

BATH AND WELLS DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEMORIAL TABLETS

Is a tablet the best memorial?

Although many churches are enhanced by beautiful memorials, the introduction of new memorial tablets tends to be a source of difficulty for those concerned, for the petitioners (usually the relations), for the Incumbent and the PCC, for the DAC in their duty of offering advice to the Chancellor and for the Chancellor himself who alone can grant the faculty which is always required. Architectural, aesthetic, pastoral and legal questions overlap.

As a new memorial tablet should only be allowed in exceptional circumstances, ideas for alternative memorials are frequently requested or needed. Memorial gifts which are useful and can enhance the appearance of the church, enrich its worship or serve its pastoral work are usually to be preferred. Small plaques commemorating benefactors and their gifts are discouraged. Instead, such records should be incorporated by the artist into the design (eg of a stained glass window) or suitably and artistically inscribed on the gift itself (eg a piece of furniture, a restored candelabra or the base of a chalice). Alternatively, a commemorative book in which to record such gifts should be kept in the church.

This paper seeks to set out the present position from the first intimation that a memorial tablet is being proposed for a church. In doing this, the judgment in the Court of Arches on St Margaret's Eartham in the Diocese of Chichester given on 3 February 1981 is definitive.

Criteria for a Memorial Tablet

The judgment in the Eartham case lays down that the Chancellor must exercise a judicial discretion bearing in mind that "faculties for memorials cannot be freely or extensively granted for, if they were, the walls of a church might soon become so overcrowded as seriously to detract from the church's appearance". So a "faculty for a memorial should be regarded as a special privilege reserved for very exceptional cases". The character of the person to be commemorated, service to the church, country or mankind may justify the idea of "exceptionality". So too could the place of the tablet as one or the last of a series in the church be a contributing factor.

It is the petitioners who have to make out a case for the granting of a faculty and the grounds of "exceptionality" need to be spelt out in the petition. Even where these prove acceptable, architectural and aesthetic factors within the church may prevent the granting of a faculty. It is always advisable to approach the DAC and the Archdeacon at an early stage and seek preliminary informal advice. Lack of agreement between the petitioners, the incumbent and the PCC could influence the granting of a faculty.

Design of Memorial Tablets

A memorial tablet becomes an architectural feature of the church. Quite apart from every other consideration, the appearance of the tablet must measure up to the high standard of excellence rightly demanded of everything placed in a church. The material

chosen, the quality of design, the skill of the lettering, the felicity of the inscription all contribute to a memorial which will embellish and enhance the interior of a church.

It follows from this that the design must be first class, one over which the church architect/surveyor has been consulted, even though he/she may not have been invited to design the tablet or indeed wish to do so. The drawings provided should describe, in elevation and section, the memorial and its location in the church. They should state clearly the material to be used, indicate edge mouldings and depth of incised lettering, and specify how it is to be fixed. The style of lettering is of prime importance and the drawing must show this accurately: machine cut lettering is not appropriate. Any heraldry or emblem must be correct in every detail, including colour.

The wording should be concise but informative so that the distinction of the person commemorated is clear and the appropriateness of the memorial in the particular church is obvious. In short, the inscription should be evocative of the person commemorated but should be prefaced by being "To the Glory of God and....."

It is suggested that advice should be sought from the organisation Memorials By Artists which is a charity whose aim is to promote for the public benefit the arts and crafts associated with memorials. The charity can be contacted at Snape Priory, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 1SA (Tel. 01728 688834).

Procedure to be followed

The application should be thoroughly discussed at each stage since the memorial is likely to be expensive in both design and execution. The following procedure should be adopted:-

1. A memorial should not be considered until three years have elapsed since the death of the subject of the proposed memorial.
2. The desirability of the memorial from every aspect, with special emphasis on "exceptionality" and quality of design, should be discussed by the petitioners, the incumbent, the PCC and the Archdeacon in whatever way seems best pastorally and before any work is commissioned.
3. An application for preliminary informal advice should be made to the DAC once outline design proposals are in place so that opinion can be tested and unnecessary costs prevented.
4. Once having received an encouragement to proceed to formal approval, the petitioner should apply for a faculty and provide
 - Full sized drawing giving details of lettering and wording
 - Photograph of the site chosen (with position marked in)
 - A rubbing and photograph of similar work by the craftsman chosen
 - Details of the materials proposed (plus samples where unusual)
 - Written confirmation that the church architect has been fully consulted and approves the proposals

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