

Register Faith



The skilful reproduction of terracotta on the Chapel Royal in Brighton earned HMDW Architects the Gold Medal, below

Ecclesiological honour lost and found

A gold medal awarded to English church builders was originally a gift from an admiring Prussian king, writes Andrew Riley

The presentation of the King of Prussia Gold Medal earlier this month to a firm of English architects for its skilful restoration of the Chapel Royal in Brighton has drawn attention to the obscure history of this ceremonial decoration, which was made in 1857 but lay forgotten in a leather-covered presentation box for the next 126 years.

It was finally awarded, for the first time, in 1984, and is now open to any Christian denomination. The medal — only one of which was ever made — is given annually to the architect, chartered surveyor or practice responsible for that scheme of church repair which is judged to have most successfully overcome the greatest aesthetic or technical challenge. The winner keeps the medal for a year, and is given a silver replica thereafter.

The medal itself was the gift of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV to the Incorporated Church Building Society (ICBS) in London, and was meant to have been awarded to the architect “whose exertions may have been most conducive” to the success of the society.

Friedrich Wilhelm, King of Prussia from 1840 to 1861 and a patron of architecture, had sent his royal architect, Friedrich August Stüler, to Britain in the 1850s to learn how it was dealing with the pressing need for more churches in towns and cities caused by the birth of the Industrial Revolution in England. Stüler then fed his observations back to the King for use in Prussia, which faced a similar problem.

Stüler, who had built the Neues Museum in Berlin, spent some months as a guest of the ICBS, which was founded in 1818 to provide funds for the building and enlargement of Anglican churches in England and Wales.

In his note of thanks to the ICBS, dated May 12, 1857, and sent via the Prussian Consul General, Stüler wrote: “I have been commanded by His Majesty the King to express his best thanks for the architectural Plans and Drawings showing the very satisfactory activity of the Incorporated Society for Promoting the Enlargement, Building and



Repairing of churches and chapels, so obligingly forwarded by the Society and furthermore in acknowledgement of its exertions, and those of the Architects employed, to transmit the accompanying Gold Medal, to be presented by the Society at its own discretion in the name of His Majesty, to the Architect whose exertions may have been most conducive to its success.”

Scrutiny of the society's minutes reveals that the King of Prussia's gift nonplussed the General Committee of the ICBS, which accepted the Gold Medal as intended for the society before realising that it should be presented to an architect. The General Committee then appears to have passed the buck to the Committee of Honorary Consulting Architects, which included George Gilbert Scott, T. H. Wyatt, David Brandon, Ewan Christian and other of the most prominent church architects of the day. This committee, in turn, was quite unable to decide who should have the medal. Indeed, if it had been presented to any one of them the rest of the committee would probably have resigned — and if it had been presented to anyone else, the whole committee would have resigned. The society therefore obtained the consent of the King of Prussia to present the medal collectively to the Committee of Architects.

Nothing more was heard of the Gold Medal until 1983, when the society's office was moved from Queen Anne's Gate in Westminster to Fulham Palace, the historic home of the Bishops of London, after the administration of ICBS was transferred to the Historic Churches Preservation Trust.

During the move the Gold Medal, which bears the likeness of the King of Prussia on the obverse and a Prussian eagle on the reverse, was discovered in a burgundy-coloured leather

presentation box in an unlocked drawer, where it had seemingly lain, undisturbed and forgotten, for 126 years.

Its discovery led to the long-overdue decision to present it according to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV's wishes: the first winner of the award was John Morris, in 1984, for the re-roofing of St James's Church, Newbottle, Northamptonshire.

Prince Nicholas von Preussen, a direct descendant of King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, said: “The architects could not agree among themselves over who should win it — they all thought that they were the best — so they thought it easier simply to shove it in a drawer, where it seems to have remained for the next 120 years or so. It could so easily have been nicked and no one would have known.”

The King of Prussia Gold Medal Award is now run jointly by the National Churches Trust (NCT), which succeeded the Historic Churches Preservation Trust in 2007, and the Ecclesiastical Architects & Surveyors Association (EASA), of which Prince Nicholas is patron; he is also on the judging panel and pins the medal, which is hung on a dark-blue ribbon, on the winner's lapel each year.

This year the medal was awarded to Julian Vallis, of HMDW Architects, for his practice's restoration of the brick-and-terracotta Chapel Royal in Brighton, a Grade II* listed building near the Royal Pavilion that dates from 1793 but which was remodelled by Arthur Blomfield in the 19th century. Blomfield added the brick façades on the south and east sides as well as the clocktower.

Richard Pedlar, the outgoing president of EASA and chair of the judging panel, congratulated HMDW Architects for “an exemplary scheme” that had overcome complex challenges in a harsh coastal environment. Prince Nicholas, who is also a patron of the NCT, said the Chapel Royal scheme had stood out because of the extensive use in the building's decoration of terracotta, which had had to be exactly reproduced.

The Prince added that the medal was irreplaceable. “I only get to handle it for 15 minutes each year — taking it off last year's winner and pinning it on this year's.” The winner, he said, was “free to do what they like with it as long as they bring it back at the end of the year”, though he confessed to “holding my breath” that it would not be lost, damaged or stolen in the interim.

It was disappointing that only three entries had been received this year, he said, and it was to be hoped that more would be forthcoming in 2013.

News in brief

Interfaith centre opens

A centre for worldwide interfaith dialogue funded by the King of Saudi Arabia will open in Vienna on Monday. King Abdullah will fund the centre for the next three years. “This is the first multifaith initiative from a Muslim source, and not just any source, but from the very hardcore heartland of Islam,” said Rabbi David Rosen, one of the centre's multifaith board of directors. “It is an essential stage in King Abdullah's efforts to change Saudi Arabia itself,” added Rosen, who is the International Director of Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). “If there are possibilities of good things coming from this, we have to give it a try.” However, the centre has drawn criticism from local politicians. Alev Korun, a Green Party deputy in the Austrian Parliament, said Saudi Arabia's ban on the practice of any faith but Islam “stands in amazingly cross contradiction to the dialogue the king wants to have here”.

Online Advent calendar

The Children's Society is launching an online Advent calendar next Thursday containing daily Bible readings and weekly prayers. Reflections linked to each reading will cover topics such as runaway children, child poverty, the August 2011 riots, young carers and families affected by disability, drugs and alcohol. Guest bloggers include the Rev Giles Fraser, and the Rt Rev Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham. He will write about young parents and runaway children. www.childrenssociety.org.uk/advent

Mental illness and spirits

New research suggests that mental illness among ethnic minorities in Britain is often attributed to Jinn, and other supernatural spirits. This is the finding of Professor Swaran Singh, head of Mental Health Science and Wellbeing at Warwick Medical School. He led a five-year study with Department of Health funding to discover why patients from ethnic minorities frequently reach mental health services in a state of more severe mental illness than do those of non-ethnic backgrounds. Professor Singh says: “We found that in the very early stages when people have depression or anxiety, they seek help through their GP because it looks like a psychological problem. When they become seriously unwell, like when they develop delusions or start hearing voices, then the groups diverge. The Asian groups, particularly the British Pakistanis, then attribute their problem to a religious cause, for instance, possession by a Jinn. So they seek help through the Imams.”

Academy of Sacred Music

An Academy of Sacred Music www.aosm.org.uk opened last night in Glasgow. It will offer choral singing classes for 8-21 year olds of any or no faiths, but its founder, Joan Dillon, blames “lousy” music in Catholic churches for a decline in Mass attendance. “That is where things have gone wrong, why congregations are shrinking, but it need not be so,” she says. “As a parent myself it seems to me young people are being brought up immersed in the negative messages of modern music. They need the transformative power of sacred music to balance that, but instead they are getting banal, happy-clappy stuff at Mass. Sacred music can lift young people up and help them embrace more noble ideas, yet it is not sung in many Catholic churches in Scotland.”

IT companies target faiths

Within five years, world religions will represent a potential \$40 billion (£25 billion) market for technology developers, a new study claims. The report by Gartner Inc says that IT services will be increasingly needed by religious groups, above all in developing countries. They specifically refer to the need for advanced security for pilgrimage sites, for banking and for social media. “The IT industry today is at a point where it must leverage religion in emerging markets to attain growth by filling in the technology void created by religious organisations looking to evolve,” said Asheesh Raina and David M. Coyle, the authors of the report. They added: “Religion has a great influence on high-growth regions such as Latin America, Africa, the Arab world and South Asia.”

Atheists object to play

Atheists in Little Rock, Arkansas are complaining about a planned school trip to take local children to see the play *Merry Christmas Charlie Brown*. It is being staged in a local church and teachers at the Terry Elementary School wrote to parents to say that attending the outing will “expose your child to Christianity”. The Arkansas Society of Freethinkers (ASF) claims the school has violated the Establishment Clause of the US Constitution by exposing pupils to a play with Christian themes. The show is an adaptation of the 1965 Charlie Brown Christmas cartoon in which the Peanuts cartoon strip character Charlie Brown sets out to discover the meaning of Christmas. In one scene, his friend Linus quotes from the Gospel of St Luke. Lee Wood Thomas, a board member and media representative of the ASF, said: “Everybody's labelling us angry atheists, and we're not. Charlie Brown in and of itself is not a bad thing, but it does promote the Christian worldview, and that's not something you need to single out in the public sphere or in public classrooms.”

Ministry of administration

Clergy in Liverpool are being offered a day course on administration by a man who views it as a “spiritual ministry”. “The organisation of all resources, including people, is an area of Christian service requiring those specially gifted, together with the Holy Spirit's spark of life. But it is also an aspect of ministry that all in positions of leadership need to understand,” says John Truscott, the church consultant who will be leading the course offered next Friday at Liverpool Hope University for Anglican ministers in the diocese. In a clergy questionnaire, many identified paperwork as a major source of their daily stress.

Jesus taught with a tweet

Jesus summed up his teaching for the first time in public with the brevity of a tweet, says a leading Vatican official. Jesus “used only 78 Greek characters to express the faith, barely half of the amount used for a message on Twitter today,” said Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture. Ravasi, who often posts brief Scripture quotes on Twitter, urged Catholics to evangelise pithily, saying: “The proclamation needs to be made with the same essence as Christ who in his first public intervention used a sort of essential tweet: “This is the time of fulfilment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

Bess Twiston Davies