

THE ELHAM ANNUNCIATION BY JOHN WARD R.A.

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With the centenary in 2017 of the birth of the eminent East Kent artist John Ward,¹ it is time to assess his remarkable, but little-known, mural of *The Annunciation* which was painted in 1993 high up behind the organ loft in the bell-ringing chamber of the church of St Mary the Virgin in Elham (Fig. 1). Commissioned by a local man, the mural completed and complemented a major project to rebuild the church's organ.

Although it is a familiar sight to Elham bell-ringers and organists, this *Annunciation* is almost unknown, not only in the wider art world but also in Kent and even in Elham itself. This is partly because it was funded by an individual (rather than by a number of parishioners, as were Ward's better-known murals in the church of Ss Cosmas and Damian at Challock, near Ashford), and also because it is hidden away in the ringing chamber which is on the first floor of the Bell Tower above the locked vestry (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 St Mary the Virgin, Elham.



Fig. 2 The Ringing Chamber.

Perhaps because it is out of sight, local memory of the circumstances surrounding its commissioning has faded in the years since it was painted. But in the year of the Ward centenary it is time for this magnificent painting to be publicly acknowledged alongside his better known works and to be reconsidered in the light of more traditional depictions of the Annunciation.

In the chronology of John Ward's work, the *Elham Annunciation* came between his two series of Challock murals.² These were *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, which he painted in the Challock chancel in 1956 (the year he was elected to the Royal Academy), and his *Millenium Mural*, commissioned almost exactly 40 years later in 1997 and painted on the north wall of the nave at Challock. This mural has echoes of a single biblical event, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem before the Crucifixion. But as in the earlier *Scenes from the Life of Christ* the actual setting for John Ward's Millennium image is the Kent countryside: Christ is depicted riding into Challock in the year 2000 to be greeted by the jubilant villagers.

Unusually, the *Millennium Mural* was a village project, paid for by what today would be called 'crowd-funding'. People could pay from £10 to £1,000 to be included: £10 might buy a painting of a favourite flower, a bird or a bumble bee; a bit more and a dog or cat could be included, and so on up the scale to horses, trees, houses and portraits of individuals – 85 in all. It was a very successful, popular communal enterprise: a work of art funded from within the community.

The Elham *Annunciation* project was much lower-key. The main movers were two of Elham's organists: James Larkin (who had been an organist in Elham in the early 1960s) and his successor Martin Renshaw, both Lyminge men. Elham church PCC records show that throughout the 1980s, Martin Renshaw (who was also an organ builder) had had to carry out some much needed running-repairs on the Elham organ, and that by 1991 it had become obvious that a complete renovation was needed. At that point James Larkin came forward and offered to cover most of the substantial cost of the works.³

Architect's drawings were provided and approved, a Diocesan Faculty for the project was granted and work on the organ began in May 1992. The following year, in March 1993, Larkin wrote to the PCC to say that he would like to complete the project by donating a mural of *The Annunciation*, to be painted by John Ward above the newly installed screen in the Ringing Chamber. Ward had been approached late the previous year and had agreed in principle to undertake the work. His work diary for this period provides a fascinating record of the progress of this commission and his meticulous way of organizing his work.⁴

The PCC minutes record that by June 1993 the work had been completed (Fig. 3). There was a celebratory exhibition of the mural and preparatory drawings, and a two-day organ festival directed by Mark Deller.⁵

As with his murals at Challock, John Ward's Elham *Annunciation* has a contemporary setting: the artist has set the scene in a typical village kitchen. The story it tells is taken from the Gospel of St Luke, Chapter 1:26-38, the dramatic moment when the Angel Gabriel announces to a young village girl that she is to be the mother of Christ. Unlike his Challock murals the Elham image was not painted directly onto the wall itself, probably because it would have been difficult to fix scaffolding in the narrow space above the ringing-chamber gallery so as to access the wall. Once the design had been finalised, panels were cut to size, and the panels were then painted in a studio before being fixed on the arch high above the gallery.⁶

When Ward treated his Challock biblical scenes as if they were happening in the surrounding fields and lanes, he was working within the traditions of Renaissance Italian painting. In the 1930s his artistic training, first at The Hereford School of Arts and Crafts and then at the Royal College of Art in London, would have been an academic as well as a practical one. For professional artists of his generation the study of the History of Art would have been an integral part of their training, as would life-studies, portraiture, landscape painting, architectural drawing and still life. Ward would have learnt that in Renaissance times, the placing of biblical stories in a contemporary setting was a way of bringing sometimes obscure religious events to life. It was also a way of helping those who could not read the Bible for themselves to understand the complex religious messages that preachers would be trying to teach them. This combination of religious events with contemporary medieval scenes is what makes those Renaissance paintings so appealing and compelling today.

By locating his biblical scenes within contemporary, twentieth-century settings, and by peopling them with local, recognizable characters Ward was following closely in the footsteps of Italian masters like Fra Angelico, Masaccio or Ghirlandaio in Florence, or Giovanni and Gentile Bellini or Carpaccio, in Venice.

In his Elham *Annunciation*, Ward's portrayal of Mary as an ordinary village girl



Fig. 3 *The Annunciation.*

in a domestic setting is reminiscent of Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation. But whereas Renaissance painters such as Botticelli, Filippino Lippi and Fra Angelico painted their medieval Mary sitting quietly reading or spinning, John Ward has painted Elham's twentieth-century Mary helping her companion to stack crockery (Fig. 4).

The Elham Mary is a village girl in the kitchen of what could be an Elham house. She and her friend look as if they had been talking quietly and companionably about the day, about the coming weekend, perhaps about a forthcoming village fête, when Gabriel bursts through the door, bringing her the startling news that she is to be the mother of Christ. Their kitchen is a simple one, and they are surrounded by everyday objects. Like all John Ward's paintings, this one is full of small, intimate details that bring it to life – ordinary rather battered cupboards, carefully drawn jugs and glasses, gloves and a hat. It is a normal, homely space, which no one would think was anything special. In this way Ward has set the scene for an extraordinary and supernatural story to unfold.

The calm and peace of the girls' day is dramatically broken. The door bursts open, and a violent wind, a clap of thunder or a bolt of lightning sets the curtains flying and the dog barking. The young girl in the foreground looks as if she has just dropped what she was carrying and whipped round as through the door, in a burst of dazzling brightness, erupts the androgynous figure of God's messenger who looks as if he/she has flung something straight at Mary (Fig. 5). And that something is the halo that hovers just above Mary's head, almost as though a frisbee has been flung straight across the kitchen!

The Virgin is depicted as being frozen in the moment and so is the Angel Gabriel: both figures are quite static. It looks like a freeze-frame and they seem to inhabit another world. The only living things still in this world are the girl in the background and the excited dog. Mary's companion is standing on a chair with her back to the viewer stacking crockery, but looks as if she could be in a trance. She seems to be vaguely aware of the bright light, the door flung open and the billowing curtains, but there is a puzzled, dream-like quality about her. It is as if she can sense (rather than actually see) that something extraordinary is going on.

The dog is the only creature in this painting that is acting normally. Traditionally dogs, a symbol of fidelity, were thought to have second-sight, and this one has been well and truly startled by what it can see and is jumping up at the Archangel, perhaps in greeting, perhaps in fear.

It is Ward's close attention to every aspect of the painting that brings it to life. A particularly startling detail is the way the flimsy cotton curtain has been set flying in the gale that sweeps in through the door, suggesting that the curtain rings are about to be torn off the pole. Ward's deft inclusion of seemingly insignificant details brings a reality to the scene: the damp tea towels draped to dry on the clothes airer; the straw hat hung carelessly on a nail, ready to be grabbed again when one of the girls picks up the gardening gloves on the right-hand cupboard and goes back into the garden to plant the chestnut sapling (Fig. 6).

In a Renaissance painting such carefully included details would usually have symbolic meaning. Indeed, if this were a Renaissance painting it would be significant that the Virgin's right hand is gesturing towards a clear glass carafe, so as to make sure the viewer does not miss it (Fig. 7). In a Renaissance painting of



Fig. 4 Mary and Companion, detail.

the Annunciation the glass carafe would symbolize the purity of the Virgin herself. John Ward was greatly influenced by early religious paintings where symbolism was all important and so it is quite possible that in this instance he was following such Renaissance traditions.

Overall, it is because of the very normality of the kitchen surroundings that the frozen figures of the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary draw our attention. What the viewer is witnessing is the moment of Christ's conception, as represented by the flung halo hovering above Mary's head. It is a most extraordinarily powerful image.

The final elements of this panelled mural are the symbols and lettering at the centre of the arch between the main figures, which pull together the themes of the picture and its commissioning origins (**Fig. 8**). There are two birds, images of the natural world. On the left is one of the jackdaws of Elham church tower, and on the right a pheasant of the Elham Valley fields. They flank a Latin inscription. 'Magnificat Anima Mea Dominum': My Soul doth magnify the Lord. It is the first line of the biblical text known as *The Magnificat*, which is also to be found in Chapter 1 of St Luke's gospel.⁷



Fig. 5 The Angel Gabriel, detail.

St Luke tells how after the Annunciation Mary went to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth who, exceptionally given her age, was pregnant with a son who was to become John the Baptist. The Evangelist tells how when Elizabeth saw Mary ‘the child leapt in her womb’. Mary then tells her cousin what has happened to her, in the passage beginning: ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my saviour...’. It is an intensely moving passage of scripture, and at its



Fig. 6 Right-hand cupboard, detail.



Fig. 7 Mary's right hand gesturing, detail.



Fig. 8 Lettering and Bird, detail.

heart there is the theme of motherhood, two pregnant women – both amazed at what has happened to them – talking quietly and reverently together.

Immediately above the lines from *The Magnificat* there is a line of poetry: ‘Ring out Wild Bells to the Wild Sky’, which could be the mission statement for any bell-tower anywhere in England! The line comes from *In Memoriam*, a long poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson written in memory of his close friend Arthur Hallam, who died as a young man just after becoming engaged to Tennyson’s sister. It is entirely appropriate therefore for James Larkin’s personal commemoration project in honour of his mother.

Three of the central verses from *In Memoriam*⁸ sum up the circumstances of this particular painting. They also contain the central message of this and every other depiction of the Annunciation.

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light.
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.*

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow.
The year is going, let it go;
Ring out the false, ring in the new.*

*Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more.
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress for all mankind.*

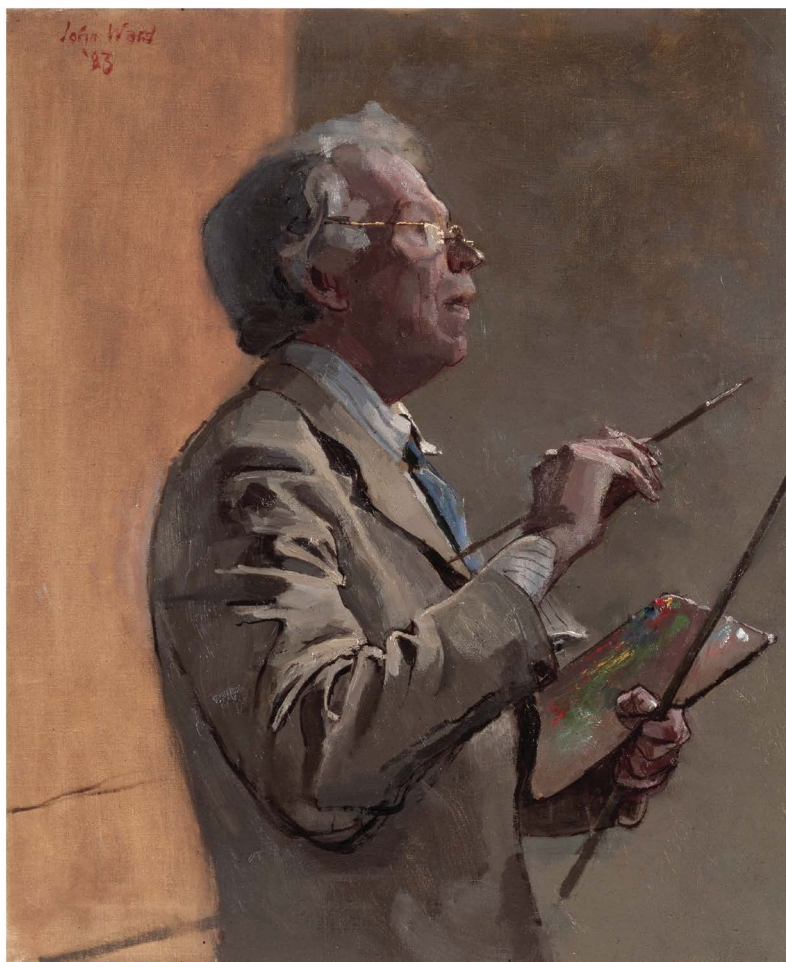


Fig. 9 John Ward R.A.. self-portrait (1983): courtesy of William Ward.

‘Redress for all mankind’. That is what depictions of the Annunciation throughout the history of art have been about. All such paintings have addressed the cosmic event which in Ward’s outstanding mural has caused the curtains to blow and the dog to bark.

John Ward was fascinated by his subjects, and his individual style displays a lightness of touch, deftness and joy in his interpretation of the world around him (Fig. 9). His sketches, studies and finished paintings are full of intimate detail, not just for the sake of it but to evoke the atmosphere of a scene.

Alongside his work as a portraitist and society painter, he was passionately interested in the landscape and architecture of east Kent, and was familiar with the early tradition of religious wall paintings that would have filled these churches. It is particularly fitting therefore that alongside his ambitious series of wall paintings at

Challock Church, he should now also be remembered for this remarkable painting in St Mary the Virgin, Elham.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Anyone wishing to view the mural, which is in the locked ringing-chamber, should contact the Churchwarden of St Mary the Virgin, Elham (contact details are on the church website).

ENDNOTES

¹ Ward was born in Hereford in 1917 and died at Bilting, Wye, near Ashford, in 2007.

² The murals in Ss Cosmas and Damian were painted in collaboration with his friend Gordon Davies.

³ 'Mr James Larkin had pledged £27,500 towards the cost of the necessary repairs to the organ and the provision of a screen between the organ and the ringing chamber ... A further sum of £4,000 had been guaranteed by an anonymous donor. Mr Larkin wished the work to be carried out as a memorial to his mother'. Extract from the Minutes of a Meeting of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) 23 January 1992.

⁴ Extracts from JW's work diaries: Wednesday 28th October 1992: *11.00am Elham*; Tuesday 29 December – Saturday 2nd January 1993: *Murals*; Saturday 16th January: *Mural*; Wednesday 27th January: *Designs to church*. Saturday 8th May: *5.30 meeting at church*. This is when the design would have been finally approved. Work then continues in the studio. Monday 10th May: *Mural*. The entry dated 14th - 16th May gives a list of the mural's details that Ward is working on: *table, bracket on wall, inside of cupboard, hands, curtain rings, flower pot, hand, latch & hand*, each crossed out in pencil demonstrating his systematic way of working. On Tuesday 8th June: *Mural*. And finally for the week beginning 14th June: *Mural*, crossed through in pencil. The work is complete.

⁵ Minutes of the PCC Social Committee of 27th April 1993 give full details of the Organ Festival to be held over the weekend of 12th and 13th June, to be directed by Mark Deller. The event was to include trips up the tower to visit the Ringing Chamber and view the mural and drawings, and Minutes of the next PCC meeting on 1st July reported that the Organ Festival had been 'extremely successful'. As Ward's diary entry for 14th June suggests, he probably made final adjustments or additions *in situ* after the Organ Festival and Exhibition.

⁶ Gordon Davies, his collaborator at Challock, also worked with him on the Elham *Annunciation*. Ward made preliminary drawings for the three figures in his own studio at Bilting, and then the large panels were prepared and painted in Gordon Davies' studio at Hastingleigh. Ward asked one of his close friends, David Embry who was then Head of Art at Folkestone Girls Grammar School, if he could suggest models for this painting. The model for the figure of the Virgin Mary was Claire Carroll (née Percival) and for Mary's companion was Kate Samson. Close scrutiny of the androgynous looking figure of the Angel Gabriel showed that it too was also based on Ward's drawings of Claire Percival, but that he had used his studies of his own hands to make the figure appear more masculine.

⁷ Luke 1:46-55.

⁸ From *In Memoriam*: Canto 106.