

Reredos mosaic in memory of Richard Owen Armstrong and Hannah Armstrong

The reredos mosaic was commissioned by Mary Hannah Shaw, wife of James Herbert Shaw, of Coolbawn, Ailesbury Road, in memory of her parents Richard and Hannah Armstrong. The Shaws were long-time members of the congregation of St John's, using pew no. 26. Mr Shaw served as a trustee of the church for a number of years.

An inventory of documents held at the Victoria and Albert Museum archive in London, compiled by Dr Dennis Hadley, attributes the mosaic to James Powell and Sons of Whitefriars in London, also known as Whitefriars Glass, a firm of English glassmakers, leadlighters and stained glass window manufacturers. The business existed from the 17th century, but became well known as a result of the 19th century Gothic Revival and the demand for stained glass windows. Dr Hadley examined cash books and order books which included details of the Armstrong memorial. The relevant entry reads:

“611. p.134 28/10/09 St John, Sandymount, Dublin, Ireland 2 opus panels, apse. Angels after Gozzoli. Sk 4 ctns. Hardgrave £211”

From this entry, we may deduce that Mrs. Shaw paid £211 for the memorial in 1909, the year her father died, and that it was designed by Charles Hardgrave (1848 – post 1920), who was for many years Powell's highest paid in-house designer, and whose speciality was opus sectile and mural decorations.

The term 'opus sectile' refers to an art technique popularized in the ancient Roman world where materials were cut and inlaid into walls and floors to make a picture or pattern. Common materials were marble, mother of pearl, and glass. Although the technique died in Rome with the decline of the Empire, it continued to be used prominently in Byzantine churches. In England, the technique was revived in the late 19th century by artists working in the Arts and Crafts movement, among them the above-mentioned Charles Hardgrave.

The reference to "Angels after Gozzoli" relates to the works of **Benozzo Gozzoli** (c. 1421 – 1497), an Italian Renaissance painter from Florence. He is best known for a series of murals in the chapel of the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence depicting festive, vibrant processions with wonderful attention to detail and a pronounced International Gothic influence. He frescoed two choirs of angels in the chapel following the style of his master Fra Angelico.

Dr Hadley's inventory lists many items commissioned by churches in Ireland from Powell and Sons, including the reredos in St. Stephen's (the 'Peppercannister' Church) and numerous works in the now-demolished churches of St. Peter and St Matthias in Dublin.

Richard Owen Armstrong and Hannah Armstrong

Richard Owen Armstrong, J.P. was born in 1825, the son of Owen Armstrong Esq and Elizabeth née Garnett of Gormanston Green, Co Meath and Charles Street, Dublin. He was a solicitor in the firm Newton and Armstrong and became Chief Clerk to the Lord Chancellor of Ireland, Lord O'Hagan. Following his retirement, he served as a director of a number of companies, among them the Royal Bank of Ireland and the Midland and Great Western Railway and was a member of the Board of Guardians of the Dublin Lying-in Hospital. He was also a Governor of the Bluecoat School and a director of the Dublin Artisans' Dwelling Company, as a result of which Armstrong Street at Harold's Cross was named after him. He was 84 years of age when he died in 1909. He was predeceased by his wife Hannah (née Davidson), a native of Edinburgh.

The Armstrong family lived at 5 Clifton Terrace in Monkstown. There were two sons and three daughters. Both sons died before their father: George Charles perished tragically, aged 24 years, in a fire at an hotel in Sydney, Australia on Christmas Day 1888, and Henry Robert died in London in 1906 a few weeks after the death of his mother. The daughters, Elizabeth Stuart, who married Herbert Rawson, Nannie Cavendish Armstrong as well as Mrs Shaw, survived their parents.

The Armstrong burial ground is at Deansgrange Cemetery in Blackrock. It has been shared with the sisters of the Community of St John the Evangelist.

Sources:

<http://www.tilesoc.org.uk/pdf/opuslist.pdf>
www.tilesoc.org.uk/tile-gazetteer/gloucestershire.html
www.lynnpearson.co.uk/Wiltshire.pdf
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magi_Chape