

JOHN CYRIL HAWES

What a man – well worth a pilgrimage

An article in American journal 1960 described him as an ‘internationally famous architect, philosopher, poet, essayist, Fox Terrier breeder, sculptor and collector of archaeological treasures’ .. by time of his death he was something of a celebrity
No mention of the mainspring: H’s religious faith, or his search for the austere, solitary, self-sacrificing life

James O’Collins Bishop of Geraldton during last years H was there described him more perceptively, although also without emphasis on the Christianity his be-all and end-all: ‘a most colourful character ... and extraordinary person .. architect, painter, sculptor, stone-mason, decorator, poet, horseman and horse-breeder ... His life has always been a very austere one; the harder and the more difficult the more he liked it.’ .. in W Aus he was also a jockey, racing horses he breed .. what a polymath .. if all that not enough he could also draw amusing cartoons

Some of those reproduced in Peter Anson’s biography ‘the Hermit of Cat Island’ which you may have read .. I am at the disadvantage that I am not aware how much you know – on this pilgrimage almost certainly a great deal more about H than I do .. so forgive me if I am covering familiar ground

H born in Sy 1876 – middle-class family – his father solicitor .. family were devout evangelicals – low church Anglicans .. his father resigned as churchwarden when candles were put on what he would have called the communion table

H wanted to be an architect .. at age 17 he was articled .. firm not very well chosen, for work of practice was mainly banks and pubs

Apparently that is how he first came to Our Most Holy Redeemer – his firm were the architects for a bank under construction on corner of Tysoe St .. and he happened to walk through Exmouth st

H would certainly not have missed this church, an astonishing sight at end of c19. Built in 2 phases 1887-8 & 1894-5, in for that time and place a very unusual style: Italian Renaissance .. the norm was neo-Gothic, ubiquitous in London in c19 .. but this type of architecture not unique here – a precursor of HR is Inigo Jones' st Paul's in Covent Garden (giant pediment and overhanging eaves); inside Holy Redeemer the austere classicism of Wren, & as its architectural and liturgical focus this magnificent baldacchino framing the high altar .. imagine church then without all the dilapidation of age and neglect – stark pristine white; light streaming in through windows unobscured by buildings on either side

Anson, notable writer on religious subjects who also defected to Rome, observed that a visitor would have found it hard to believe that he was in a place of worship belonging to the C of E, what with 3 altars (now 6), businesslike confessionals, stations of the cross, statues, vestments and incense .. and he might have added the baldacchino

Unmistakeably, prominently a Catholic church – proud outpost of the universal Catholic church, divided at the Reformation: with unreformed arm the Roman Catholic .. where is the exemplar of the baldacchino? – St Peter's Rome by Bernini .. by the end of c19 Anglicans of this persuasion – Tractarians, then ritualists - were becoming known as Anglo-Catholics

Church designed by John Dando Sedding, a great architect known for his boldness and originality – his other outstanding ch in London Holy Trinity Sloane st. However he had died in 1891 at age of 53 before HR completed – that was HR's misfortune .. however its good fortune was that he had an equally talented assistant Henry Wilson who continued as the ch architect

Hawes admired Sedding - 'what a genius' .. also attracted by externals of Cath worship .. attended St Mary Magdalene Munster Sq – its 'very atmosphere' was said to have moved one to worship

1898 at age of 22 H experienced what he regarded as his religious conversion – still an Anglican

H extremely enterprising, hard-working and serious young man .. as soon as he was qualified as architect, set up in practice on his own – he wanted to design churches not pubs or banks

In about 1897 he was commissioned by Bishop Hornby to design a chapel of ease at Gunnerton in parish of Chollerton Northumberland .. Hornby had been B of Nyasaland and was then vicar of Chollerton .. he had been impressed by H's model of a prototype church displayed at RA, which had been judged as being of 'outstanding quality'

H's relationship with Hornby was one of great moment for him .. Hornby recognised H's vocation and encouraged him to study for holy orders .. 1901 H to Anglican theological college in Lincoln

As it happened Hornby was a friend of vicar of Holy Redeemer – Edward Vincent Eyre .. Hornby gave H an introduction to him, and he agreed to take H as his curate In Oct 1903 H ordained as Deacon and licensed as curate at HR

However H was racked with doubt at time of his ordination .. he had to assent to 39 Articles – which he did with great difficulty: for example Article 31 condemns the sacrifice of mass as a blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit

Nonetheless he continued, to be ordained as priest 2nd Oct 1904

H a man who did nothing by halves – he spent night before he said his first mass in prayer prostrate before altar - here

Soon after his ordination he made a pilgrimage – of course on foot to St Hugh's shrine in Lincoln Cath .. nearly 150 miles

But H was very much at home at HR – where in words of Anson it was 'easy for him to forget the more Protestant aspects of Anglicanism' .. not only was the church Italianate but so was the ritual and liturgy: utterly and uncompromisingly 'Catholic' in its externals – in short as near to Roman Catholic as was permissible in C of E

What was permissible was still very controversial matter at that time – C of England was split between ritualists and their Protestant antagonists .. as recently

as late 1870s and early 80s 6 devout and conscientious parish priests had been imprisoned for refusing to obey court orders as to ceremonial practised in their churches .. one particularly determined martyr Rev Sidney Faithorn Green was Lancaster Prison for over 19 months – his crimes included lighted candles and cross on the altar; wearing the alb and chasuble; adopting the eastward position in the eucharist – he was also prosecuted for the bald in his church; that charge dismissed on technicality that, as permanent structure, it was actually a ciborium .. how far away all of this was from the essentials of Christianity and the C of E's task of combating rising tide of indifference and heathenism – at home

H was fortunate in his church; and, as he wrote in his draft autobiography, 'I was even more fortunate in my vicar' – Eyre, founder of this parish and builder of this church, was kind, gentle and indeed saintly .. H described him as 'a most holy and devoted man' .. H was obviously fond of E – in more ways than one a father figure to him

Ritual at HR regarded by those of a similar persuasion as 'advanced' and as 'extreme' by Protestants, intent hunting out those seen as too close to Rome, 'fingering its trinkets', in words of one antagonistic local vicar .. the Protestant Alliance kept a close watch on 'goings on' at HR and from time to time reported alleged illegalities to B of London - at that time the genial and easy going Winnington-Ingram, who certainly wanted to avoid prosecuting such an otherwise exemplary parish priest

In deference to Bishop E gave up processional lights and ceremonial use of incense; substituted curtained prayer-desks for confessionals, and removed 6th station of the Cross – uncanonical St Veronica wiping face of Jesus

H remonstrated with him for pandering to Prot prejudices – E replied that it was not the external ritual or ceremonial that mattered. No amount of that would make the ch Catholic.

H always maintained that it was E who taught him principles of Catholicism, including need to submit to episcopal authority – difficult to avoid if you believed, as Catholics of course did in apostolic succession

In the parish of HR there lived 6000 or so people, nearly all poor, working-class, and many in dire poverty living in abysmal conditions in slum housing – Anson described these slums as being as bad as any in London .. there were largish houses in parish, eg in Wilm Squ, but they had seen much better days, and by then many were in use as lodging houses or workshops.

Very few of the poor attended church .. those who did mainly came for handouts – they were too busy staying alive and coping with travails of this life than to concern themselves with here after

This was despite HR being very active parish – like other Catholic parishes in slum areas there was a team of unmarried clergy, headed by vicar, assisted by lay workers and in this parish nuns from Sisters of Bethany who ran a mission (in Wilm Sq – their convent was nearby) – they did all they could alleviate the suffering of their flock; there were clubs and guilds to support devout parishioners, to provide innocent recreation particularly for young, to retain Sunday school children within the fold of the church, & to establish some link with those outside it

E threw himself enthusiastically in parish work. 1/3rd of parish was allocated to him for visiting, accompanied by one of the Sisters. He got to know at first hand the horror of the lives of his fellow men – beset by destitution, disease and despair. H described sitting up all night by the sick-bed of one parishioner. By then St Francis of Assisi was his spiritual inspiration, and he sought to follow St F's example, living alongside and sharing the poverty of parishioners. At that time there was no campanile with clergy house on lower floors - Eyre had a little cottage close to the church. H lived in what he described as a 'horrid little flat' up stone steps in a gloomy block in Farringdon Rd – in fact this a good deal better than where the poorest lived .. it was one of the 'model dwellings' erected to replace slums, although described by George Gissing as 'terrible barracks' which crushed the spirit. H had a meagre stipend. However he refused to accept his full pay, and then gave away all he could spare – as always keen to divest himself of worldly goods .. vicar who succeeded E stepped in to prevent H from destituting himself.

However these seem to have been happy times for H under Eyre at HR – although H, in his striving for the hair-shirt, may have felt guilty about such feelings. He contributed to the beautification of church in number of practical ways, for example painting a crucifix and other figures to go over one of the subsidiary altars. H recounts that he was regarded by the other clergy as very ‘pro-Roman’; on Sun eve they all gathered socially in E’s study – the others smoked, not our hero. At the end of the evening E would announce ‘It’s time for bed now. Hawes always starts on the Pope at midnight’. H worked with a particular nun from SSB, Sr Rosina. As he explained, ‘our mutual devotion to St Francis drew us together’, also their common zeal for holy poverty. H helped Rosina and 3 other sisters to become independent, and they in due course founded their own convent St Damian’s named after that of the poor Clare nr Assisi.

However H’s curacy under E did not last very long. Eyre was in poor health. The prolonged strain of establishing the new church and parish had taken its toll on him. In March 1904 he resigned from his ministry at HR. He became vicar of Chollerton, his old friend Hornby having left to become bishop of Nassau in the Bahamas. Eyre’s successor at HR was Herbert Charles Frith, promoted from curate at Mary Magdalene, Munster Sq. Frith was another advanced or extreme Anglo-Cath. H described him as being full of zeal and efficiency. Perhaps he did not have had quite the same warm relationship with Frith as he had had with Eyre.

In June 1906 H left Holy Redeemer. He slipped away without any formal send off. He may have felt that his life there had become too comfortable. In February, 1906, the new campanile and clergy house, designed by Wilson, had been finished. In it each curate had his own bedroom and study, with a communal dining room and sitting room – looked after by female servants .. otherwise no women allowed. In the parish magazine Frith expressed his thanks for the ‘great talent’ of H’s artistic work and the parish’s regret at losing ‘a most earnest and devoted man of God’.

H had fallen briefly under the spell of Benjamin Fearnley Carlyle, Abbot Aelred, who had just established an Anglican Benedictine community on island of Caldey off coast at Tenby in S Wales. H went to live there and became a novice of the Order

of St Benedict, taking the name of Father Jerome. Carlyle was a charismatic visionary or an ambitious conman depending on your point of view, probably a bit of both. He hankered after the contemplative life of a religious. But Abbot Aelred wanted him for his skills as an architect and builder. He worked hard to try to fulfil the Abbot's grandiose plans for the new monastery, among other things designing the new guest-house. It was evidently much to the liking of Lord Halifax, the leading A-C layman who stayed there in 1908. Halifax wrote to his son praising his delightful room, the very comfortable arrangements, and the very good food and wine.

That was not at all what He was looking for. He yearned for solitude and austerity, and wanted to rebuild the ruins of a hermitage, apparently on a near-by island. But he had to content himself with living in a cave in a cliff, sleeping on a bed formed of 2 builders' boards, with pieces of wood in the shape of a cross nailed to the bed-head. Perhaps inevitably relations between He and the Abbot became strained. They were both strong and determined personalities, and He felt his real calling was St Francis. Carlyle seems to have feared He would disrupt the community by diverting his followers from St Benedict. So in about Oct 1907 He left Caldey, and set off tramping round the country in emulation of the grt St F, barefoot and without money - sleeping in haystacks and preaching in the street.

I shall leave the detail of He's life there. His journey took him to the Isle of Man, and a little later to the Bahamas where he went to assist Bishop Hornby after they had been devastated by a hurricane. But in 1911 he was received into RC church. In 1912 he went to train for the priesthood in Rome and was admitted to the Franciscan Order. After his ordination he became a bushwacker priest and prolific church architect in Western Australia. 20 years or more later he decided that he was enjoying himself too much, and in 1939, by then Monsignor Hawes, he returned to the Bahamas aiming at last for a real Franciscan life of holy poverty. There he built a hermitage for himself on the top of the hill on Cat Island. However his conscience would not allow him to withdraw into solitude. When the islanders sought his help he could not refuse them. He assisted them to build churches, including one named the Holy Redeemer. He died in 1956, having fulfilled his

Franciscan vows by in his long life using to the full the great talents god had given him. He was buried, as he had requested, in a little cave on Cat Island.

A footnote – While H was studying in Rome Fr Eyre came out for a visit. H was delighted to see him again. Hawes has described how Eyre had great veneration for everything Roman and longed to be in communion with the Holy See – for the reunion of these branches of the Cath church. They went together to a number of churches in Rome. In one Hawes said Mass. ‘My dear old vicar knelt with great devotion hearing my mass’.

Enjoy the rest of your pilgrimage.