

A K NICHOLSON NOT SIR WILLIAM – THE BECHER WINDOW

By Martin Everitt July 2020

This is an extended version of the article for the Steward



John Beaumont's guide to the 'Stained Glass in Southwell Minster' ascribes the Becher Memorial Window in the Pilgrim's Chapel to Nicholson on page 6 and then on page 14 elaborates on Sir William Nicholson - father of Ben and father-in-law to Barbara Hepworth, part of the well-known family of artists and friends of the Becher family. Hence, we have all been well versed in telling visitors of this connection. However, over the past few years, some visitors have said, quite forcefully, that it is not by Sir William, being quite unlike his style of work.

It is not difficult to find an alternative, A K Nicholson, Archibald Keightley, a noted and prolific stained glass designer and member of another prominent Nicholson family, but quite unrelated.

We have been hesitant to change the ascription and in spite of trying quite hard to find positive proof we have failed to find it. It seems as if many of the families' records are missing, not helped by WW II damage. But significant members of the Society of Master Glass Painters, not just one but several with specialist publications in the field, say it is typical of A K Nicholson and is by him. We have asked Clare Hartwell who is currently publishing the revised Pevsner and who has knowledge of stained glass herself. Whilst not a Nicholson specialist she has said that she has faith in those whose opinions that we have got. Conclusion: we should refer to the window as the work of A K Nicholson. It is not too implausible that the Becher family did seek the advice of their friends the Nicholsons who recommended Archibald Keightley Nicholson - but unprovable.

So who was A.K. Nicholson? Gleaned from the internet www.victorianweb.org:

Archibald Keightley Nicholson (1871-1937) was one of three sons born in London to the educationalist and politician Sir Charles Nicholson. The three were all talented. The eldest, Charles Nicholson (1867-1949), was a pupil of J.D.Sedding and partner of the architect Henry Wilson, becoming a prominent architect himself, and inheriting his father's baronetcy. The youngest, Sydney Nicholson (1875-1947), was the founder of the Royal School of Church Music, and was knighted for his services to music. Both have ODNB entries.

Like his older brother, Charles, A K Nicholson set out to be an architect. He was articled to Henry Wilson at first, but was drawn more towards other crafts, particularly metalwork and stained glass. He is said to have produced his first glasswork as early as 1894. Despite being

largely self-taught in this area, he was evidently successful. In 1907 he set up his own stained glass studios in London, moving to Westminster in 1916 and Gower Street in 1921.

Nicholson was perhaps a typical craftsman of his time, "embedded in the best traditions," and keeping "close personal control over all the work which left his studio". The studio continued to operate in his name right into the 1960s, run by his former chief designer G.E.R. Smith. Over his lifetime, Nicholson produced over 700 windows. These included work in the cathedrals of Newcastle, Chester, Lincoln, Norwich, Southwell*, Bradford, Worcester (the Edward Elgar memorial window) and Wells.

** There is no further detail existing as to which window!*

Other windows by A K:

Nicholson designed the rose window of the south transept at the Church of Christ the King, Bloomsbury, along with a 1932 window dedicated to St Stephen Harding in the Musicians' Chapel at St Sepulchre-without-Newgate, both in London. The latter church also contains a memorial window to him, by Gerald E. R. Smith, with the following inscription:

"To the glory of God. In memory of Archibald Keightley Nicholson, Master Glass Painter, who worshipped at this church. This window is designed and carried out by the craftsmen of his studios as a thank offering for his life and friendship. 1871 - 1937."

The east window of 1902 at St John the Baptist, Womersley, Surrey, is Nicholson's earliest commissioned work. It was installed in memory of two soldiers, and depicts Christ with St George and St Alban, both military saints. Nicholson also produced two smaller windows in the north wall depicting the Madonna & Child and the Annunciation. In St Wilfrid's Church, Moberley is Nicholson's window to the memory of George Mallory the mountaineer, who died on Mount Everest in 1924.

The Lady Chapel of Waltham Abbey Church contains three windows by Nicholson. They depict the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Work on a fourth window depicting the Epiphany was interrupted by the Second World War and never resumed.

The East window behind the altar in the church of St Peter and St Paul's in Ewhurst, Surrey was commissioned as a memorial window for the 24-year-old Captain William Ralph Frecheville, executed after his capture on 9 January 1920 in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, whilst serving as part of the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War.

Several windows by Nicholson may also be seen in St Gabriel's church, Brynmill, Swansea. The largest of these is the great east window above the high altar which was dedicated in 1925. The principal figures are the archangels Gabriel and Michael, flanked by figures representing the Te Deum and with the Doctors of the Church in the lower panels. The style would appear to be a little dated, but the Vicar at the time was obviously delighted: "a triumph of the artist's skill", he wrote, "the beauty of the design, the richness and blending of the colours, the majesty of the figures, the expressions of the faces make it the grand and inspired conception of one who is at the same time a great artist and a devout Catholic". There are smaller windows on the south side of the sanctuary also of 1925-26 showing Saint Helen and Saint Catherine of Alexandria but in a more contemporary style. The windows in the Lady Chapel over the altar and on the south wall are by Nicholson and date from 1925-26. They depict themes related to the life of Our Lady.