

Our Lady of Walsingham and the new plinth for Westminster Cathedral

Written by Stefan

Monday, 05 December 2016 18:44 - Last Updated Tuesday, 13 December 2016 13:31



Association of Polish Knights of Malta UK

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The Cathedral's Statue OLW

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Dr Mark Stella-Sawicki MBE KM



The story of the restoration of the statue and its relocation all started with the very special Walsingham initiative of Cardinal Griffin, (1899–1956), an English Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church who served as Archbishop of Westminster from 1943 until his death, and was elevated to the role of Cardinal in 1946 by Pope Pius XII. It was Cardinal Griffin who blessed this statue of Our Lady of Walsingham soon after the end of World War II.

Close to 70 years later, the condition of the statue, which had lived in the Cathedral crypt and placed too close to a radiator, was in a very poor condition and in urgent need of sympathetic repair and restoration.

Antonia Moffat had alerted me to this situation, and as I had acquired previous experience of such restoration work (the large bronze of Fryderyk Chopin outside the Royal Festival Hall on the Southbank) and had some highly talented friends such as Jacek Korzeniowski – a specialist in wood design and repairs and Sharon Jennings, an artist and painter – I offered to take on and plan this unusual restoration.

One of the main complications was the missing limewood lily and the subsequent difficulty in locating an experienced sculptor, who was prepared to recreate one from my sketches. A lucky find was Keith German, a woodcarver in Norfolk, who undertook this critical

in Norwich and one at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham.

A debate and resultant decision on the new plinth for the statue of Our Lady was far more complicated, as the history of Walsingham, from the Reformation, coupled with knowledge of English sacred art, all had to be considered. It was a massive challenge and certainly not an easy undertaking. But at this point a story has to be told.

At that time my eldest daughter, Dorota, was planning to get married in the beautiful church of the Holy Trinity in Chipping Norton, Oxford. I managed to convince a very old family friend, Father Gostomski, to officiate, since he had been a priest in Ealing Abbey many years ago.

Everything was set for the ceremony but I unexpectedly had an unplanned trip to Poland to Smolensk, accompanying the last Polish ambassador in London, Mr Richard Kaczorowski. Tragically, he never returned from this, as the Polish plane crashed in the Smolenski forest near the village of Katyn on 10 April 2010. May he rest in peace.

In our sorrow we turned to Bishop M. J. Ryan, the Parish Priest at Holy Trinity. He knew me well and was well to offer help in saving the day. This was a Religious, he had to attend a training course to enable him to preside at the rite and receive the marriage at his church. His mirth at the time was admirable, saying he did not expect to be a priest at his age!

During multiple trips to Chipping Norton, I discovered the intriguing history of one of the altars of the Holy Trinity, which was of striking beauty and had become fixed in my mind. Little did I realise what an important find it was. Research into its provenance, I have learnt that it was originally from Mary's Church in Heythrop, Oxfordshire, and did not survive after 1882. The altar was stolen during the reign of Henry VIII and then offered for sale in a local auction for the price of £7.

Apparently, an English Catholic priest had purchased the 'fireplace' but needed to be given these days a substantial sum of money.

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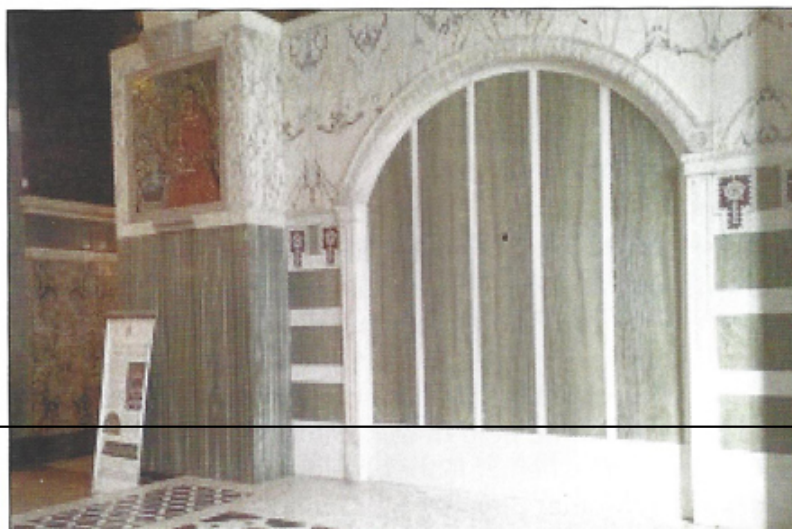
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The Cathed

So, when the newly restored statue of Our Lady of Walsingham was put on display for the first time on 27 June 2015 in Cathedral Hall, during the British Première of the Mass in F by Prince Joseph Poniatowski, I recognised that Our Lady's statute was crying out for its own special altar, pedestal or plinth.



Naturally, most of the audience noticed and commented on the newly-restored statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, placed quite intentionally on the stage. The subsequent surprising return of Our Lady's statue back to the crypt became the subject of many phone calls, lengthy discussions and suggestions as to where it should finally find a home. Canon Christopher blessed the process by facilitating the various debates and granting the permissions needed for Our Lady of Walsingham to be given a special place of honour in the Cathedral.



altar, were asked to build a high quality replica. Sadly they managed only to waste 7 months of time. 'Man proposes and God disposes' as the saying goes.

Finally, unexpected help came from Poland. Nothing was impossible and where specialists in stone and wood craft are still widely available to take on the challenge of this historic work of sacred art of great significance in English Catholic history.

Tomasz Zdziebkowski from the Polish Order of Sovereign and Military Order of Malta in London took on the challenge to build the new plinth based on the exact measurements of the pre-Reformation altar of the Holy Trinity Church.



Exact measurements were taken and several times double-checked. Jacek Korzeniowski prepared the design drawings for Tomasz Zdziebkowski to follow. The seasoned oak wood was chosen to represent a copy as possible of the historical altar, hidden for hundreds of years in the depths of the Cotswolds.

I think you will appreciate the fine craftsmanship that has gone into Our Lady of Walsingham's new shrine, which is now complete with a beautiful Canopy on top. May it provide a place of encounter and communion with the Blessed Virgin and her beloved Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, in our beautiful Westminster Cathedral.

To preserve the spiritual, historical and pious connection with Our Lady's Shrine in Walsingham, I have hidden within the interior of the plinth some soil from the Martyrs' Field, the Slipper Chapel, and the Shrine in Walsingham, along with soil from Our Lady's Shrine in Czestochowa's Shrine in Poland in thanksgiving for the generosity of the Polish artists who have built Our Lady's new pedestal.

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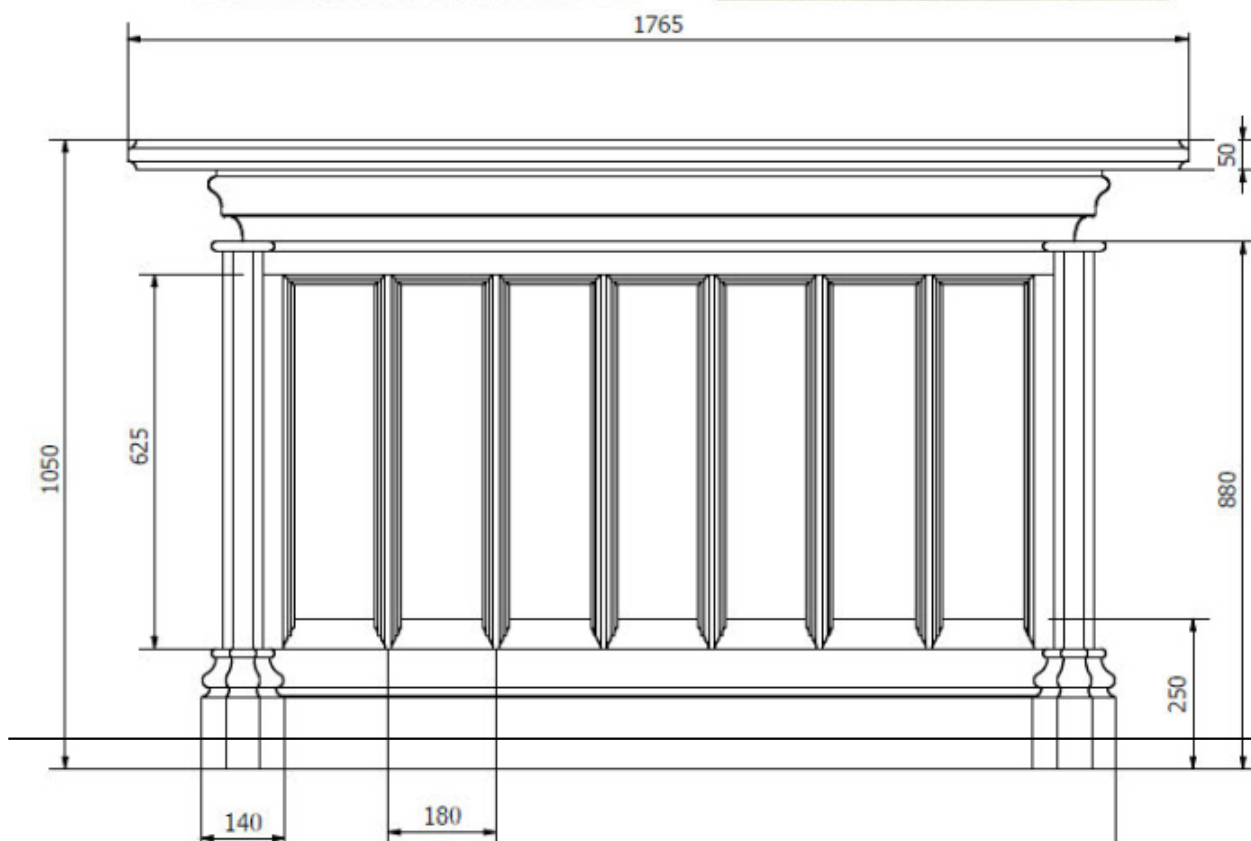
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Westminster Cathedral London and Walsingham 201



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C A R A R R A

Seems snowcapped
This once core – hot
Eruption of earth
That since cooled
Is rock hard and veined
Not unlike diamond
Carbon – crushed
Also the stuff of creation
Left to time's gaze
Untouched

until mined by hand :
Creation handed over
To the creation of man
one such
Disarmed a mountain
Made of its marble
An adorable Mary
His unbearable calm
At rest in her arms
grief so beautiful
Sorrow transformed
So is art strong

Jessica d'Este

and love, Maria
T. . .

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