

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE AT MIRFIELD

Many religious communities are attracting increasing numbers of visitors. For CR at Mirfield this has become a major factor of life: individuals and groups visiting, but also institutions wanting to have their home here.

The **Retreat House** has room for up to 47 guests, individuals and groups, who come to stay for several days of either guided or private retreat, and worship with the Community.

The **College of the Resurrection** opened in 1903, and continues as a major user of the church today. In 1904 it became the first Affiliated College of the University of Leeds, and in recent years the involvement in the University has become very strong.

In 1997 the **Mirfield Centre** was founded, running day-events and conferences, and working with ecumenism and inter-faith questions. This regularly brings large groups into the church for the Community's services.

In 2005 the **Romanian Orthodox parish** of St Macarie was founded, and that uses the Lower Church for its liturgy every Sunday, with congregations on major festivals of over 200 people. Twice a month they have a common meal together in the College.

In 2006 the **Wakefield School of Ministry** was founded - this brings 60 people plus staff to Mirfield on one Sunday a month for worship in the Lower Church and a day of study, including a sit-down meal (we now have 3 refectories on the site and 2 kitchens).

In 2007 the **Diocesan Resources Centre** moved to this site, a resource for Anglicans and Methodists coming from all over West Yorkshire.

In 2008 the new **Yorkshire Ministry Course** established its base in the College. There had been a link for more than 10 years with its predecessor, including regular use of the church for worship, and that has now increased. The Retreat House is fully used by YMC for residential weekend accommodation. They have two CR chaplains, and regularly participate in the Community's worship.

In the same year the **Mirfield Liturgical Institute** was established. This offers courses up to PhD level, and also facilitates private research, in liaison with St Anselmo in Rome and the German Liturgical Institute in Trier. In due course it will also do work at parish level.

What are people looking for?

Part of the attraction of Mirfield and other Communities has to do with a thirst for spiritual things and for meaning which has a new intensity. There is an opportunity here asking to be seized.

There are many today who think monasticism holds a key to the future not only of the Church, but of society, responding to a desire for community and belonging, for simpler living, and for a life that has meaning and orientation. There is a new openness to self-limitation, to be seen most obviously in our concern for the environment.

The Community of the Resurrection now finds it needs to respond to these things, spurred on by an urgent need to refurbish its church and buildings, which have become unusable. Before explaining that further, we need to say something about the church.

The Church



The eastern end of our large and beautiful church was designed by Sir Walter Tapper (for background see www.sir-walter-tapper-churches.co.uk). Work began in 1911, halted by the First World War, by which time the easternmost Resurrection Chapel had been completed, with the east ambulatory and what was to be part of the high altar area. This trunk was the Community's church for the next 20 years.

In 1935 Tapper's son Michael was commissioned to complete the church. It was the time of the Great Depression, and throughout the project there were worries about finance. So what Tapper the younger designed was something much simpler, shorter and lower. The original elaborate, cavernous, cathedral-like design (taller than most English cathedrals, though) was abandoned in favour of something completely different: severe white plaster, simple arches, and a brick exterior in 'Odeon' style, shorter, smaller than what his father intended, yet still monumental. Work was completed in 1938.



Viewed from the south the church looks a muddled but imposing giant. The green twin 'pepper-pots' at the west end are visible from far around - other than that it is mostly invisible to the neighbourhood. Within the grounds, grass slopes surround three sides, while the handsome pseudo-Byzantine apse of 1911 in Runcorn stone surveys the front lawn of the House.



Here is an unusual building that means a great deal to the Community (we spend a large part of our life in it) and also to many people far and near. Walter Tapper's architecture has an integrity that bears any amount of scrutiny. However long we have been here, and some brothers have been in CR since the 1940s, his architectural east end continues to speak with a fresh voice.

The entrance is towards the east end – first-time visitors are usually a bit thrown on entering. On one side they see the lofty Resurrection Chapel with its lateral chapels, while on the other they find they are behind the high altar.

The Resurrection Chapel in the eastern apse has always been a 'shrine' for the Community, a focus for personal prayer and the place of the weekday eucharist. It is an important symbol to us of our dedication to the Resurrection, and a place that people naturally gravitate to pray in. On important feasts there is a procession at the start of evensong. This happens approximately 20 times in the year. Brethren and congregation gather, usually in the Resurrection chapel, where a short liturgical unit is celebrated, and then all proceed singing down the side-aisle to the west end, and then back through the centre into choir, where the illuminated Resurrection Chapel continues to make its presence felt behind the high altar.



Over its altar stands a *ciborium* in 'Festival of Britain' style by Michael Tapper, a memorial to one of the early Superiors, Keble Talbot. This was simplified in 1980 by removing polychrome decoration, filigree fretwork, brass finials, and a rear curtain. The sacrament is reserved in a hanging pyx, after the medieval English use. The cross and candlesticks are by Comper. The chapel is, surprisingly, devoid of any reference to the Resurrection. Either side of it stand the small chapels of the Holy Cross and the Ascension.

Working our way through the church, we come to the high altar from behind. Here is a broad and simple space with changing light according to seasons and times of day. The high altar is built of rough ashlar blocks that were intended to be faced with a decorative wooden front which was never made. Many people comment on the oddness of the single pillar behind the altar: this is in fact a common feature of medieval churches - Exeter cathedral for example. Tapper intended wrought-iron screens to stand between the pillars, which would have made it look less odd, but we are grateful for the unusual spaciousness around the altar and the view through to the Resurrection chapel behind. The sanctuary contains no furniture, but there stand either side of the altar two tomb-chests marking the place of the ashes of Charles Gore, the Community's founder, and Walter Frere its first Superior, which are beneath them. These were two great men in their time: Gore as a modernizing theologian and bishop, Frere as scholar, liturgist and ecumenist. By Walter's burial-place is a large triptych painted by a Russian nun in the 1930's in his memory.



Above the altar step hangs a crucifix given in 1948 in memory of Bishop James Nash CR. By Michael Tapper, it is clear he did not have much experience in representing human anatomy.

Next we come to the monastic choir stalls, designed in 1952 by Michael Tapper. Their layout in individual blocks is curious, and not well suited to singing. Beyond them lies what we would call the nave, a completely bare space, apart from glimpses of the fine Stations of the Cross by Joseph Cribb, of the school of Eric Gill.

In the crypt beneath is the simple chapel of the College of the Resurrection, nowadays also used by many institutions and groups.

Why the changes?

Hereby lies a complex story. It starts with the remarkable screw-fed coal heating system put in in 1938. This caused warm air to trickle through gratings. In 1995 it came to the end of its life and was replaced by gas heating, the air now power-driven through the grilles. Too late it was discovered that this caused serious black marking of the white interior. In the autumn of 2007 this system in its turn collapsed. By coincidence at the same time the electrical system went dramatically wrong, and large parts of the wiring had to be replaced by temporary cable nailed to the walls. So there is no heat, some lights don't work, and sometimes the organ cuts out.

The engineering firm Arup conducted a thorough survey and concluded that the only form of heating they could recommend was underfloor heating, expensive to install but cheap to run. This would in most of the church involve a thin heating layer, but in the choir where the community spend most of their praying lives, the sunken well could be used to install a thicker, more powerful layer. This would necessitate removal of the choir-stalls.

This now meshes with another set of problems. In 2004 the Community abandoned the choirstalls and instead sat between them. The effect on our singing and sense of community was dramatic. In addition guests, formerly ‘outside’ our worship beyond the screen, could now be with us in it by sitting in the stalls we had abandoned.

Once too far away, however, guests can at times be a bit too near, putting us off our stroke if they participate with enthusiasm. In addition, although the church is the size of a cathedral, there is little space to seat people. If we have the College worshipping with us, a retreat group in residence, and a large visiting group from the Mirfield Centre coming to evensong, many find themselves crammed in the dark aisles and other corners. The choir-stalls themselves seat three people to a bay, where a pew the same length can seat six.

The conclusion is obvious: instead of the choir-stalls we need a freer space where we can experiment with the right configuration for guests, and with more efficient use of the space for seating people.

This leads now to a further problem. Our daily eucharist used to be celebrated in the Resurrection chapel. Its eight levels, however, meant that participation was lacklustre and infirm brothers could not have a part in the liturgy. We became so ill at ease with it as a space for worship that in 2005 we started experimental use of the flat space of the nave. The effect, again, was an immediate transformation, remarked upon by many guests. Even very infirm brethren could now preside at the altar, sometimes with a little help from their brothers, something incidentally remarked upon by guests as an example for the rest of society. The purpose of this experiment was to see what would be needed in a renewed Resurrection Chapel. It was clear it needs to lose its steps as well as the unremarkable ciborium over the altar. A level chapel would then, we thought, need a focus that spoke of the Resurrection, and we conceived of an eastern altar adorned with scenes of the Resurrection. The chapel would need an art work higher up in the apse that would be visible throughout the church, as there was something very important about the unusual way the chapel can be in a kind of conversation with the rest of the building. But that must wait, we have decided, until we see the finished space.

A further consequence of installing underfloor heating is the need to dismantle the tomb-chests either side of the high altar. In the late 1960s a reordering plan was commissioned from Murray and Maguire which included removing the tombs. In the event the cost was more than could be managed. In fact Michael Tapper himself was opposed to putting the tomb-chests there, writing in a letter, “I wonder whether future generations will say ‘why on earth did these people lumber up the sanctuary by putting tombs here?’ ” Our instinct, like his, is to free up the fine architecture that has been cluttered by their insertion, while at the same time making the altar space more accessible when there are very large numbers in church. The ashes of our founders will, however, remain exactly where they are in their honoured place, interred in the ground and marked by a floor-plaque, which was the original arrangement. The inscriptions from the ‘tombs’ will have a prominent home in our planned new building.

We have explored the possibility of a dramatic floor design showing a ‘River of Life’. We have listened carefully to the comments received, and have decided to modify this. In November the Chapter decided to recommend “a ceramic tile floor ... either using a neutral colour or a more marked colour scheme – the final choice being dependent on further information”. On ceramic tiles our architects, Harris McMillan of Exeter, write: “underfloor heating could not be installed if stone was retained. Much of the floor is suspended, with another storey underneath ... the combined weight of an underfloor heating system and a stone covering would be too great for the existing structure ... As well as this, a stone floor finish of this thickness (c 100mm) would not be the most efficient material to use over underfloor heating: the heating response would be slow and a significant amount of the heat would be deflected downwards by the density of the material. The use of the stone would also increase the thickness of the floor overall – requiring adjustment at all wall junctions and reconstruction of thresholds and staircases. The Community in any case finds the finish over such a vast area difficult to keep clean – it retains stains, candle wax etc.”

If those challenges were not enough, there is another yet to be mentioned, crucial to the scheme. There was a time when all the side chapels were used, but with the liturgical reforms of the mid-20th century they fell into desuetude. More recently we have found ourselves using them again with pilgrim groups who come to Mirfield, by taking a group from chapel to chapel, singing as they go, with a short service at each chapel. The chapels trace the events of our redemption: Incarnation, cross, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost. With a little adaptation they could become alive again - spaces where many folk can walk through the story of the faith, and where many in an age which has a poor grasp of the Christian story may experience it in a vivid way, by following what we have called 'Stations of Salvation'.

As a back-up to this we have taken the decision to turn the sacristy into a chapel - it is a beautiful space, very appropriate for worship. It will be dedicated to St James, on whose day the Community was founded, and patron saint of pilgrims. It will also be equipped as an 'education room' to provide a base for the many school classes who are now geared up to come on day-visits as part of the National Curriculum. It will also contain a permanent exhibition on the Community's history and Anglican Religious Life, and we hope, with grant funding, to kick-start this work with schools by employing a full-time educational worker for the first year. St James's chapel will also provide a suitable chapel for the worship and addresses of retreat groups, who at present have to use the less satisfactory setting of a common room in the House.

The 'Stations of Salvation' would take the following form:

1. Nativity, with a new statue of the BVM;
2. Christ's ministry (St James's chapel);
3. The Cross (Holy Cross chapel);
4. The Resurrection, including circling of the altar of that name, on which Resurrection narratives will be depicted;
5. Commissioning of the apostles (Ascension chapel, now becoming the Reconciliation chapel);
6. Ascension (new station by the memorial of Walter Frere);
7. Pentecost (the cantharus/font at the west end);
8. The Holy Trinity (the high altar).

The west balcony will be extended, to make room for a larger organ, should that ever prove possible, for overflow seating, and as a multi-purpose space for use with groups. There will be a lift linking all floors.

The entrance to the new monastery will be in the north wall under the balcony, giving access to the new sacristy, which will be part of the new building.

Some home-made pictures by the brethren:



What are our guiding aims?

The main aim is to restore our now-abandoned church to usability. That accounts for the bulk of the £2m for which we are appealing. Other things arise from it:

The need to level the floor gives us a unique opportunity to think how we can make the most of this wonderful building for the needs of today.

The Community of the Resurrection has a tradition of engaging with society. In South Africa this included the struggle against Apartheid. In modern Britain we speak to a big hole at the heart of society that is to do with a sense of common purpose, a sense of being rooted in a framework of mutual responsibility, in a world where too many people, especially young people, put their individual selves at the centre of the universe, resulting in a diminishment that we are all aware of. We have a chance to make our church building a place that faces people with something different: something bigger than themselves that calls them beyond the self, and gives them a sense of the mystery of God and the new way opened up by Christ. Human beings need healthy frameworks, and without them they are shadows of what they could be. We hope you will support us in making the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield a place that can help change society for the good.

POSTSCRIPT

The old Community House is no longer viable as a home for a religious community, and also now needs major refurbishment. The regular income of the Community also needs urgent supplementing from some source. Following expert advice we have decided to build a new monastery alongside the church, funded by sale of some Community assets, and to turn the old house into flats to bring in a rental income. The proposal at the moment is that the conversion into flats be funded by making a small peripheral piece of land available for construction of a care home by a developer.

In due course there will be further information about the new monastery and the other projects on our website.

We hope our friends will share our faith in the future, not only of all that goes on at Mirfield, but of the Religious Life itself.

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