

Appendix to ‘In the frame: Gert van Lon, C.R. Ashbee and the Chapel of King’s College, Cambridge’

by JEAN MICHEL MASSING and AURÉLIE PETIOT

Letter dated June 1932 from C.R. Ashbee to the Dean of King’s College, Eric Milner-White. (Cambridge, King’s College Archive Centre, King’s, KC/KCAR/KCC/364).

To the Dean the Rev. E. Milner-White, King’s College, Cambridge.
June 1932.

C.R. Ashbee’s notes on the designs for the proposed ‘founder’s memorial chapel’ in the North Chantry.

1. The object of the designs submitted is twofold:

A. To supply a fitting frame for the ‘Madonna’, thus resetting the picture as an altarpiece, for which purpose it was no doubt originally painted.
B. To carry out the problem you set me, of utilizing the chantry as a memorial chapel for distinguished Kingsmen, but in such a way as to retain a unity of design, and control or limit the memorials subsequently placed in it.

2. The designs suggest that B. is best achieved by a series of flat oak panels of varying shapes, free of all moulding, but with a uniform section capable of holding the metal tablets with such enamel as may be used from time to time. I have had in mind for this design the stal [*sic*] plates of the Garter (samples of which will be found on p. p. 151 and 154 of St John Hope’s ‘Heraldry for Craftsmen’. Pitman.) See also the armorial reproductions, plate IV and plate XII, in the ‘Heraldic Exhibition Catalogue’ Burlington House 1894. Chiswick Press 1896).² I submit, with the drawings, actual enamels, bronzes and samples of metalwork that have been made [by] chasers and enamellers who have worked for me. I would have you note specially the Tollemache-Hamilton shield in opaque red enamel.

3. There should be room for 50 bronze, copper gilt, or latten memorials, with or without enamel, on the South and North walls: and a method will be devised for either securing the tablets on to the oak, or bolting them through so as to fix them more firmly. If the latter is thought the better way it will be easy to construct the paneling so as to take it apart when occasion arises.

4. The paneling on the West wall is so designed as to enable your proposal of utilizing the lovely drawings (in reproduction) of the unfinished ‘Beauchamp M.S.’ I left my copy with you.³ This gives episodes from the Founder’s life. If that suggestion is adopted the reproductions should be on some permanent material, vellum perhaps or parchment, and put under glass in the five panels on the eye level. If it is not adopted then those panels can be used as designed for memorials to

Kingsmen in the same way as the others. I hesitate to advise utilizing the reproductions thus, on account for the delicacy of the workmanship, till I have tested them in position, and in the light they will be looked at, and think the alternative suggested in 9. below may be better.

5. I have used two of the carved medieval motives – one from the beautiful oak door of the chantry, the other (the cresting) from the 15c cresting in the South Chantry. It was desirable to link up in this way the frankly modern handling of the paneling with the traditional framing suitable for the picture in its chantry setting. The carved frieze of the paneling will be solid carving as in the chantry door, not applied. The styles of the panels will be mason jointed, and I propose to get part of the effect by pegging with ebony or bone.

6. The frame will be gilded, but in subdued gilding to harmonize with the picture. On the wings of the folding doors I suggest two dedicatory inscriptions. That on the right is an extract from the Founder’s will. The words are singularly beautiful, and as he undoubtedly used them himself it seems appropriate to incorporate them with his memorial. On the left I suggest a reference to the picture. It appears to have been painted about the year of his death, and it is undoubtedly the sort of picture he would have wished to see in his chapel.⁴

7. The picture will stand, in the customary manner, on a retable supported by two oak corbels. These I want to carve in oak, in the solid. As subject is needed for them I want your help in finding it. There are three sources from which we might draw:

a) The founder’s patron saint

b) Historical examples from his life

c) Examples taken from the book of his Miracles (Harpesfield quoted by Gasquet) or of the pre-Reformation popular cultus of the king.⁵

The subject chosen must of course be suitable to a stylized wood carvers’s [*sic*] treatment. A. I should regard as a bit conventional and we might do better. I would prefer subjects drawn from b. or c. can you, or the Fellows select anything dealing with the beginning of the College, or the breaking off of the great enterprise during the wars of the Roses, or some outstanding episode in the King’s life? Our pre-reformation ancestors would probably have selected c. and perhaps we are now sufficiently free from either ‘protestant’ or ‘roman’ bias to pick one or other of the quite well authenticated examples of faith healing that are recorded among the miracles, not to mention the other curious stories that testify [to] the extraordinary love he inspired in the people. Were he living now he would presumably be

¹ W.H. St John Hope: *Heraldry for Craftsmen and Designers*, London 1920, pp.151 and 154.

² *Illustrated Catalogue of the Heraldic Exhibition, Burlington House 1894*, London 1896, pls.V and XII.

³ *Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick*, K.G. 1389–1439, ed. Viscount Dillon and W.H. St John Hope, photo-engraved from the original manuscript in the British Museum by Emery Walker, London 1914; see also *The Will of King Henry VI: now first printed in full from the original: in commemoration of the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone of King’s College Chapel*, Cambridge 1896.

⁴ Henry VI died in 1471, while the painting by Gert van Lon was carried out between 1512 and 1520.

⁵ F.A. Gasquet: *The Religious Life of King Henry VI*, London 1923, pp.69–72 and 103–18.

⁶ Robert Cecil (1864–1958) and Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862–1932), both pacifists, were instrumental in founding the League of Nations in 1918. Dickinson was a close friend of Ashbee’s, whom he had met at King’s College as an undergraduate.

⁷ See Gasquet, *op. cit.* (note 5), esp. pp.109–10.

⁸ See *Illustrated Catalogue*, *op. cit.* (note 2), pls.XXIII and XXXIII.

⁹ *Richard II presented to the Virgin and Child by St John the Baptist and Sts Edward and Edmund* (‘The Wilton Diptych’), c.1395–99. (National Gallery, London). The outside doors are painted with the arms of King Richard II and a white hart chained with a crown around its neck; see D. Gordon: exh. cat. *Making and Meaning: the Wilton*

working with Cecil and Lowes Dickinson in the League of Nations.⁶ The 350 cases cited appear to have been grouped by the authorities in the reign of Henry VII under 'proven', 'non-proven' and 'doubtful'.⁷ If some of the more picturesque were to be subjected to modern medical or scientific investigation it might give interesting results. I suggest it as a possible fellowship thesis!

8. You asked me if the beautiful heraldic badges of Henry VI and Henry VII (see Heraldic Exhibition Catalogue plates XXIII and XXXIII) could be utilized, and the former perhaps on the wings of the reredos, above the inscription.⁸ I would like to test this before deciding, as it might jar with the colour desirable scheme, [sic] or disturb the concentration of the colour that is desirable in a design of this character. To put the heraldic coat, or coats, on the outside of the doors, – to be seen when closed, as in the Wilton Diptych would be more traditional, and also I think more effective and interesting.⁹ The arms or badge of Henry VII might be given a central position, – possibly in the cresting on the west wall, or in the carved frieze on the other walls. It was an obvious intention of the 15th century designers which I have followed to provide for later heraldic insertions. It depends, I think, whether we are to regard Henry VII as a joint founder, or as a royal benefactor, if the latter, his badge should not appear with that of the founder, for if it did, then why not also the badge of Richard III (see Willis and Clark, *Hist. Cambridge Vol. I* p 473 et seq.)¹⁰

9. I now return to 4. above my alternative to the insertion in the panelling of the Beauchamp MS reproductions is to put them in book form on a small lectern or reading desk of wrought iron, which I would design for you. The book might be in heavy oak boards, and locked to the lectern in the manner of the old chained bibles, I suggest it contains a number of leaves, each holding its reproduction, covered where necessary with protective transparent glazing, and stiffly mounted, so that they can be handled, as the Botticelli Dante drawings are handled in the museum in Berlin.¹¹ This book should contain also reproductions from the beautiful MSS records of the King's life.¹² I have been through great many of these in the MS room of the British museum. It would be quite possible to have some of them copied by hand, with all their colour and gilding, by pupils of Grailey Hewitt, or Johnson.¹³ In the Founder's chapel they ought to be seen together, and so seen as to be understood in reference to his life as a whole. This has never yet been done, because illuminated manuscripts have to be locked away as too precious, they are distributed in different libraries, they cannot be adequately reproduced by mechanical process, and to be properly appreciated must be moved about in accordance with the light as the page is turned. Also it would not be right to hang them on the wall near monumental enamels. They are too delicate for that. The two crafts, that of the enameller and the miniaturist, must not suffer to compete.

10. You asked me if the work could be done in sections. Certainly, and I think it would be better so done. Let Rattee and Kett submit provisional estimates for:

- a) The framing of the picture with the retable and doors
- b) Each of the three elevations separately.

That will give you four separate estimates. If you wanted to break up A. you might arrange for them to make the following allowance [sic] in their estimate.
 £10 for the gilding
 £10 for the painting of the heraldic badges, if we decide on them later
 £10 for the wrought iron hinges
 £20 for the carving of the two corbels.

We could then arrange to put the wings up later, and so complete the colouring and gilding of the whole frame work. But I think it would be a pity to do this.

11. That brings me to the last of my notes. Other things being equal there are advantages in breaking up the estimates. I have felt doing this design that there was something so solemn and dignified in the 15th c stonework with its graceful moulded shafts, that I have had no great desire to cloth it in wood. I want our wooden coat to be regarded in the light of a protection if we could get our bronze and enamel memorials flush with the grey stone, it would probably be a finer thing to do; – but it would be done at the cost of chipping and hacking the stone surface. That is the justification for our paneling and that makes it desirable to envisage the future, and if possible anticipate what others who come after us may do. So we may claim that we are following in the line of the great tradition.

My master, Bodley, used to say to us, his pupils, that in Lancastrian work – of which the unachieved project of the Founder at Cambridge is the last word, we see the beginning of our national architecture, even as in regency work we see the end. It is a logical movement over 400 years in which plastic form expresses what Englishmen believe to be beautiful and true.

When designing in modern material for modern needs we seek to throw away stylistic considerations and yet keep what is good and to live in our national tradition, we find ourselves searching for a formula that shall combine a use of the thousand and one ephemeral materials and mechanical processes that have destroyed the crafts, with that sense of permanence and that satisfaction of the personal need for creation that they imply.

We have not yet found the formula, and it is not to be found, I think, not in architectural style or fashion, but in that deeper aesthetic sense which the founder had, and which he tried subconsciously to carry out in his incomplete plans for King's; – perhaps in what he called 'kunnynge in dilatacion of the christen feith'.¹⁴

The younger postwar generations who find it in steel tubing, or in varying the processes of mass production that create such things, appear to be as far from finding it as were we. Nor do the ethics, and still less the economic theories, of the Fabian socialism, taken over many of them half baked from the Industrial age that went before, – to help. If my master, Bodley, was right, that there is something in the national tradition still to sift; and if I am right, that the formula is to be sought in the Founder's way of looking at things, we shall probably discover that there is a great deal more in the aesthetic approach to life – which was his – than we have hitherto imagined. That is why this memorial chapel, dedicated to his memory, has for me a very great significance.

With this are submitted:
 One sheet 1' scale E wall
 W
 N
 S

Full size details
 Showing colour distribution
 Full size of cresting
 First draft of lettering.

Seven bronze, enamel, and other metal models.

Diptych, London (National Gallery) 1993.

¹⁰ R. Willis and J.W. Clark: *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge and of the Colleges of Cambridge and Eton*, Cambridge 1886, I, pp.473–74.

¹¹ The Botticelli drawings entered the collections of the Kupferstichkabinett in the New Museum, Berlin, in 1886; see F. Lippmann: *Zeichnungen von Sandro Botticelli zu Dante's Goettlicher Komoedie nach den Originalen im K. Kupferstichkabinett zu Berlin*, Berlin 1887; *idem: Drawings by Sandro Botticelli for Dante's Divina Commedia: Reduced facsimiles after the originals in the Royal Museum Berlin, and in the Vatican Library*, London 1896; A. Venturi: *Il Botticelli interprete di Dante*, Florence 1922; H.-T. Schulze Altcapenberg, H. Bredekamp et al.: exh. cat. *Sandro Botticelli: der Bilderzyklus zu Dantes Göttlicher Komödie: mit einer repräsentativen Auswahl von Zeichnungen Botticellis*

und illuminierten Commedia-Handschriften der Renaissance, Berlin (Kupferstichkabinett) 2000; English ed., *Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) 2000.

¹² For the king's iconography, see J.W. McKenna: 'Henry VI of England and the dual monarchy: aspects of royal political propaganda 1422–1432', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 18 (1965), pp.145–62, pls.26–29; and H. Ryan: 'Portraits of the Founder at Eton and King's', *Eton Collections Review* 2 (2007), pp.36–50.

¹³ Grailey Hewitt (1864–1952) and Edward Johnson (1872–1944) were English calligraphers and both taught at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London.

¹⁴ 'kunnynge in dilatacion and stablishment of the christen feith' is the exact wording of the Founder's design; see Willis and Clark, *op. cit.* (note 10), p.353.