

Nathaniel Hitch

Architectural Sculptor and Modeller



OCCASIONAL MONOGRAPH No. 1
February 2010



Truro Cathedral

Nathaniel Hitch

Architectural Sculptor and Modeller

Introduction

As you enter Truro Cathedral your eyes are drawn down the nave towards the magnificent sculpture at the east end. In many ways the High Altar and the accompanying Reredos are the primary focus of attention. Nathaniel Hitch was the name of the sculptor of the reredos and this short monograph brings together the research that has been accumulated over the years. Further research needs to be undertaken so that we can expand this knowledge base, but this is a start.

Born

31st May 1845 in Ware in Hertfordshire

Died

Early 1938

Childhood

Showed great facility with his hands at an early age. There is a small model he made at the age of 12 in the vestry of Ware Parish Church.ⁱ

Apprenticeship

He left home at the age of 14 and went to London where he was apprenticed to the firm of Farmer & Brindley (Westminster Bridge Road) who were architectural sculptors of repute working in both wood and stone for architects like Sir Gilbert Scott (Albert Memorial, Westminster Cathedral) and Alfred Waterhouse (Natural History Museum). It is likely that Hitch helped with these projects carving out rough-hewn forms ready for the master carver to add the fine details and finishing touches to the sculpture. This is where Nathaniel Hitch learnt his trade. The firm even sent its apprentices to art classesⁱⁱ at the newly established Borough Polytechnic Institute. It is unclear how long he worked for them but it seems that he left them for Thomas



Nathaniel Hitch with his wife and large family.

Nichollsⁱⁱⁱ a sculptor who worked for the architect William Burges on Lord Bute's Cardiff Castle (1868-1881). It is interesting to note that Thomas Nicholls was one of JL Pearson's preferred sculptors^{iv}, so it is possible to speculate that this is where he might have first met Pearson, a meeting that would eventually lead to such a fruitful working relationship.

Nathaniel Hitch – Architectural Sculptor and Modeller

The life of a sculptor in Victorian times was very precarious. Not only was there a lack of sculpture commissions (certainly compared with other art forms such as painting) but to pay for and create 'speculative' works to show off your talent (at exhibitions etc) was prohibitively expensive. The key to success as a sculptor was to establish and develop a relationship with a patron, preferably a rich one. Hitch didn't find a private patron, but over the years established a number of 'professional' patrons in the form of architects.

It is interesting and very illuminating to look at Hitch's first ten years of self-employed work from 1885-1894.⁹ In this time he completed 32 commissions, only four of which were for architects other than J.L Pearson. (two of the commissions were for WD Caröe, a former pupil of J.L Pearson). Amongst those Pearson commissions were works for Westminster Abbey, Lincoln Cathedral, Peterborough Cathedral, Bristol Cathedral, Rochester Cathedral, Sydney Cathedral and of course Truro Cathedral. It is clear that at some point J.L Pearson had come across Hitch (perhaps at Thomas Nicholl's studio?) and admired his work and perhaps suggested that he could guarantee work to allow Hitch to strike out on his own.

The great majority of Nathaniel Hitch's work was in or on church buildings. He was fortunate to work at the tail-end of the Gothic Revival movement in the late nineteenth century. This movement had seen a huge number of new churches being built together with a large number of restorations and so there was a plentiful supply of commissions in this niche market.

Of the 32 commissions, a quarter were for the sculpting of a Reredos (8), and indeed throughout his career he specialised in this most demanding of sculpture (27% over his entire career). One could imagine that this specialisation gained him a fine reputation and thus a steady stream of work came his way.

He referred to himself as an 'architectural sculptor' so he obviously thought of himself as more of a craftsman than an artist. This is reflected in the fact that there is only one salon work listed to Nathaniel Hitch; that being a bust of F.Weekes Esq. which was shown at the 1884 Royal Academy Exhibition. It is interesting to note that one of the ways to pick up private commissions was by submitting sculptures to exhibitions. As this was just before he went self-employed it might be said that perhaps he was testing the waters for commissions.

Nathaniel continued to work well into his eighties until his deteriorating eyesight meant that he finally had to retire in 1929 (aged 84). His son, Frederick Brook Hitch, who had been working in the business since the age of 16 (1893) wasn't really interested in continuing the family business. He was much more a salon sculptor and eventually went to Royal Academy of Art School, going on to exhibit regularly at the Royal Academy. The workshop and business closed down in 1939 (presumably at the outbreak of war). Nathaniel himself died in early 1938 aged 92.

The first ten years of commissions (1885-1894)

YEAR	ARCHITECT	BUILDING	SCULPTURE
1885	JL Pearson	Thurstaston Church, Cheshire	Reredos in alabaster with sculpture
”	JL Pearson	Sydney Cathedral	Reredos in alabaster with sculpture
1886	JL Pearson	Headingley Church, Leeds	Pulpit with sculpture
”	WD Caröe	Tortworth Church	Wood Triptych with sculpture
1887	JL Pearson	Truro Cathedral	Reredos (stone)
”	”	”	Sculpture to N & S Sediliae
”	”	”	Sculptured panels and figures in South Porch and Interior
”	”	”	Carvings to Choir Stalls
1888	JL Pearson	Bristol Cathedral	Reredos and Credence (stone) Statues to western towers
”	”	Cambridge University Library	Statues over Gateway leading to Quadrangle
”	”	Westminster Hall	Statues, general carving, heraldic animals to staircase
1889	”	Rochester Cathedral	Stone Choir Screen and statues
”	”	St Stephen's Bournemouth	Sculpture to stalls, pulpit, altar table and triptych
1890	”	Peterborough Cathedral	Sculptured panels and figures for oak pulpit,
”	”	Westminster Abbey	Statues to North Transept
1891	”	Peterborough Cathedral	Sculptured panels and figures for stalls in choir
”	”	Oxford University, New College Chapel	Statues to large stone screen and stone sedilia
1892	”	Peterborough Cathedral	Sculptured panels and figures for Bishop's throne,
”	”	Laverstoke Church	Sculpture to Wood Triptych
”	”	Ayr Church	Pulpit with sculpture
”	”	Burley Church, Leeds	Pulpit with sculpture
”	W. Colson	Lockerley Church	Reredos in alabaster and marble
1893	JL Pearson	Streatley Parish Church	Reredos in alabaster
”	”	St Mary's Pembroke	Reredos with sculptures
”	”	Lincoln Cathedral	Oak Statuettes (67) to old stalls in choir and Bishop's throne
”	WD Caröe	Barrow-on-Soar, Leicester	Reredos with sculptures
1894	JL Pearson	St Paul's, Maidstone	Reredos with sculptures
”	”	St Helen's, Bishopsgate	Sculpture to Triptych in teakwood
1894-6	”	Astor Estate Offices	Wood statuettes, medallions
”	”	Lincoln Cathedral	Restoration of figure in S. Porch
”	”	Catholic Apostolic Church, Maida Vale	Alabaster altar and statue of the Good Shepherd
”	E. Swifen Harris	St Philip's, Cheam	Triptych and Wall Screens

His workshop

He seems to have lived and worked for his whole career at 60 Harleyford Road, Vauxhall, Kennington, in London. The building still exists and is a semi-detached house on four floors with a gateway opening into a yard and back garden. Richard Hitch (grandson) remembers that Nathaniel's workshop filled the back garden. It was a corrugated iron structure which the council had given him permission to have it for a year. But the structure was still there when he retired.

Unusually in this time Nathaniel Hitch photographed a great number of his works and Richard Hitch remembers his dark room in the yard at the back of the house. A number of photo albums are in the Hitch family possession while one is at the Henry Moore Institute and one at the National Monuments Record Centre in Swindon. A number of photographs show pieces destined for Truro Cathedral (none for the reredos – unfortunately), but there is some research work to be done as some of the photos are misnamed or for a different building entirely.

Truro Cathedral Sculptures

From Nathaniel Hitch's own list of executed works we see that he created sculptures in several different areas of the Cathedral:

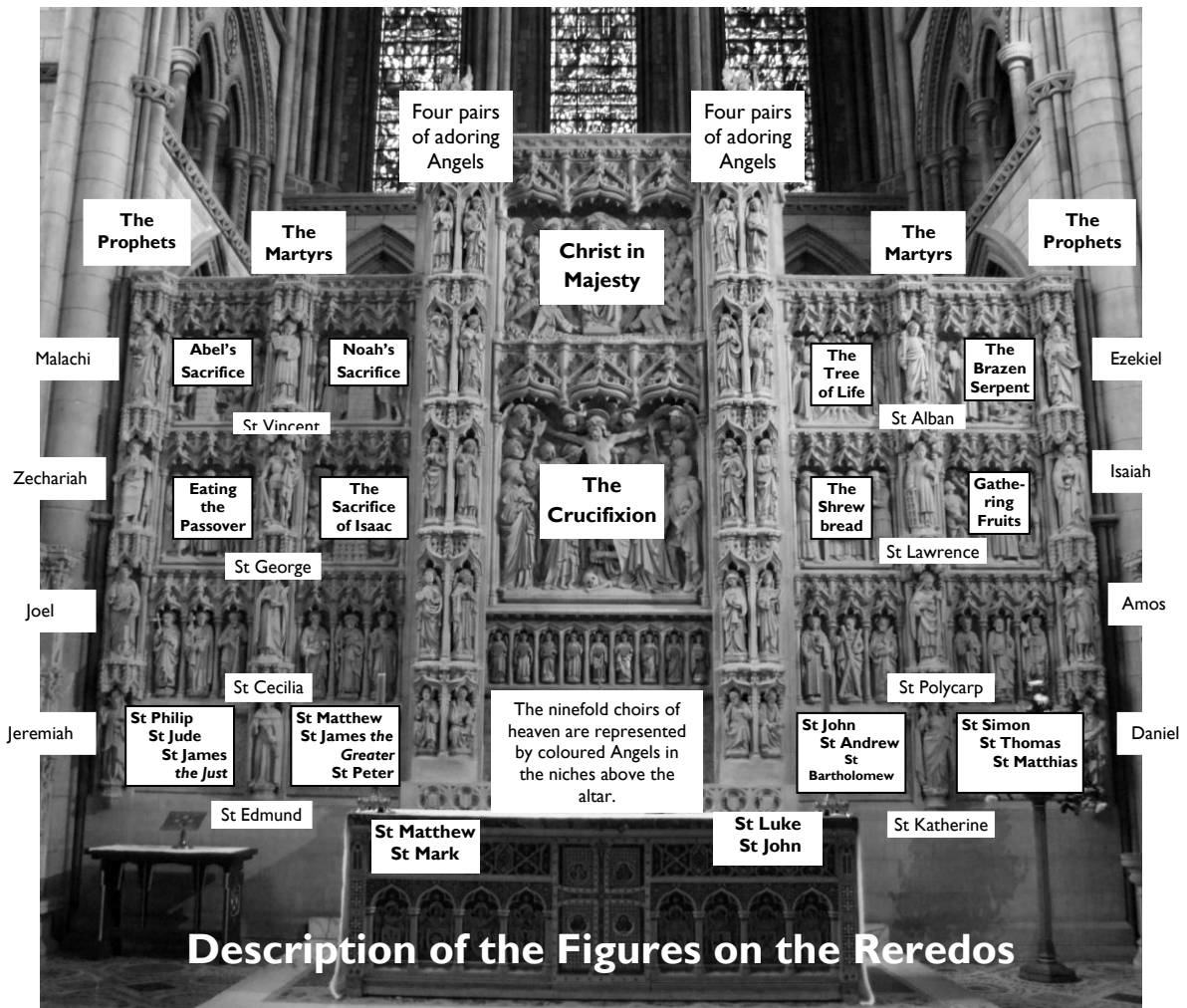
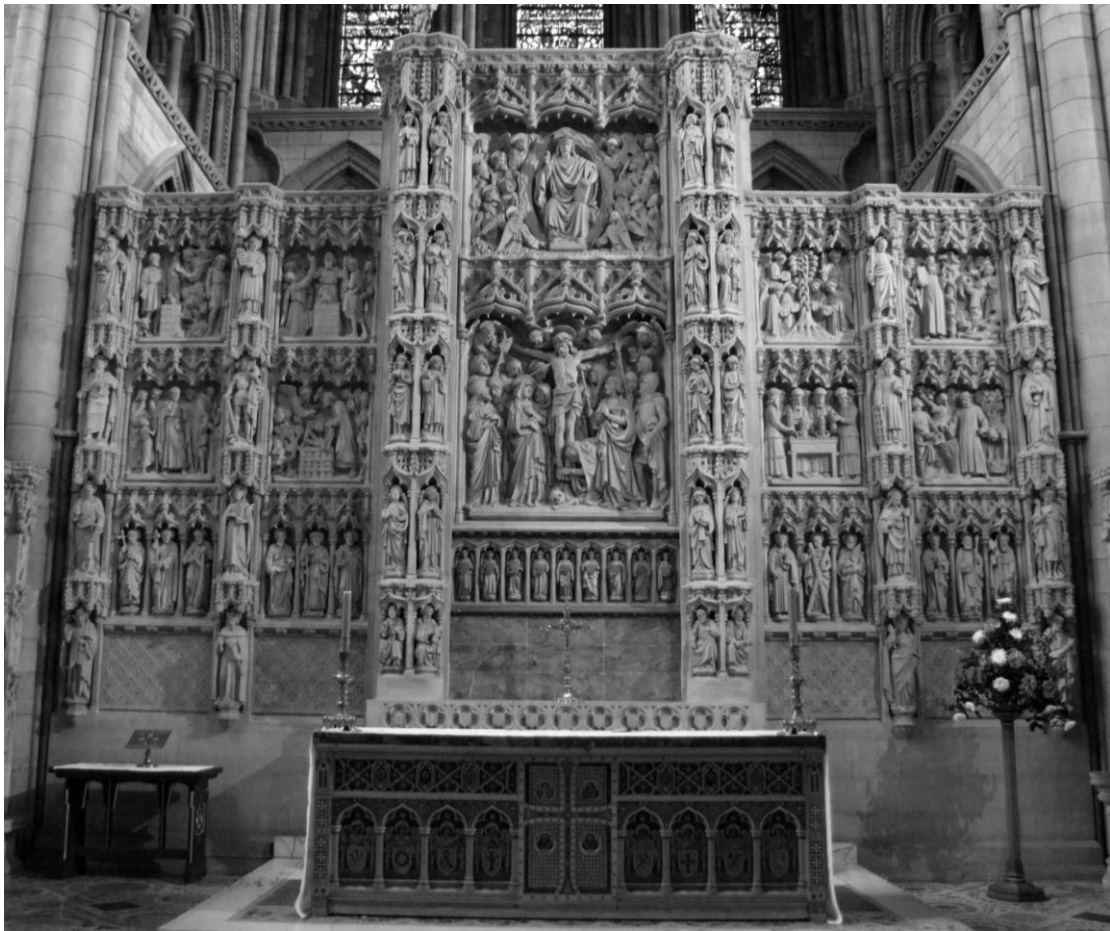
1. Reredos and sculpture to N. and S. Sediliae
2. Statues on the West Front and tympanum panels in west porch
3. Choir stall carvings
4. Tympanum panels and figures for South Porch and interior of Cathedral

The Reredos

Designed by JL Pearson but the sculpture is incomplete (the original drawing was to have a series of pinnacles as at Bristol). It was constructed in three sections and carved from Bath stone. It was a gift from the Deanery of Powder. We think that the reredos was probably carved on site – but not sure.

A reredos (also spelled raredos) is a screen or decoration behind the altar in a church, usually depicting religious iconography or images also called altarpiece. It can be made of stone, wood, metal, ivory, or a combination of materials. The images may be painted, carved, gilded, composed of mosaics, and/or embedded with niches for statues. Sometimes a tapestry is used, or other fabric such as silk or velvet. The term is derived from the a Middle English term which is derived from an Anglo-Norman 14th century term areredos, from arere behind +dos back, from Latin dorsum. In French and sometimes in English, this is called a retable (in Spain a retablo etc). WIKIPEDIA

JL Pearson designed the High Altar and Reredos to be the focus of attention inside the cathedral. In 1886 he said, "Upon the design of this I have devoted a considerable amount of time and study for upon this feature I rely more than any other for giving dignity to the general design of the interior of the cathedral, it being the centre and culminating point of the choir. I propose to execute it in Bath Stone so that it shall have the effect of being part and parcel of the building."



Description of the Figures on the Reredos

How Pearson creates the focus on the High Altar and reredos



- 1) He heightens the visual effect by bringing the reredos into prominence by the flood of light falling on it from the windows of the SE Transept
- 2) Using the horizontal effect of the 'line' of capitals on the columns and the line of the coursing separating the arches from the triforium, he draws the onlookers eye irresistibly towards the High Altar and reredos.

“The great reredos in Truro Cathedral is a "magical work" in which its creator, Nathaniel Hitch has made stone do what by its nature it cannot do, and that is speak two messages at once. The central and powerful panels of the reredos show Christ seated in glory above Christ suffering in agony on the cross. The magic comes when gazing at the piece. Whichever element you have in focus you cannot escape "seeing" the other in your peripheral vision. Thus the stone "says" when you look on Christ in glory it is the same as looking at him in agony. In stone the reredos radiates the message of Christ Crucified as recounted in the Gospel according to St John - God's majesty is seen on earth in his vulnerability and suffering. It speaks powerfully in the "Kingdom Season", that period between All Saints and The First Sunday of Advent when the Church ponders the mystery of the sovereignty - the Kingship of Christ.”

Canon Paul Mellor

ⁱ Letter from Richard Hitch to Murray Smith

ⁱⁱ Richard Hitch has a portfolio of life drawings

ⁱⁱⁱ Transcription notes of photo album in possession of Henry Moore Institute.

^{iv} JL Pearson by Quiney p174

^v From Hitch's List of Completed works