THE HEADMASTER AND THE ARCHITECT: J F ROXBURGH, J F MATTHEW, AND STOWE SCHOOL WAR MEMORIAL

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This article describes the War Memorial at Stowe School, designed by John F Matthew, of the Edinburgh partnership Lorimer and Matthew. It explains the iconography of the Memorial, describes the stages in the evolution of the design and illustrates the extent of the involvement of the Headmaster, J F Roxburgh, in the design. The article includes reproductions of previously unpublished cartoons by the artist Morris Meredith Williams.

DESCRIPTION

In 1945 J F Roxburgh, Stowe's headmaster, wishing to set up a memorial to the pupils killed in the Second World War, returned to the partnership of Lorimer and Matthew which had built the school's chapel. John F Matthew, the surviving partner, had available Sir Robert Lorimer's drawings for memorials to the fallen of the First War, the furniture makers Scott Morton & Co still had oak set aside for use at Stowe and Matthew's designs are such that they could have come direct from Lorimer's hand.

The nave of the chapel (which is oriented north-south rather than east-west) comprises seven bays and is separated from the narrow aisles by arcades. Lorimer had provided sets of stalls to occupy the five central arches in each arcade: the remaining arches in each arcade would be filled with wooden screens, allowing passage in and out of the aisles. In the event, only three of these screens had been built and thus the southernmost bay of the western arcade remained empty. The War Memorial (Figs 1 & 2) occupies this south-western corner of the chapel.

The War Memorial comprises a screen, separating the aisle from the nave and pierced by a central arch; a shrine, placed against the south wall of the aisle, to the left as one goes through the screen; and a framed set of five oak panels listing the 270 names of the dead, placed against the west wall of the aisle directly opposite the screen. Matthew intended that the woodwork should be given Lorimer's usual grey treatment.[1] The screen,

and perhaps the shrine as well, were coloured and gilded by an unnamed Edinburgh decorator.[2]

The shrine comprises a canopy, a back panel bearing a cross, and a desk containing the Book of Remembrance. The cross in silvered bronze, terminating in enamelled symbols of the evangelists (Fig. 3), was modelled on that recently provided for the memorial to King George V in the Thistle Chapel.[3] John Soper enamelled the symbols,[4] following Morris Meredith Williams' designs for the enamelled symbols on the cross in the Thistle Chapel (Fig. 4), and Charles Henshaw & Sons assembled and made the whole piece.

The Book of Remembrance was lettered by F G Marshall of Epsom, and completed in July 1951 at a cost of £680 7s 6d. It was bound onto pickled pigskin thongs, laced into laminated boards, and covered in vellum.[5]

The five panels bearing the names of the dead are surmounted by an openwork frieze.[6] The names were carved by Mr Norman Forrest ARSA (1898–1972), assistant instructor in sculpture at Edinburgh College of Art. The Memorial was dedicated on 8th June 1949, although the screen was not finally installed until that November.[7] Matthew also designed the adjacent memorial to Pilot Officer George Gillings Lax DFC, for construction by Scott Morton.[8]

A memorial to former pupils who lost their lives in the post-war campaigns was added to the south end of the east aisle in the late 1950s, though it is now bereft of its standards and metal standard-holder. A dove, by David Wynne, was suspended across the central arch of the screen in 2016.

FIGURE 1 The Screen viewed from the east, with the oak panels visible beyond

FIGURE 2 (left to right) the Screen, the Shrine, the Panel of Names, the Gillings Lax Memorial, viewed from the north

ICONOGRAPHY

On the outer face of the screen are two crosses with their arms terminating in trefoils; on the inner face are two demi-angels; all four are wreathed in laurel for victory. One of the angels bears a lily, symbol of purity; the other a scroll marked PAX, perhaps short for PAX INTRANTIBUS, *i.e.* 'Peace to those who enter'. In the canopy of the shrine, the rose and the thistle, perhaps standing for love and suffering or for the union between the two kingdoms, flank the descending Holy Spirit. On the sides of the shrine the pelican (Fig. 5) and phoenix (Fig. 6) symbolise self-sacrifice and resurrection.

The openwork frieze above the panels of names has at either end the letters Alpha and Omega, associating the sacrifice of the fallen with that of Christ. In between, it contains the badge of the Royal Air Force, flanked by a passion flower and a vine, symbols of Christ; an anchor wreathed in laurel for Royal Navy, flanked by a poppy and a thistle, symbols here perhaps of remembrance and suffering;[9] a burning cross, symbol perhaps of enthusiasm and sacrifice, flanked by the letters S S for Stowe School; the emblem of the Army, flanked by a lily and roses, symbols of purity and love; and the emblem of the Royal Army Medical Corps, flanked by rowan and a pomegranate, symbols perhaps of life and resurrection.[10]

Dr Geoffrey Fisher, at the memorial's dedication, drew attention to the fact that 'at one end of the Chapel was the Memorial of Man's imperfect but faithful sacrifice and at the other was the memorial of Christ's perfect sacrifice.'[11] In view of both speaker and occasion it would be churlish to say that there was no symbolic significance in the Memorial's position.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE DESIGN

Roxburgh initially proposed that a Memorial Screen should be inserted in the southernmost bay of the western arcade, to complete the set of four screens. He envisaged a screen 'taller and more distinguished' than the other screens 'so that it will catch the eye as being something more than a part of the furnishing of the chapel.'[12] Matthew suggested a screen similar to the others but with panels in the side openings which could accommodate up to 122 names (Fig. 7). Roxburgh pointed out that the new screen would not stand out suffi-

FIGURE 3   The Symbols of the Four Evangelists (photos Alan Longworth)

ciently, and there would be insufficient space for the names, whose number he expected to exceed 250.[13]

Matthew therefore enhanced the pediment, in a manner recalling Lorimer's memorial to the dead of the First World War at Westminster School, which had been destroyed during the Blitz, and by reducing the width of the central passage provided for two columns of names on either side. He suggested that on the inner side of the screen a carved figure could be placed over the central bay, and that the clear glass in the window opposite could be replaced with stained glass incorporating a figure.[14]

Roxburgh, having consulted the Chairman of Governors, Dr A W Pickard-Cambridge, responded that the carved figure from the inner side of the screen might profitably replace the cartouche envisaged for the front of the screen, that the central passage was now too narrow and
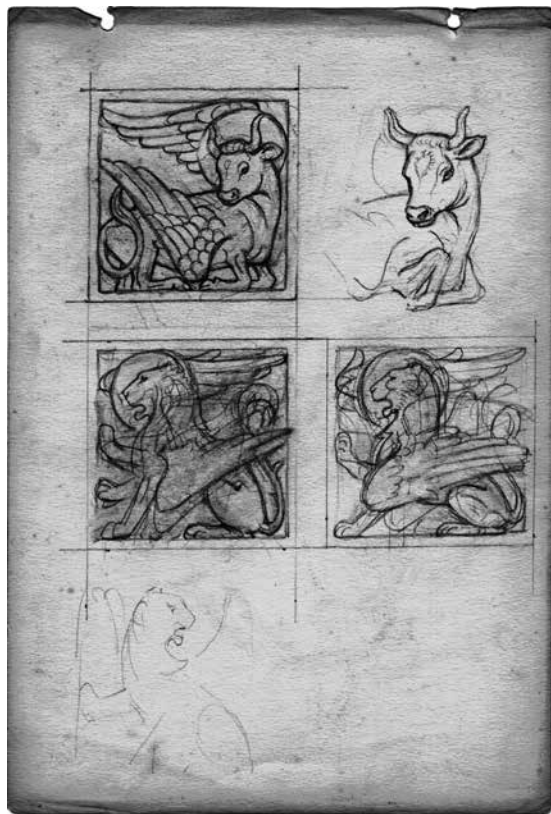
FIGURE 4 Preliminary sketches by Morris Meredith Williams for Symbols of the Four Evangelists (private collection, reproduced with permission)

FIGURE 5 The Pelican

FIGURE 6 The Phoenix

that the swags hanging from the Ionic capitals were 'over sumptuous.'[15] Matthew duly amended the design, putting the statue on the outer side of the screen and providing a wider central passage, but at a meeting on site 2 December with Roxburgh, Pickard-Cambridge, and the school's War Memorial Committee, Matthew appears to have solved the difficulty of compressing all the names and a sufficiently wide passage into the narrow space available by suggesting that the whole of that corner of the chapel should become the Memorial, and that the screen, enriched with the carved figure of St George, should effectively become the entrance to the Memorial, which would additionally comprise wall panels displaying the names of the fallen and a shrine holding the Book of Remembrance.[16]

Matthew followed this suggestion with fully worked-up drawings (Fig. 8). The screen now had three bays, not five, widening the central passage considerably. For the shrine, Matthew suggested 'a Cross on the upright panel – silver, with emblems of the four Evangelists in enamel, and the Phoenix carved and decorated on the front of the Table.' The estimated cost was £2,427 10s, including elec-
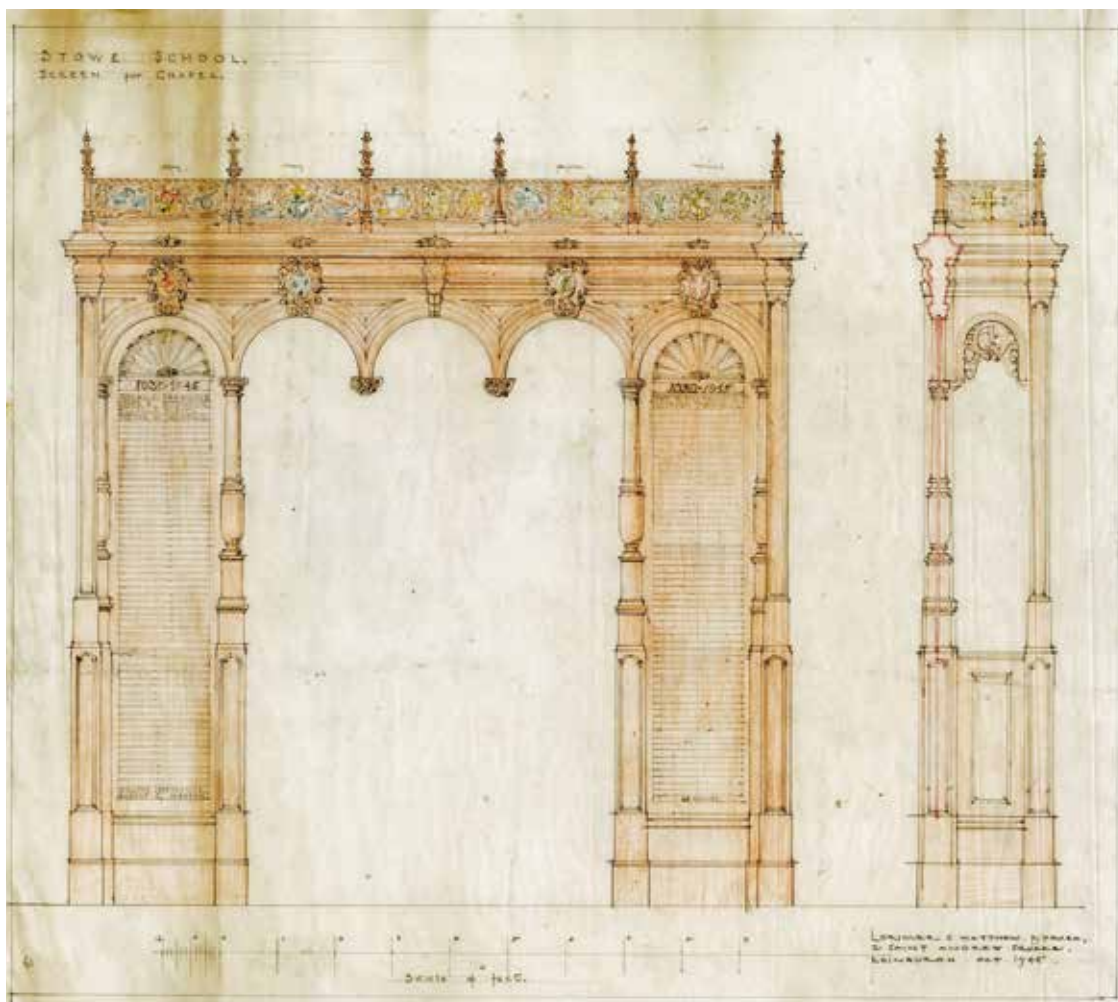
FIGURE 7 Matthew's Initial Scheme © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/XSD/40/2/16)

tric lighting but excluding fees and the silver and enamel cross, which was estimated at £50.[17] The architect's fee amounted to £360.

One of the members of the War Memorial Committee noticed acutely that Matthew's difficulties included the high narrow space into which the shrine had to fit, and the light from the window against which it would be difficult to view the carved frieze above the name panels, but both difficulties followed inevitably from the chosen location, and on 2 July Roxburgh gave approval to proceed.[18]

Progress was held up by the need for a licence for the work from the Ministry of Works and a licence to use timber from the Board of Trade's Timber Control section. The Ministry of Works felt that as a school was involved it should refer the matter to the Ministry of Education in London which, following consultation with its Southern Region Priority Officer, granted permission on 1 December 1947. The school was notified of the decision two weeks later. The Ministry of Works gave its permission on 5 December. Matters were further dislocated by the death on 23 February 1948 of David Ramsay, the draughtsman at Scott Morton who had always dealt with work for Stowe.
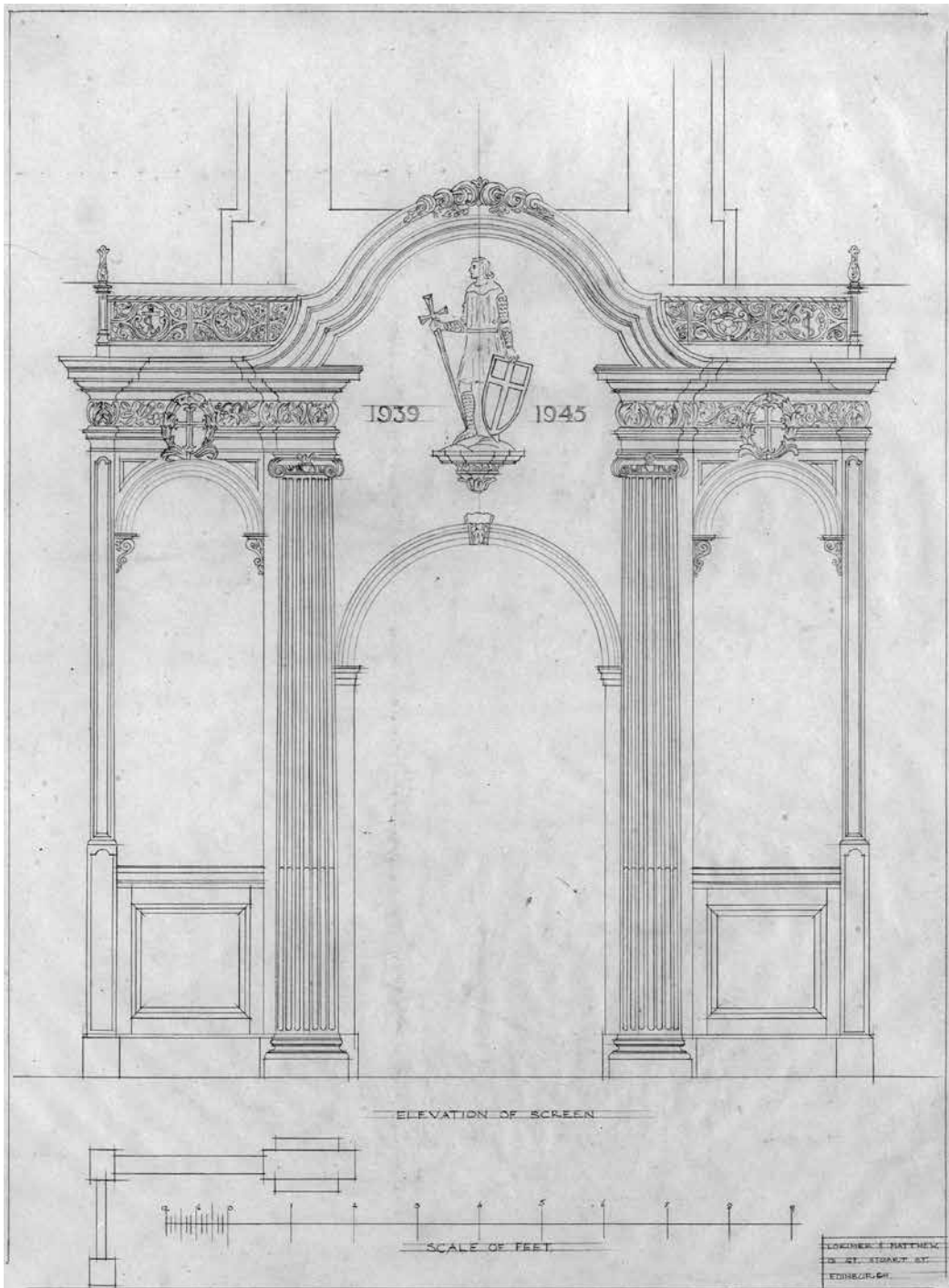
FIGURE 8 Matthew's Second Scheme: the Screen © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/XSD/40/34/2)

Not until July 1948 did Scott Morton recruit Peter Miller as his successor.[19]

Meanwhile, Roxburgh had formed doubts about the proposed figure over the central arch of the screen, writing to Matthew, 'As shown in your drawing the figure is a crusader facing half right … I am not myself quite convinced that a figure is exactly what is wanted and I know that some members of the Committee also have doubts on this subject.'[20] Matthew responded by inviting Morris Meredith Williams (1881–1973), who had been part of the original team of craftsmen who had worked on the Chapel, to produce three sketches for alternative treatments.[21]

Roxburgh, who had not yet received the sketches, followed up his earlier comments by writing:

'I have been giving a great deal of thought recently to this memorial … which is associated with such deep emotions in the hearts of all of us here … I cannot convince myself that any figure – unless Michaelangelo came to life again – could really be worthy to stand in such a conspicuous position. I am going to suggest to you that instead of a figure we should have a shield bearing the arms of the school … Heraldic enrichment somehow seems appropriate in our chapel because the school arms supported by angels surmount the entrance to it outside and the arms of Charles II form the most conspicuous feature of the "west" end woodwork. … I feel sure that if a heraldic feature of sufficient dignity and magnificence can be provided over the main aperture of the screen it will look right – look as if it belonged to the Chapel.'[22]

Roxburgh then received Meredith Williams' sketches (Figs 9-11), which were intended to be in low relief and not coloured. In No 1 Meredith Williams echoed the sword and the wreaths from the north panel of the frieze which he and his wife Alice had designed for the Shrine of the Scottish National War Memorial; in No 2 he took forward the angel trumpeters of his design for the door of the memorial porch at St Baldred's, North Berwick.[23] Matthew commented on the three designs:

'… right away I like No 2 best as it seems most appropriate both as regards filling the available space and the note of uplift and joy which it conveys rather than No 1 which is more depressing. No 3 does not fill the space so well and has a more formal note about it and makes too much of the scroll.'[24]

Roxburgh replied:

'The sentiment expressed in No 2 is the most appropriate, but the design is not a successful one. The design of No 1 is in itself not unpleasing, but it does not seem well adapted to the space into which it is to fit. No 3 is much too crowded and looks like an illustration to a book. The fact is that no composition consisting of figures will, I believe, seem right in this position and I return to my request that you will consider a heraldic composition.'[25]

Roxburgh took advantage of the Christmas break to visit Edinburgh, where he met Matthew and came away happy with Matthew's heraldic design. Roxburgh also visited Warriston Crematorium to look at the lettering there and the Thistle Chapel to look at its silver cross. He commented that the cross

'…is of course a beautiful thing and exactly right in its surroundings. However I did feel a slight doubt as to whether the general effect of it might not be a little too Gothic for our Classical Chapel. In particular the enamel plaques of the Evangelists seemed to have a touch of the Mediaeval about them which I could not be certain was quite in keeping with the Renaissance tone and character of the building.'[26]

Matthew responded by saying that the cross proposed for Stowe was 'extremely simple – its severity of line being relieved by the colour and sparkle of the enamelled emblems … They introduce a bright touch where needed.'[27]

Roxburgh wrote:

'I am prepared to agree to the metal cross … but I welcome your suggestion that the I.H.S. should be omitted for I cannot help feeling that such a monogram has a mediaeval suggestion about it which is hardly in keeping with the classical character of our Chapel. As you know, I feel something of the same kind about the enamel panels, but I must leave it to you to settle that problem as you think best.'[28]

Matthew asked whether the lettering should be gilded only or whether it should additionally be set against a coloured background, perhaps red or blue. Gilding, he suggested, would provide 'a subdued sheen of gold background as one views it through the arched openings on approaching the Memorial Screen.' Roxburgh agreed that the lettering should be gilded but preferred the background uncoloured.

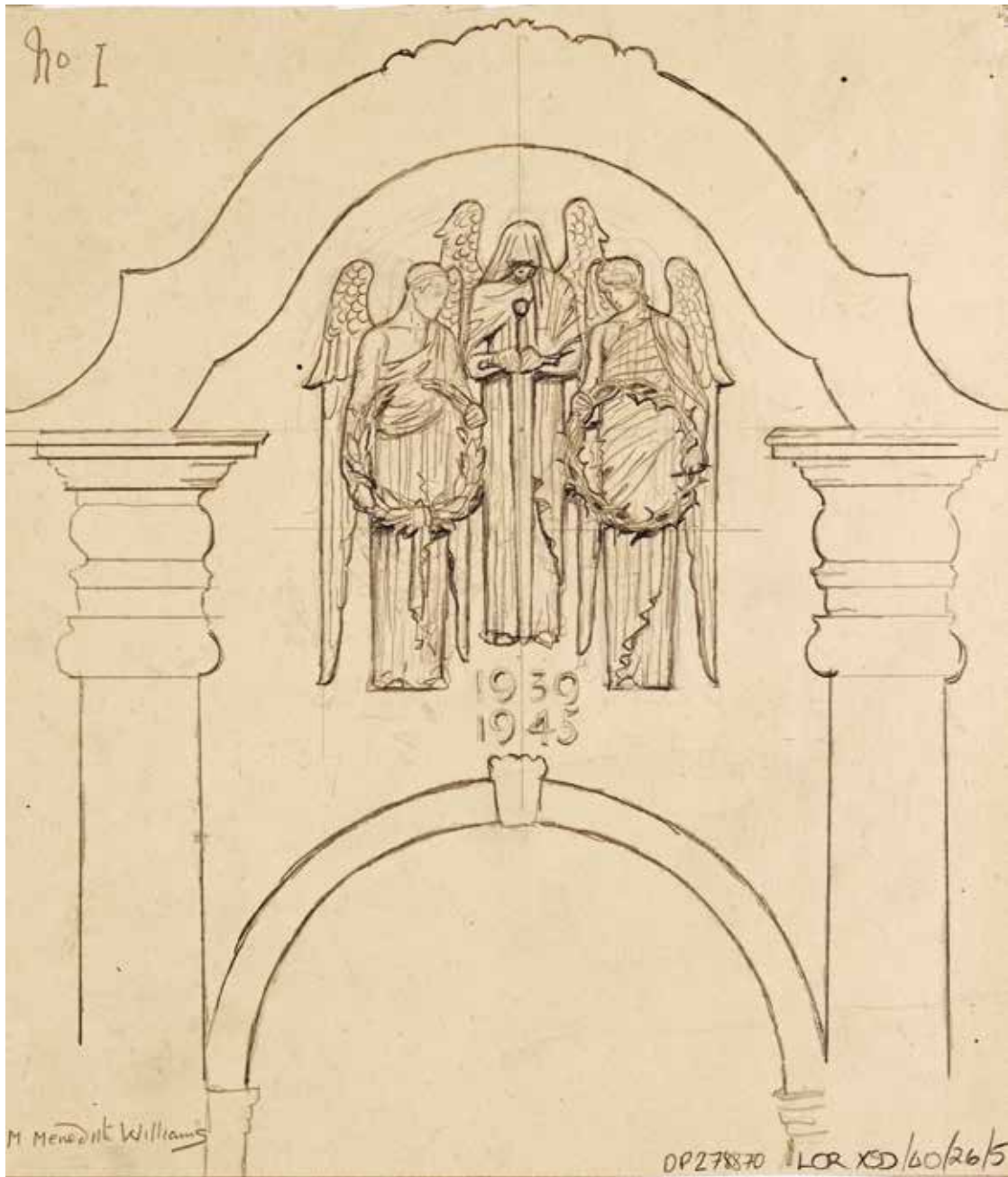Work on the panel was held up by the fact that

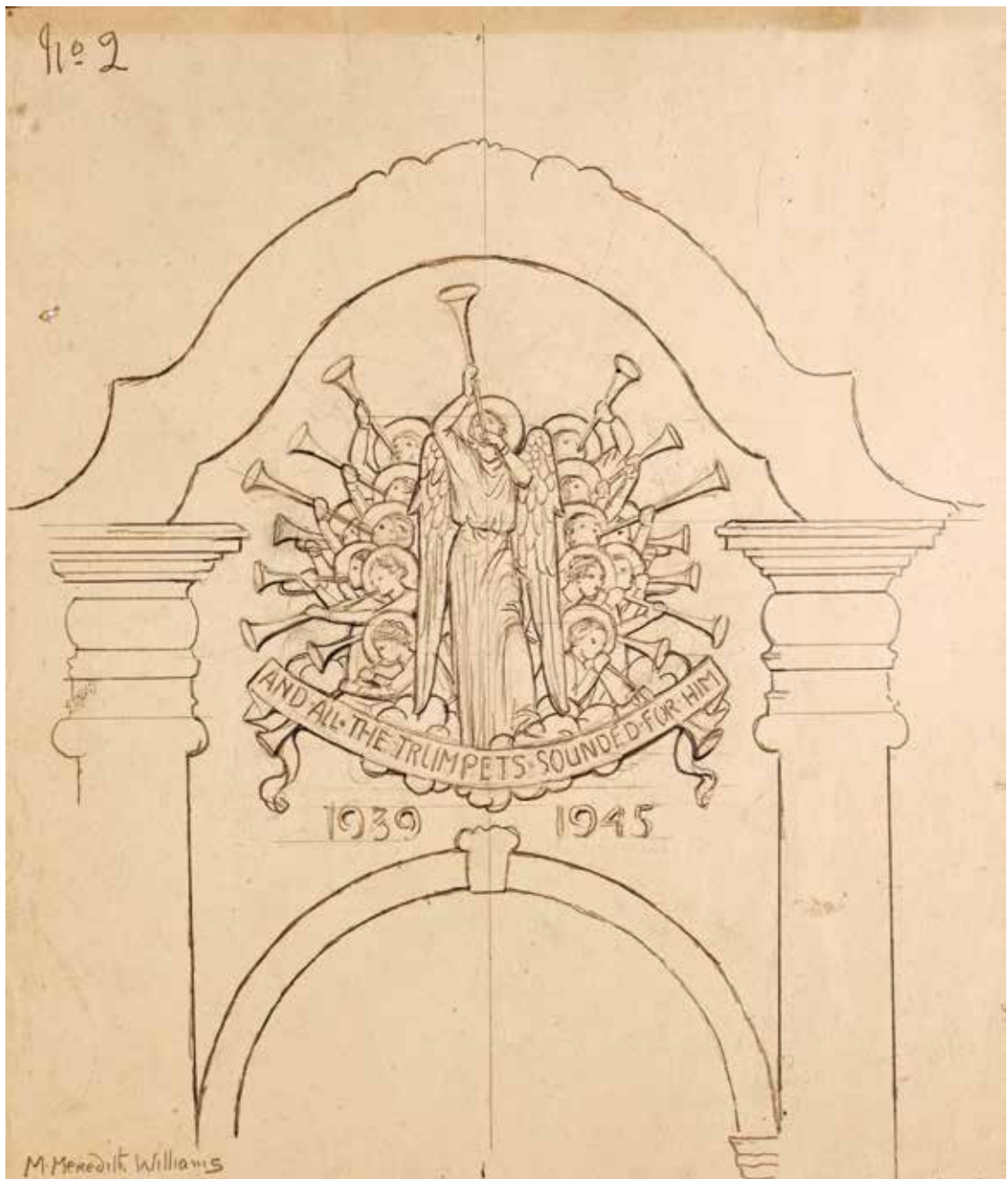FIGURE 9 Cartoon No 1 © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/XSD/40/26/5)

FIGURE 10 Cartoon No 2 © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/XSD/40/26/6)

FIGURE 11 Cartoon No 3 © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/XSD/40/26/7)

Scott Morton now only had three carvers, whose hours were limited by their age and health. One of the three may have been the septuagenarian Robert Young.[29] Attempts to recruit additional carvers were unavailing, and it was only Matthew's securing the services of Norman Forrest that enabled progress.[30] When the text of the inscription was finalised, it became clear that there was insufficient space on the same panel for both it and the carved Phoenix, so Matthew suggested that the Phoenix be transferred to one side of the shrine, balanced by a Pelican on the other, leaving the inscription on the front of the shrine.[31] The design was now complete (Fig. 12).

CONCLUSION

Following the Memorial's dedication, Roxburgh summed up his thoughts to Matthew: 'I feel very happy about the beauty and propriety of the whole design and the exquisite character of the workmanship.'[32] Roxburgh was more experienced, more self-confident than he had been during the building of the chapel, and Matthew was known for valuing 'moderation and tact.'[33] The project was well managed, in that fund-raising was completed before the go-ahead was given; Roxburgh ensured that the Chairman of Governors and the War Memorial Committee were informed and supportive, and once he had given the go-ahead he did not introduce any variations that had financial implications. Roxburgh had a preference for classical simplicity and a certain austerity: Matthew, heir to the Scottish romantic tradition, had a greater enthusiasm for colour and for representational carving. Nevertheless, between them they put into effect a design that blended the two approaches and, despite all the difficulties, implemented Roxburgh's original ambition for a screen 'taller and more distinguished' than the other screens, that would 'catch the eye as being something more than a part of the furnishing of the chapel.'

The last word should perhaps lie with a mother who had lost two sons, and who said that the Dedication Service was 'a most moving and inspiring service,' and that she went away 'quite uplifted.'[34]

Visiting: The Chapel is open to the public on a number of days throughout the year. Please check the Stowe House website www.stowehouse.org or email shptinfo@stowe.co.uk

FIGURE 12 Matthew's Final Design © Courtesy of HES (Lorimer and Matthew Collection LOR/ XSD/113/2)

REFERENCES

1. Matthew to Roxburgh, 20 June 1949 (this and other letters cited are in Stowe School Archive, War Memorial file); for Lorimer's grey treatment, see Robin Blair and others, *The Thistle Chapel Within St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 51; and 'Treatment of oak for the Thistle Chapel' (Edinburgh University Library, Centre for Research Collections Gen 1963/3/53).
2. Matthew to Roxburgh, 23 July 1949.
3. For the Thistle Chapel Cross, see Robin Blair and others, pp. 58 & 66–7.
4. Matthew to Roxburgh, 26 January 1949.
5. Marshall to Roxburgh, 31 March & 27 May 1949.
6. HES LOR XSD/40/26, 27, & 34, LOR XSD/113, & SMO XSD/3/3/6.
7. Roxburgh to Eric Reynolds, 8 November 1949.
8. Scott Morton to Stowe School, 22 June 1953; HES LOR XSD/40/27/9.
9. For the rose and thistle as a symbol of the union of England and Scotland, see Stuart Matthew, *The Knights and Chapel of the Most Ancient and Noble Order of the Thistle: A Panoramic View* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 32–33.
10. HES LOR XSD/40/10/12.
11. *The Stoic*, **XIII** July 1949 No. 6, p. 266.
12. Roxburgh to Matthew, 18 June 1945.
13. Roxburgh to Matthew, 25 October 1945.
14. Matthew to Roxburgh, 22 November 1945.
15. Roxburgh to Matthew, 12 June 1946.
16. Roxburgh to Peter Sherwood, 2 December 1946; HES LOR XSD/40/10/12.
17. Matthew to Roxburgh, 3 March & 23 May 1947.
18. Roxburgh to Matthew, 2 July 1947.
19. Matthew to Roxburgh, 12 July 1948.
20. Roxburgh to Matthew, 13 August 1948.
21. Matthew to Roxburgh, 18 November 1948.
22. Roxburgh to Matthew, 29 November 1948.
23. Phyllida Shaw, *An Artist's War: The Art and Letters of Morris and Alice Meredith Williams* (Stroud, 2017), pp. 195 & 255.
24. Matthew to Roxburgh, 26 November 1948.
25. Roxburgh to Matthew, 7 December 1948.
26. Roxburgh to Matthew, 13 January 1949.
27. Matthew to Roxburgh, 19 January 1949.
28. Roxburgh to Matthew, 28 January 1949.
29. For Robert Young, see *Malcolm Cant*, Edinburgh: Gorgie and Dalry (Edinburgh, 1995), p.127, and *The People's Journal*, 20 July 1946. I am grateful to Louise Boreham for sharing her knowledge of Robert Young.
30. Matthew to Roxburgh, 26 January 1949. For Norman Forrest, see Scott J Lawrie, The Edinburgh College of Art (1904–1969): *A Study in Institutional History*, MPhil thesis submitted to Edinburgh College of Art (Heriot Watt University) 1996, p. 53, and 'Norman John Forrest ARSA, ARBA', *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951*, University of Glasgow History of Art and HATII, online database 2011 [http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=msib6_1208254567] (viewed 19 December 2018).
31. Matthew to Roxburgh, 31 March 1949.
32. Roxburgh to Matthew, 15 June 1949.
33. Stuart Matthew, p. 107.
34. *The Stoic,* **XIII** July 1949 No. 6, p. 266.