

Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 14:

Artistry in Stone, Wood and Bronze: the carvings of architectural sculptor, Frank Tory, and his two sons, with particular reference to St John's, Ranmoor

As part of the Scissors Paper Stone project, Sylvia Dunkley recently gave a talk on Frank Tory and his sons who were responsible for the carving in St John's. The article below is a summary of it.



Frank and Harriott Tory

Those readers who know the inside of St John's Church may have at some point admired the very fine stone carving. Much of this is the work of architectural sculptor, Frank Tory (1848-1938), who was responsible for carving the capitals (head feature of a column), the corbels (projecting block supporting something above) and the magnificent reredos (screen behind the altar). It is said that if stone carvers from other parts of the country were in Sheffield they would always ask to see Tory's work at St John's.

Frank Tory's ancestors were Huguenots from France. He grew up in Kent and studied at the Lambeth School of Art. He came to Sheffield as one of the team of stone carvers who worked on the Corn Exchange which was being built for the Duke of Norfolk at the end of the 1870s. It seems Tory was asked to stay in Sheffield because the architect for the Corn Exchange was so impressed with his work. Tory brought his family to the city and had his first workshop in a small, crowded court known as Sans Paviour roughly where the City Hall is today.

Examples of Tory's carving can be seen all over the city on ecclesiastical, commercial and public buildings. Some of his first commissions were for prominent office buildings in the city centre. Two of these are on High Street: Parade Chambers (1884) for a firm of local stationers with its portraits of Chaucer and Caxton, its gargoyles and its mythical beasts, and the sadly neglected Cairns Chambers (1896) with its fine statue of the 1st Earl Cairns, Lord Chancellor during Disraeli's ministries and its portrait heads of Edward, Prince of Wales, and Princess Alexandra. Another building Tory worked on was Carmel House (1892) at the corner of Fargate and Norfolk Row which was built for the Young Men's Christian Association. It is covered with religious carvings: the symbols of the four evangelists, a sequence of ten arched panels, six depicting the six days of creation and the other four the progress of Divine law. There are also shields bearing the arms or signs of the twelve Apostles.

Tory was particularly in demand for his ecclesiastical carvings, both in stone and in wood. In St Matthew's in Carver Street, the oak font and pulpit are both his work as is the very striking gilded altar surround with its angels at the top and its niched figures on either side. There are newspaper reports of Tory being commissioned to work in churches across South Yorkshire and further afield in towns like Preston. He also undertook commissions for external carving such as the majestic stone pillars that were designed to hold the gates to the churchyard of the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul (now Sheffield Cathedral) which are still there today.



Carving on the south side of the chancel arch.



The intricately carved reredos.

The architect designs for the new St John's church after the original building was mainly destroyed in a disastrous fire in January 1887 can still be seen in Sheffield Archives. They show that Frank Tory was closely involved in the designs for the work he was responsible for carrying out, whilst the very comprehensive 1990 account by the NADFAS Recording Group of the internal fixtures and fittings in the Church gives us detailed descriptions of Tory's work. The capitals on the columns in the nave, each one different, are densely carved with foliage as are many of the corbels. The corbels in the Chancery arch are particularly fine. The corbel to the north side of the chancel arch has an elaborately carved base surmounted by the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) with the banner of victory and two praying angels either side. The corbel to the south side has an equally elaborate carved base and above this are three angels. The one to the left has folded arms, the one in the centre is playing the mandolin and the one to the right holds pan pipes. The stone and marble reredos, depicting the Last Supper which is carved in alabaster, has a canopy with crocketed gables above it and the figures of St Peter and St Paul on either side. The coloured marble shafts are particularly striking. Frank Tory was also responsible for the carving of the original choir stalls in dark oak.



Capital in the chancel with a face.

He and his wife had twin sons, Alfred Herbert and William Frank (always known as Frank) who were born in 1881. Both sons attended the Sheffield School of Art whilst apprenticed to their father and together the three of them formed the firm of Frank Tory & Sons which was located on Ecclesall Road where the Porterbrook public house now stands. Alfred and Frank jnr. were commissioned to carve the Chancel and Lady Chapel screens for St John's, both of which have now been removed. Like their father, their work can be seen all over Sheffield and they undertook commissions in many towns and cities such as Leeds where they briefly had an office, Hull, Birmingham and even Brighton. The firm closed down about 1960.

Tory's carving in St John's is of an exceptionally high quality. As the 2004 Pevsner Architectural Guide to Sheffield records, "His decorative sculpture throughout the church is one of his finest achievements, matching the depth and finish of the medieval work that inspired it and displaying artistry and craftsmanship in every leaf, flower and figure." The story of Frank Tory and his two sons is an important part of the history of Sheffield's built heritage from the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

*Sylvia Dunkley
November 2024*