

The Statue of Our Lady



In the mid 1960s, St Philip's Church, Elswick, undertook a programme of refurbishment. This included a new screen, pulpit, clergy stalls and lady chapel. The refurbishment was begun under the priest Fr. Jack Rutherford. Fr. Rutherford moved to Walker Parish Church in 1966 and the new vicar was Fr. Robert (Bob) Stroud (1966-1972).

The first mention of the statue in the P.C.C. minutes was on 23 July 1969.

“Lady Chapel - Fr. Stroud had thought that it would be a good idea to have a wooden statue of Our Lady in the Lady Chapel. Accompanied by Mrs Millican and Miss Fennah he had been to see a wood-carver in Morpeth. This man had come to see the church and had said he could make one to fit for approximately £100 and that if we did not want it when it was finished it wouldn't matter. This would look very effective with blue velvet curtains at the back of the Chapel and also round the organ. All members agreed this was a very good idea and gave Fr. Stroud the go-ahead.”¹

The statue was created by the sculptor Zbigniew Les who was working at the time as an art teacher in Morpeth. A small article in the Newcastle Sunday Sun on 2 Nov 1969 states that the statue took the artist four months to complete.²

Raising the money to pay for the statue was taking some time.

“Decision on Statue - The Vicar already has £40 but another £60 are needed. Letters will be sent out at Christmas with envelopes asking parishioners to make contributions as a Christmas gift or as a remembrance to someone. If £60 is not raised in this way the money from the G.P.O.³ will be used.”⁴

By early 1970 the Lady Chapel was ready and Fr. Stroud applied for a Faculty to place the statue and an oak and glass case containing the Mother's Union banner which can be seen here on the wall next to the vestry door. In the Faculty application the artist is referred to as Mr Ley and continues to be called this throughout the correspondence.

¹ St Philip's Church, P.C.C. Minutes, 23 July 1969, Elswick St Philip Parish Records, 1869-2011, Northumberland Archives, EP/85/61

² “Four months to carve statue”, Sunday Sun, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2 Nov 1969, page 7

³ The G.P.O. (General Post Office) had requested use of the Church Hall for three weeks in December 1969 for sorting the Christmas post. The Hall would be open 24 hours per day and they would pay rent and reimburse for electricity and gas costs. They asked if the Church could supply a cleaner for 2 hours per day who would be paid 6 shillings an hour.

⁴ St Philip's Church P.C.C. Minutes 3 Dec 1970 [*sic*, although should be dated 1969], Elswick St Philip Parish Records, 1869-2011, Northumberland Archives, EP/85/61

“We commissioned a wood carver of international repute to carve an oak figure of St Mary for the Church. This figure completes the alterations made by the oak screen, pulpit and clergy stalls. The Archdeacon has assured me that there is no need for a Faculty since this figure is a replacement. However the P.C.C. insist that we have a Faculty.”⁵

The first reply from the Faculty Committee expressed their surprise that the Faculty had not been applied for before the statue had been carved.

“Statue - The figure of St Mary, carved by Mr Ley [sic] of Morpeth, was approved by the Committee at its last meeting. Members of the Committee asked me to point out that the proper procedure in such a case is that a design of the proposed statue is submitted for approval before the statue is carved. It would have been embarrassing for all concerned had the Committee not felt able to approve the statue.”⁶

Fr. Stroud replied to this admonishment repeating his assertion that he was told a Faculty was not required.

“Statue - This is a replacement for which I was assured that no faculty was needed. A “high-church” faction on the P.C.C. insisted on a faculty for fear of what a future incumbent might do.”⁷

The Committee granted the Faculty on 11 Jun 1970, but a member wrote to Fr. Stroud in March stating that they understood his position.

“Statue - I explained the position you mentioned in your letter, to the Committee, and the members understood. Fortunately, all has turned out well, though some members thought that the neck of the figure was rather substantial. However I am sure that the statue will shew [sic] up well on the plain plinth you have for it to stand on.”⁸

The artist Zbigniew Leszczynski was born in the village of Dosin in Eastern Poland on 27 April 1914.⁹ He studied at university and then at military school before being commissioned into the Polish army in 1938, served with the Polish 45th Foot Regiment. He was held as a Prisoner of War in Balatonlelle, Hungary after the Nazi invasion of Poland. After escaping and making his

⁵ Letter from Fr. Robert Stroud to [Faculty committee], 20 Feb 1970, Diocese of Newcastle Records, Northumberland Archives, DN/E/8/2/2/3505

⁶ Letter to Fr. Robert Stroud from [unknown Faculty committee member], 6 Mar 1970, Diocese of Newcastle Records, Northumberland Archives, DN/E/8/2/2/3505

⁷ Letter from Fr. Robert (Bob) Stroud, 9 Mar 1970, Diocese of Newcastle Records, Northumberland Archives, DN/E/8/2/2/3505

⁸ Letter for Fr. Robert Stroud from [unknown Faculty committee member], 12 Mar 1970, Diocese of Newcastle Records, Northumberland Archives, DN/E/8/2/2/3505

⁹ ‘Zbigniew Leszczynski (Les)’, *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=msib1_1265027049 , accessed 02 Aug 2023]

way to France he joined other members of the Polish Army. Leszczynski made his way to Britain after the fall of France in 1940 “where he trained special agents, radio operators and couriers for sabotage work in occupied Poland.”¹⁰ Leszczynski was decorated for his wartime efforts by Poland and Great Britain.¹¹

Leszczynski studied social studies at Edinburgh University, gaining his degree in 1948. He married Catherine Taylor McGilp in London in 1949 and returned to Edinburgh College of Art for a Masters degree in fine arts in 1955.¹² On 21 January 1955 Leszczynski became a British citizen.¹³ He used the name Zbigniew Les for much of his life in Britain.

An art teacher in secondary schools in Northumberland and Cumbria, Leszczynski continued working as a sculptor in wood, stone, clay, plaster, cement and concrete. He exhibited works at The Royal Scottish Academy Exhibition and The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts Annual Exhibition.

When he carved the statue of St Mary for St Philip’s Church, Leszczynski was living at 19 Cottingwood Gardens, Morpeth with his wife Catherine. Catherine died in 1978 and he married his second wife Barbara Edwards (who used the pen name Barbara Simon) in Peebles in 1981. Leszczynski suffered a stroke in the mid 1980s but continued to work with his one good hand.

Zbigniew Leszczynski died at Borders General Hospital on 8 August 2003.¹⁴ His obituary in The Scotsman states “He was a most talented, brave and compassionate man, and a good friend. He will be sorely missed.”¹⁵

¹⁰ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/zbigniew-leszczynski-2469595> [accessed 2 Aug 2023]

¹¹ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/zbigniew-leszczynski-2469595> [accessed 2 Aug 2023]

¹² ‘Zbigniew Leszczynski (Les)’, *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=msib1_1265027049 , accessed 02 Aug 2023]

¹³ The Edinburgh Gazette, 18 Mar 1955, Issue: 17269, p:167

¹⁴ ‘Zbigniew Leszczynski (Les)’, *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=msib1_1265027049 , accessed 02 Aug 2023]

¹⁵ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/zbigniew-leszczynski-2469595> [accessed 2 Aug 2023]