

# The Life and Times of Sir Ninian Comper

## Introduction:

I am not an academic so this presentation is purely from my own research with a little help from this well known book on Sir Ninian Comper by Anthony Symondson and Stephen Bucknall (which is very interesting, if a little hard going) and internet searches.

So why did I choose Sir Ninian Comper as this year's subject matter? The reason being is that on first entering this church some 3 years ago I was intrigued by its ornate decoration. It reminded me of the late medieval early Renaissance church decoration I had studied during my History Open University Degree, not the Renaissance work we associate with Italy but work found in northern European towns and cities such as Bruges in Belgium and Lubeck in Germany. But I knew that this work could not possibly be as old as 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries - and it certainly did not look that old.

As we all know during the English Reformation the majority of churches were cleared of statues, wall paintings, rood lofts, stained glass windows etc. and although we still see some Medieval and Renaissance work in the cathedrals around the country it is very rare that a parochial church such as Kemsing would to have avoided the destruction Henry VIII and Cromwell dished out in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Eager to find out more I asked a few parishioners and was told a little about Sir Ninian Comper's restoration and how our little church was lucky enough to obtain the services of such a renowned architect. Now I say 'lucky' with tongue in cheek – because for the majority of people I have spoken to about his work they either dismiss it as too elaborate and fussy or dislike it intensely accusing the man of downright vandalism.

I decided to focus more on the ecclesiastical ideas of the period, Ninian Comper's background and what his inspirations and objectives for church design were rather than solely concentrating of his work here at Kemsing.

Sir John Ninian Comper was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1864 and died the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1960. Seeing these dates I thought you may be interesting for you all to see the type of contemporary church architecture and interiors of or around these two dates. The first is St. Michael's and All Angel's Church, Shoreditch, completed in 1865 and designed by James Brooks. The second is St. John the Evangelist Church, Newbury, constructed between 1955 and 1957 and designed by S.E Dykes-Bower. Although the later church has a degree of ornate decoration on its ceiling it is

essentially modernist/gothic in its design. I could have chosen a many churches dated 1960/61 but these were truly modern – similar to our library in Kemsing.

Perhaps these pictures may give you a sense of how church architecture had evolved throughout Comper's lifetime and provide you with some insight as to why enthusiasm for his work waned during his later years.

You may be one of those who hate Comper's work so I hope by the end of this little presentation you maybe a little more inclined to view his work with fresh eyes and with a little more sympathy.

### **Family Background:**

Let us first start with his family background. Many of you may be well aware that Ninian Comper was Scottish by birth but his family actually originated from the South of England – Pulborough in Sussex. It was Ninian's father Rev. John Comper who left the South of England in 1848 to teach at the newly-founded church school at Kirriemuir, Scotland. But by 1849 he had moved to St Margaret's College, Crieff, to study for ordination into the Episcopal Church in Scotland, this had been his main reason for moving to Scotland as it was impossible to gain holy orders in the Church of England during this era unless you were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge.

John Comper was ordained in 1850 and initially served as a priest in the Highlands before being moving to the Brechin Diocese under Bishop Forbes in 1857 - a man that was to greatly influence Rev. John Comper. Bishop Forbes was an Anglo-Catholic and had connections with the leaders of the 'Oxford Movement'. Perhaps it was due to the Bishop's influence that led Comper in 1861 to move to Aberdeen where he realised that the poorer areas of the city were not being reached by the Church and where he established the St Margaret's Convent in 1862, bringing sisters up from Dr John Mason Neale's pioneering community in East Grinstead, Sussex. – *Although this particular community in Aberdeen and that in East Grinstead no longer exist, there are still daughter houses in London and South East England as well as communities in Haiti, the USA and Sri Lanka.*

It is perhaps important to understand what Anglo-Catholicism is/was and what the 'Oxford Movement' was as both had a profound effect on Ninian during his informative years.

### **What was the Oxford Movement?**

- The movement was established in the early 1820s by High Church members of the Church of England which over time developed into Anglo-Catholicism.

- Its original members were all associated with the Oxford University – hence the name.
- Between 1833 and 1841 the movement published 90 *Tracts for the Times*.
- Their argument was for the reinstatement of some older Christian traditions of faith to be included into Anglican liturgy and theology.

To put this into context of the period - the State and Church historically worked in unison and this was especially the case since the Reformation however, at this historical juncture many Anglicans wished to stress that the church was not dependent on the State. Why? because the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 allowed Roman Catholics to openly hold civic posts and to stand as MPs for the first time without having to be seen receiving the Lord's Supper in the Church of England. However, this was not the only issue that forced the Movement leaders into action. The previous century had seen a rise in the growth of other Protestant factions and this meant that there was no longer a uniformity of religious practice (if there ever was one).

The movement believed that the renewal of Catholic thought and practice would strengthen the Church of England in opposition to the Protestant tendencies of the splinter Christian faiths.

### **So what was Anglo-Catholicism?**

- Anglo-Catholicism describes a range of theological views and traditions in the Anglican Church.
- Anglo-Catholics highly value the sacramental life of the church and adhere to doctrines such as the presences of Christ in the Eucharist.
- To worship in an Anglo-Catholic church is meant to affect the senses as well as the head, heart and intellect.

### **Education and Training:**

So now we have a sense of Ninian's religious upbringing let us move on to the man himself. John Ninian Comper was born in Aberdeen on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1864 and was the eldest son of Rev. John Comper and his wife Ellen. He started his school life at Kingston College, Aberdeen and at the age of 10 went onto Glenalmond College in Perthshire – by all accounts his time there was not happy one, if the teaching methods were as austere as the building looks I can understand why!

Leaving in 1880 aged 16 he studied for a term at Ruskin School of Art, Oxford before moving onto South Kensington School of Art. It was during his time here that in 1882 that he was introduced to Charles Eamer Kempe (1839-1907) a glass-painter and church craftsman who over his career produced stained glass windows for Chester, Gloucester, Hereford, Lichfield, Wells, Winchester and York Cathedrals as well as many churches around the country.

Comper worked for Kempe voluntarily whilst completing his studies at Art School. Comper later said that ***'he owed little to his year with Kempe'*** but his training in drawing wall and glass painting most certainly would have given him a good grounding in the craftsman's techniques and skills as well as dealing with workmen on a daily basis. Interestingly, Comper did not extol the workmanship of skilled craftsmen. He saw himself and other architects as the creators of a design that could be accomplished through following instructions under supervision – He stated that ***'A workman's happiness and pride, be he mason, carver or painter, is in doing good work'***.

In 1883 Comper entered a 4 year pupillage under the leading church architects of the time George Frederick Bodley (1828- 1907) and his partner, Thomas Garner (1839-1906) earning £80 per annum.

Ninian greatly admired their work although perhaps not so much as the achievements of George Gilbert Scott Junior (1839-97). This architect is famous for his later modern/gothic buildings such as Battersea Power station and of course the red telephone box. However, it was Bodley and Garner's Holy Angels church, Hoar Cross, Staffordshire together with Scott's early architectural theories and his design of St. Agnes', Kennington Park, London which had a profound influence on Comper's later work and ideas both religiously and architecturally.

In addition to his Art School and pupillage training Comper also travelled to Germany, Spain, Italy and Greece where he encountered Gothic and Greek architecture and this resulted in a fusion of the classical and gothic motifs we now see in his work.

**Before moving on, let me just touch on some other aspects of his working and personal life, so that you get a good grounding of the person.**

- In 1888 John Ninian Comper formed a partnership with William Bucknall (1851-1944) – the partnership lasted 16 years. The Partnership was dissolved due to Bucknall's addiction to alcohol.
- The company drawing office was initially situated in Westminster but moved to Norwood, South London and was referred to by Comper as the 'Study'.

- William Bucknall's nephew was an important member of the business, starting as an apprentice but eventually ran the business side of the company.
- Arthur also designed all the lettering for Comper's stone, wood and glass projects.
- In 1944 the 'Study' was bombed out and the company moved to Comper's home 'The Priory' also in Norwood.
- After the Second World War Comper did not complete and new church projects.
- Arthur's second son John Samuel joined the company as an apprentice and continued the painted-glass side of the business after both his father's death in 1952 and Comper's in 1960.
- The company was inherited by Comper's son J. Sebastian Comper.
- Sadly the painted-glass side of the business folded in 1968 and the thousands of drawings and correspondence were deposited with the Drawing Collections of the Royal Institute of British Architects – (at the time that this book was published 2006 the collection had still not been completely archived)

### **[Personal Life]**

- In 1890 John Ninian Comper became William Bucknall's brother-in-law as well as his business partner when he married Bucknall's sister Grace.
- They had 4 sons and 2 daughters – the eldest son J. Sebastian Comper followed in his father's footsteps to become an architect and started his own business in 1920.
- John Ninian Comper was knighted in 1950 at the age of 84 – but it took a little persuasion from his friends and family before he would accept the honour as he had an aversion to having letters after his name.
- Towards the end of his life he was nursed by the sisters of St. Margaret from East Grinstead – the same order that his father had brought up to Scotland.
- His final resting place is beneath the windows he designed in Westminster Abbey – where he also was responsible for the design of the Warrior's Chapel.

So now you have an idea of his background, business practice and personal life I want to discuss the man and his work. Comper's work throughout his career was entirely ecclesiastically based. His first commission came from his father Rev. John Comper, to build a chapel for the church of St. Margaret's, Galloway, Aberdeen in 1889. The initial proposals were on a grand scale, one particular design was for a totally new church modelled on Bodley and Garner's St. Augustine's, Pendlebury, Manchester.

However, all that eventually transpired was a vaulted chapel in the west end of the church in the manner of his previous employers work and reflects little of the flair that we now associate with him. In 1908 he added what is now known as the 'Comper Aisle' to the church in memory of his father. This has his signature window containing his unusual signature of a strawberry – which relates to his father's devotion to the poor - apparently Rev. John Comper died in *Doothie* Park, Aberdeen giving strawberries to the poor.

### **Ethos and Rubric**

As we have heard Sir Ninian Comper was a child of the Oxford Movement and this influence permeated his whole being. In one of his earliest papers he stated that the ornaments rubric was an '**outward token of our union with the rest of Catholic Christendom, both past and present**' – Catholicism was his inspiration. He believed that his contribution to ecclesiastical architecture and internal decoration of the national church should have a Catholic identity. He was governed by the Platonist theory that '**a man should seek forms which are beautiful**'. Comper believed that beauty in the right place equalled truth and goodness, together with his appreciation of Northern European 15<sup>th</sup> century Gothic architecture these were his inspirations.

Perhaps his essay '*Of the Atmosphere of a Church*' published in 1947 goes some way to understanding his mindset and understanding of what he thought a church should be. He stated that '**The atmosphere of a church should be such as to hush the thoughtless voice**' and went on to say '**My Father's house is a house of prayer**' these statements sum up his architectural and decoration aims.

Perhaps we all remember a time when walking into a church was much like walking into a library – it was done in hushed tones. Comper bewailed the activities of commercialism that had invaded cathedrals and churches around the country (today we see this as a necessary evil in order to keep such monuments from crumbling away).

For Comper the church was the House of God and a Gateway to Heaven – somewhere that you went to leave the stresses of the outside world behind. The essence of his publication was to explain his theory of what the 'Note' of the church

should be – it should produce heavenly worship for all who entered, in much the same way the Oxford Movement thought the liturgy should do.

He believed that the early churches did this through its liturgy, in their architecture and through their internal decoration. The essay stated that the layout of the church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century which had been influenced by Greek architecture suited the needs of 20<sup>th</sup> century worship better than those of the medieval design which had survived in most Church of England churches.

The 4<sup>th</sup> century plan placed the altar in the midst of its worshippers and did not separate them by a choir but only by an open screen or a low wooden lattice frame known as a Cancelli. However, he felt that the concept of the medieval altar and the rood loft could be beautiful if treated adequately in the setting of a Gothic building and argued that the Greek and Gothic should be adapted in a brand new way giving examples of his work – St. Cyprian's Marylebone and St. Mary's, Wellingborough.

Comper hated Modernism – whose ideology was based upon a complete break from the past. Not only did he find modernist architecture and decoration ugly but when applied to church building he saw it as a death-blow to his primary understanding of a church's purpose, stating that church design and decoration should ***'move people to worship, to bring a man to his knees and to refresh his soul in a weary land'***. It was against this background in 1939 when Modernism had gained considerable influence that Ninian Comper wrote *'Of the Atmosphere of a Church'* for *The Ciceronian* by invitation of the Principal of Chichester Theological College which was later published with the addition of illustrations.

He conceded that none of the rules he had discussed so far could produce an atmosphere, this could only be achieved to some degree with colour although he felt that the greatest impact was light. Stating that ***'I have worked all day in a church decorating in gold and colour and felt despair – but only with the evening light what before seemed hopeless became beautiful'*** (I'm not sure about evening light but I've been in the church early on a winter's morning when the sun is low and as the sunlight hits the stained-glass windows the shards of light fill the church with awe inspiring beauty). He also much preferred candle-light over that of artificial lighting.

With regard to colour he saw it as essential to enhance the proportion and lines of a church – believing that colour should be used in proportion to the fabric of the building giving examples of un-restored churches in Europe where colour was used on the vaults and walls and the remaining areas were left a uniform tone of French grey.

Now you that you have gained a sense of what he was influenced by and where his inspirations came from I would like to just discuss a few of Comper's church design elements that we can relate to here at Kemsing.

Starting with Comper's thought processes in designing a gothic altar for example. It is known that in preparation for his own wedding he studied medieval manuscripts at the British Museum and it would appear that what he saw in these were reflected in his design ideas for his first altar commission in 1894 for the parish church of St. Wilfred's, Cantley, South Yorkshire. Made from stone it stood free of the east wall and was modelled on the medieval illuminations he had seen at the British museum – and much like this painting 'The Mass of St. Giles' by the Master of Saint Giles c. 1500 which hangs in the National Gallery. When we compare it with our altar at Kemsing you can see the similarities – perhaps giving the impression that such altars were mass produced so to speak! Indeed by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century this gothic or should I say English altar was synonymous with the Church of England and Comper is noted as having some influence in its promotion.

Whereas Comper turned to illuminations for gothic inspired altars, for painted reredos or altarpieces the works of Northern early Renaissance panel painters such as Hans Memling peaked his interest. We can see here at Kemsing church that the reredo has many similarities to this work of Memling.

The second most visual element within many old English Churches is the rood screen. This is the barrier between the nave and the chancel known as the rood – an old English word meaning cross or crucifix. In medieval times it would also have had a gallery above called the rood loft from which carved figures of St. Mary, St. John the Evangelist and others would have stood.

The rood screen did not remove the congregation from the rituals performed behind it as many would think. But was conceived as a window through which you could watch. It would have been highly decorated to emphasis Catholic doctrine. During the English Reformation and the Counter-reformation in Europe many rood screens were dismantled. However, if you remember from the before photo of Kemsing Church this church had retained its rood screen but it had rood loft. Comper's addition entails the fan vaulted rood loft and the figures above. Here at Kemsing the screen was not decorated but in other churches Comper produced highly decorated rood screens and lofts.

Lastly we turn to Comper's use of stained-glass and once again he found his inspiration from the past and preferred Late English medieval stained glass windows. They often depicted full-size standing figures and he liked the architectural effect they achieved in relation to the furniture. Another reason he admired them he said was due to their ***'lightness and pearly whiteness, and that rarity of colour, as of jewels, which mark it off so absolutely from the glass first brought to England from abroad'***.

To achieve these affects Comper found that using a glass-oven was the most favourable technique and through trial and error Comper's glass found clarity of colour. He used medieval recipes containing sand and seaweed, using clay pots rather than modern chemical methods made in metal containers, producing brilliant tones of white and bright colour. Which lead one modern craftsman to say *'he had the courage to use pure whites as medieval workers had done – trusting that in time they would mellow instead of trying to fake the appearance of age'*.

Sir Ninian Comper's work is hard to fathom or interpret today as our world is so different from the one in which he lived. I have tried to help you gain some degree of insight into that world by looking at the concepts and ideologies of his time and by also looking at where he gained his artistic inspirations from. Your feelings towards Comper's input here at Kemsing may or may not have changed after today's talk, but if nothing else I hope you view it with a more sympathetic eye. Whatever the case maybe we all have to concede that the reason that our church is sort out by many of its visitors is not only for its pastoral importance, which was after all Comper's aim, but because they want to view his work.

Once again I would like to thank you for staying and listening to this talk, I hope you have enjoyed it and leave here having learnt something new.