

Fr Basil Maturin's Stained Glass Window



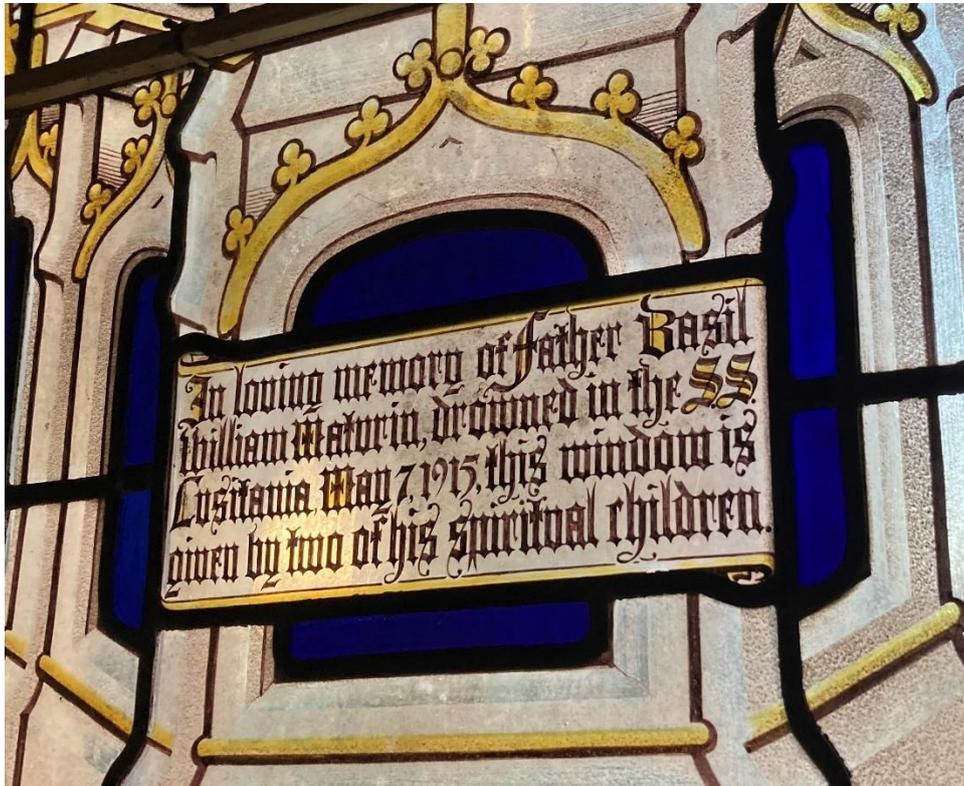
Downside Abbey has many areas which are lesser known or inaccessible to the public, and the gallery chapels are one such part of the great building. Up a flight of stairs next to the choir on the south side of the church, the chapels are an area reserved for the use of the monastic community.

However, within one of these chapels is a fascinating stained glass window which links to one of the crucial points in the Great War (1914-1918). The window is of St Basil and St William of York and was added to the abbey church in 1915. It commemorates the life of Fr Basil Maturin (1847-1915), who was sadly killed when the RMS Lusitania was sunk in May 1915 by a German U-Boat. The loss of the Lusitania, with many American passengers on board is seen as one of the reasons for the United States' entry into the Great War in 1917. Out of 1962 passengers, 1198 lost their lives, including 128 Americans and Fr Basil.

It is recorded of Fr Basil during the sinking that he was seen on the deck as the ship sank giving absolutions to many passengers and at one point handed a child into a lifeboat with the instruction 'Find its mother.' His body was found in Ballycotton Bay off the coast of Cork, and shipped back to England for burial at London's Brompton Oratory.

So what does the sinking of the Lusitania have to do with Downside Abbey? The link between the two is Fr Basil. An Anglican convert, Fr Basil spent three months at Downside in 1912 as a postulant

and then a novice, before deciding the monastic life was not for him. The impression he left after such a short time, however, led to the window being erected in the Chapel of the English Martyrs in his memory by 'two of his spiritual children.' The identity of these 'spiritual children' remains a mystery.



The Downside Review mentions the loss of Fr Basil and the erection of the window several times in the 1915 and 1916 editions. *'The news of Father Maturin's death in the sinking of the "Lusitania" came to us at Downside as a personal loss, for during the three months he spent with us...he endeared himself to all by his simplicity, frankness and personal charm.'* It was also noted that Fr Basil *'...would have liked some token to record his affection for Downside.'*

The Downside Review describes the window, and the choices that were made for the saints depicted within it, St Basil and St William of York, who were Fr Basil's patrons. Geoffrey Webb, a well known stained glass artist and pupil of Sir Ninian Comper, was employed to make the windows and his trademark spider web is in the corner of the stained glass. The site for the window, within the Chapel of the English Martyrs, *'...makes it a most appropriate memorial, since it stands exactly beside the altar at which he [Fr Basil] used to celebrate Mass during his three months at Downside as a Benedictine novice.'*

Another link that Fr Basil had with Downside was with Cardinal Herbert Vaughan who ordained Fr Basil in 1898. Cardinal Vaughan had been a pupil at Downside and his brother, Bishop Bede Vaughan was a monk of the monastery. It may have been this link which drove Fr Basil to try a monastic vocation at Downside.

Whatever his reasons for being at Downside, it is evident he made an impression and his life and death will forever be remembered through the stained glass window within the abbey church.

Bibliography

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