Archbishop Frank Woods for the Cast Iron Crucifix. The Pew Leaflet 3 March 1968 advertised an Evensong and Dedication of the Crucifix.

However, the Episcopal authorities had for some years before the Faculty was issued expressed reservations about the hanging of the Crucifix on the east wall above the altar. A letter dated 1 August 1966 from the Bishop Coadjutor

Felix Arnott to our Vicar Donald Longfield, states that *"I like the work very much indeed, but I think you know it would not be possible to have the work except on a short term loan without a Diocesan Faculty"*. He goes on to warn the Vicar that *"before you start raising money I think you should make sure that the Archbishop would grant the Faculty"*. Bishop Arnott then explains why he has reservations about positioning the Crucifix where it hangs today. He says *"Whilst I say I like the work artistically, I have some reservations theologically about the work as I do not like the Crucifix over the Altar and would much have preferred a plain Cross"*. He goes on to explain why *"After all, it is the Risen Christ we meet in the Eucharist and the place for a Crucifix, if at all, is surely the Pulpit"*. Finally, he concludes that he thinks that *"it would have to be for the Archbishop to decide this theological point when you have complete agreement by your parishioners on the matter"*. We already know that "complete agreement" was never met.

The Archbishops Response

In a letter 3 November 1967 from the Archbishop Frank Woods to Longfield he reminds the Vicar that *"traditionally the place of a crucifix is over the chancel arch I suppose to symbolise that we pass through the crucifixion to the resurrection symbolised on the altar by a cross without the figure"*. He therefore suggests to the Vicar that *"if it is easy therefore, and safe, to hang your crucifix from a beam over the altar rail, I think this is what I would advise"*.

The Archbishops suggestion was implemented. The crucifix was strung on wires on the beam over the altar rails. However, some parishioners were concerned about their safety and wished it to be relocated. The new Vicar, Ken Brierty (1969-1972), must have wrote to the Archbishop requesting permission to hang it above the altar citing safety reasons. Whether the Vicar was using safety to achieve his desire to position the crucifix on the east wall or not is open to conjecture.

Archbishop Woods wrote to Ken Brierty on the 23 April 1970 and suggested the crucifix should remain where it was until he could come himself or Bishop Arnott to view it. However he added, *"if you have to do something about it immediately my advice would be that if there is even a small group of people who are frightened by its present position, I would put it back on the west wall where it was before"*. So we learn the crucifix was first positioned on the west wall, then above the altar rails and finally to where it is now.

Our exciting conclusion - how did the Crucifix come to be in its present position? On October 14 1970 Ken Brierty wrote to the Archbishop seeking permission to place the crucifix on the east wall and inquiring whether another Faculty was required. Archbishop Woods responded on 21 October 1970 saying that a second Faculty was not required. More importantly he would *"gladly give permission for you to move your Crucifix against the east wall..."*. Now why the change of heart from the Archbishop? Frank Woods explains *"I also agree with you that the Crucifix in its present position is menacing to those who kneel beneath it"*. So we are now all agreed on safety but why permit positioning it on the east wall? The Archbishop finally came to see like

so many of us at St Margaret's now and then, in the words of Frank Woods, *"its design is quite suitable for an east wall since it speaks of glory rather than a tragedy"*. Yes there is crucifixion but also radiating light and resurrection life.

Matcham Skipper

This section concerning the person of Matcham skipper draws heavily on the *Eltham: Then and Now Website*. As a sculptor and jeweller Matcham skipper has made a significant contribution to the art of Australia. Over many years he has fulfilled commissions of great heritage value and crafted artworks of prize winning status which are represented in national Gallery collections throughout Australia and in the museums of Europe. His greatest contribution is probably as teacher and mentor. Working from his studio at Montsalvat he inspires his pupils and he continues to expand his own artistic horizons and takes them on a journey of discovery. Matcham was born in 1921 and was married to the well-known artist Myra. Together they had five artistic children. Thus, our work has artistic value internationally, nationally and locally. It also has great theological value and a great treasure of our Parish. Matcham passed away in March 2011.