

The levelling of Mirfield church



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The Dean of St Paul's and the Bishop of Salisbury are up in arms because radical change to the church at the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, "looks like an attempt to erase the memory of the first century of the Community's life".

Mirfield's huge monastic church in the Byzantine style (with a nod to Tewkesbury) is to have its interior levelled in a £2 million reordering. The altars, choir stalls and screens are to go, and also the tombs of the founder, Bishop Charles Gore, and of the consolidator of the community, Bishop Charles Frere, which "keep guard on either side of the altar" in the words of the latter's biographer.

Earmarked for destruction too is the baldachino over the altar erected as a memorial to Edward Talbot, superior from 1922 to 1940.

In an attempt to prevent "this complete rejection" of the Community's history, the Dean and the Bishop published the "destructive restoration" last week in a joint letter to the *Church Times*, also signed by the Canon Alan Wilkinson, the historian of Mirfield.

In response, the Superior's Council at Mirfield insists on two reasons for the changes: underfloor heating and the need as a "pilgrimage church" to cater for "people of every kind of mobility". At present there are steps.

The objectors say that the plans "ignore the theological and historical rationale" of the church as it is. The scheme for the Grade II listed building has drawn "strong opposition from conservation groups" and "very considerable opposition within the Community itself".

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams (who lived at Mirfield for two years in the 1970s, lecturing at its theological college), and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are the patrons of the rebuilding appeal, though this does not mean they decided its details.

Desmond Tutu was inspired to become an Anglican clergyman by Bishop Trevor Huddleston, a member of the Community whom he first met when "he

took off his hat to my mother. I couldn't believe my eyes - a white man who greeted a black working-class woman." Mirfield is renowned for its missionary work in Africa.

It has always had its controversies. It embraces a Benedictine rule, and follows a liturgical day familiar to Catholic monks. But from its foundation in 1892, Charles Gore wanted it to engage in social action, and five out of six of its founding members belonged to the Christian Social Union. Hence the decision to settle in the industrial north, between Wakefield and Huddersfield.

Gore was a bundle of contradictions, a Catholic in the Church of England whose questioning of the Old Testament produced in the 1890s a crisis for many believers. In the judgment of his biographer, he was a loner who thought he had a vocation to community

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life. He chose to be buried at Mirfield, though he had never managed to be more than a visitor there.

Gore left instructions for his body to be cremated, a practice seen as un-Christian by some at the time, provoking the Anglo-Catholic Lord Halifax to exclaim, a little late, "I could shake the life out of him with my own hands." Oddly enough WH Frere (1863-1938), was also cremated. He too was a founding member of Mirfield, and its superior for two decades until made Bishop of Truro. He continued his Community life at the bishop's house there, and was reputed to clean guests' shoes.

This double cremation means that Gore and Frere's ashes are easy to accommodate when the floor is levelled. Their stone tombs would be dismantled and the site of their burial marked "in a way that will enable better access around the high altar with large groups", the Superiors say.

Any reconstruction depends on diocesan faculties, the legal permission for rebuilding. The past week shows that it will not be automatic.