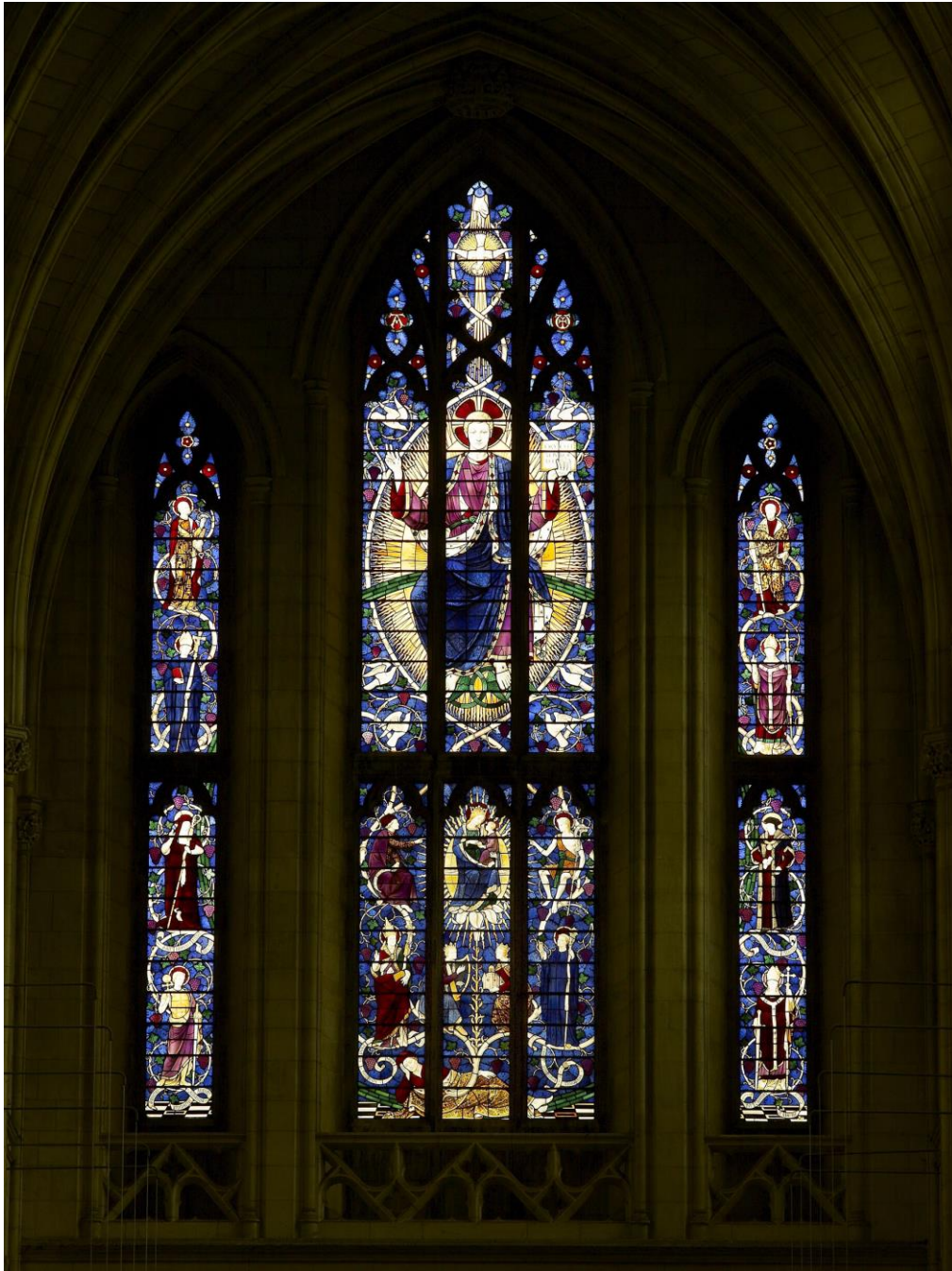


Sir Ninian Comper's East Window



A request for a blog post on the east window has come in, and as it is such a dominant feature of the abbey church, it is an excellent excuse to feature it in this edition of the blog.

The window is the work of the renowned architect and designer Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960), a Gothic Revival architect which put him in perfect place to work at Downside. However, as Abbot Aidan Bellenger points out, the window 'owes little to the Gothic Revival and much to the architecture of Palermo.'

Comper had done a great deal of work at Downside before the east window, indeed the installation was his last addition to the church, preceded by his decoration of the Lady Chapel from 1899 to 1926, his altar in the St Sebastian Chapel in 1929 and the beardless statue of St Benedict in his chapel

in 1919. Comper also produced frontals and vestments for the community which are still in use today.

Perhaps what is most impressive about Comper's window in the choir is its striking first impression as a visitor enters the church and looks up the nave, through the transept and choir to the dominant feature in the east end of the abbey church. The figure of Christ as a young man, with golden hair and no beard is typical of the style of Comper as seen throughout the abbey church, from his windows in the Lady Chapel, to the alabaster figure of St Sebastian. Depicted with Christ are: David and Solomon, Our Lady, Isaiah and John the Baptist, St Gregory the Great, St Benedict, St Peter, St Dunstan, St John Fisher, St Alban, St Paul, St Augustine, St Thomas More and St Thomas of Canterbury. The inclusion of St Alban is interesting as the window has three lancets on the request of Abbot Edmund Ford, as it is reminiscent of St Alban's Cathedral, the premier pre-Reformation abbey in England.



The creation of the window was possible due to the gift of a donation made by Dom Benet Tidmarsh (1818-1902) of £1000 for work to be done to the high altar. However, over the course of time between the donation and the completion of the choir area, the interest gained on the money enabled the community to employ Comper to add in a decoration to Garner's choir. When Comper was first employed by the monks in 1899 there had been trepidation from some monks around Comper's Anglo-Catholicism and the fact much of his previous work had been done in Anglican churches. However, by 1936, his reputation was high at Downside and he was the natural choice to carry out work on the window. Dom Augustine James wrote, 'it seemed obviously right that he [Comper] should be entrusted with this, the most prominent work of decoration in the church.'



Yet when the window was completed, it received a mixed reception from the Downside monks. Dom Anselm Rutherford commented on the new window, 'Look at that; it's a tragedy isn't it?' In the Downside Review of 1936, a commentary on the window stated '...there can be no doubt that it is a

remarkably fine achievement, and one which adds enormously to the beauty and dignity of the sanctuary...' but goes on to make a small criticism, that the '...glory which forms the background of the figure of Our Lord is somewhat overemphasised.'

It must be remembered, as Dom Augustine James points out, that Sir Ninian Comper faced a difficult task in that he was carrying out work in Thomas Garner's choir, under the watchful eye of Sir Giles Gilbert-Scott for a large community of Benedictine monks, each with an opinion. The pressure of having to create something in this atmosphere must have been immense. Yet whatever opinion may be held by visitors to Downside of the window, it must be said by all that the window is a thing of beauty, and as the words inscribed on the book held by Our Lord in the window state, 'I am the light of the world', as the window is the light of the abbey church.