

This is a Story from 'A Few Forgotten Women'



Agnes Bonham - a Victorian sculptress

Visitors to the church of Ayot St Peter, Hertfordshire are often surprised to learn that the beautiful Caen stone pulpit was the work of a lady sculptor. Agnes Bonham completed a number of large works for churches, but remains a relatively unknown artist. She never mentioned her work in any census return, simply listing “of independent means” - but she was not a lady of leisure!

Agnes was youngest of six children of Revd. John Bonham and his wife Barbarina (née Norris) who married in 1827. Revd. Bonham inherited Ballintaggart estate, Co Kildare, from his father, another John Bonham. Barbarina’s father was John

Norris Esq, of Hughenden Manor, Buckinghamshire (later the home of Benjamin Disraeli and now a National Trust property).

Revd. Bonham was curate at Dunsby parish in Lincolnshire. The couple’s first two children - Margaret Louisa and Mary - were born there. Around 1830 the family relocated to Ireland, and a further four children arrived – Francis, Anne Blanche, John and lastly Agnes Jane Susan born in 1837.



Ayot St. Peter Pulpit

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By 1861 the family were living in Cheltenham. John - now retired - was listed on the census as a clergyman "without the cure of souls".

The timing of some of Agnes' work is unclear, but her sculptures at St Margaret's Church, Whitnash (Warwickshire) are dated as 1862 (a pulpit plus other carvings in the chancel). The book "A history and description of the parish of Whitnash" by James Reynolds Young (1865) features a lengthy description of the beauty of the new pulpit, but the artist is not named. Agnes is mentioned only as "a young lady, a friend of the Rector's."

A newspaper article in "The Queen" dated 16 June 1888 stated that Agnes studied at "South Kensington, the Royal Academy and afterwards in Rome".

Agnes enrolled at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1870. Her profession was "sculpture" and the address was 24 Ovington Square, Chelsea. At 33 years, Agnes was at least a decade older than the other students, but she was already an accomplished sculptress.

Agnes' father died in 1875, the same year that the pulpit was installed at Ayot St Peter. In 1878 Agnes completed a carved pulpit of Caen stone for Bangor Cathedral, designed by Gilbert Scott.

By the time of the 1881 census Agnes was living with her mother at 'Hillside', South Norwood Hill. Barbarina died in 1882, and later Agnes moved into 9 Cypress Road, South Norwood, which was her final home.

Agnes was a member of St John the Evangelist church in Norwood and completed a reredos (a large decoration behind the altar) for them in 1888. "The Queen" states that Queen Victoria had "graciously accepted" a photograph of the work. Also in 1888 Agnes started on a reredos for Holy Trinity Church, New Westminster (British Columbia).

Agnes died on 7 October 1906 aged 69, and was buried in Hughenden on 10 October. A plaque in St John's records the gratitude of the congregation for her service to the church.

The Norwood Society have written about Agnes and her family in *The Norwood Review*

<https://www.norwoodsociety.co.uk/pdf/review232.pdf>

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