

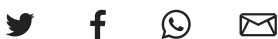
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Sacred Mysteries: The man who built a chapel for a state school

'I was apprehensive of what uproar might arise,' recalled the headmaster who succeeded in adding a chapel to a county grammar school

By Christopher Howse

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It is 40 years since that agreeable old cove Alec Clifton-Taylor pottered around Lewes in Sussex for the second of his *Six English Towns* television series. The charm of Lewes comes partly from its position above the Ouse, inside an elbow of which stands Lewes Priory School.

Lewes had a priory once, with a vast monastic church. From its nearby ruins the school takes its name. Until it became comprehensive in 1969, it was Lewes County Grammar School, built in 1930. From the road you can see a white chapel bell tower and, near the fence, three attractive lancet windows.

This chapel is a surprise. It is said to be the only one built at a state school after the 1944 Education Act. The architect was Sir Edward Maufe, the designer of Guildford Cathedral, but the man who conceived it, as a memorial to the 55 former pupils who gave their lives in the Second World war, was Neville Bradshaw.

In his mid-thirties he had become its first headmaster and his 30 years there ended with the chapel's opening in 1960. The problems he faced were funds and officialdom.

Those commemorated, from Archer to Winton, are now carved in stone by the entrance. But in 1942 "with all the contention in religious matters which had surrounded the spread of a state system of education," Bradshaw wrote in a memoir of the enterprise, "I was apprehensive of what uproar might arise over a chapel in a state school."

The cost he had put at £10,000. Every wheeze was tried. Rabbits reared at school raised £4 and the "headmaster's geese", hatched at home, £43. A young widow sent £10 in memory of her husband, an RAF casualty of 1940.

By the end of the war, £1,292 was raised. With the peace, they tried fetes. Even with the pull of Tommy Handley of *ITMA* in 1948 and that absurd but sad figure Gilbert Harding from *What's My Line?* in 1952, they only cleared £700 a time. The school secretary borrowed a street organ and, with boys to pull it for her, collected £50 in Lewes one Saturday morning. By 1955 they had raised £12,000, but the cost had risen to £28,000.

A stroke of luck was to be given the organ removed from Cuddesdon college near Oxford, made in 1874 by William Hill & Son, a leading builder. The local education committee could not pay for a chapel but it paid £1,850 to instal the organ.

Another wheeze was to use technical-section boys at the school (encouraged by the government as hands for the building trade). But even in those days, risk to boys working on scaffolding was thought too high.

Bradshaw examined the idea of a hall doubling as a chapel. But he saw there was no way of "building a hall which would provide for secular activities and at the same time preserve a religious atmosphere".



Edward Maufe designed the chapel with "well-mannered modernity" | CREDIT: Pirory School, Lewes, Memorial Chapel

In 1957 Maufe, a friend of a governor, agreed to design for no fee a smaller chapel, to be built for £20,000. His designs were exhibited at the Royal Academy. He even offered to pay the £850 for the statue of St George over the door, carved by Alan Collins (who carved St Nicholas for Saltdean church, also by Maufe in the same style). The bell came from the demolished Lewes Naval Prison, built in 1793.

Building finished in 1960. At the opening, Bradshaw noted: "The mellow sound of the bell floated over the water meadows which stretched southwards to the coast. A six-foot cross in gold leaf on the belfry glistened against the sky, visible on both sides of the Ouse Valley."

"In three weeks' time, my headmastership, which had lasted 30 years, would have ended. As those outside filed through to see what they had helped to accomplish, I slipped quietly away."

There is never an ending, though, and today £160,000 is needed for repairs.

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