ROBINSON COLLEGE CHAPEL

Founding of Robinson College. The College was founded in the late 1970s, through the generosity of Sir David Robinson (1904-1987), an entrepreneur and philanthropist who grew up in Cambridge. Three recently built Cambridge Colleges did not have chapels when they were built: New Hall (1954, later renamed Murray Edwards), Churchill (1960, one was built ‘at’ the College but not ‘of’ it, away from the main site in 1967) and Fitzwilliam (1966, chapel added 1991). Given those precedents, the Trustees appointed by the University of Cambridge to oversee the development of Robinson College asked whether a chapel was necessary here. David Robinson took the view that a chapel was an essential part of the College and is said to have replied: ‘No chapel, no college’. Thus, a chapel was already shown on the plans which the Founding Fellows saw when they were appointed.¹

Architects. The building was designed by Isi Metzstein and Andrew MacMillan of the Glasgow firm of Architects Gillespie, Kidd and Coia. Described by Metzstein as a ‘great architectural and personal adventure’, Robinson College is considered one of their finest works ²,³,⁴. Architects Yorke, Rosenberg Mardall (YRM) provided the working drawings that co-ordinated the design and they managed the construction phase.

Doors and Building materials. The West and South Doors are decorated with bronze work by Jacqueline Stieger. The Chapel is built with the Swanage brick used throughout the College, and a beige coloured limestone: ‘Massangis Clair’ or ‘Jaune’, quarried in France at Massangis (Yonne), south east of Paris.
John Piper and the Chapel. Sir David Robinson had been greatly impressed by the stained glass windows by John Piper (1903-1992) at Coventry Cathedral, and it was at Robinson’s request that Piper became involved in the Robinson College project. Piper designed the two windows and several other items in the Chapel including the lecterns and font.

College Opening and Chapel dedication. Building was under way during 1976 and was completed in 1981, with a formal opening by the Queen on 29 May 1981. The Chapel was dedicated on 1st November 1981 by representatives of the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Free Churches and it has continued its ecumenical tradition ever since.

TOUR OF THE CHAPEL

Enter by the North Door.

THE ANTE-CHAPEL

Architects’ drawing of the Chapel. A tracing of the main chapel, which was presented to the College in 1999 by Victor Bugg (Senior Partner of the Quantity Surveyors employed during the building of College, Davis, Belfield and Everest). This original tracing, coloured by the Architects of the Chapel, was produced in conjunction with John Piper.

Drawings for the ceramic in the main Chapel. The Externsteine, site of the carving of the ‘Deposition’ in Sandstone, North Germany. Copy of 1663 Engraving by Elias van Lennep. Sketch plan of ceramic panel inspired by the Externsteine, designed by John Piper and made by Geoffrey Eastop which is in the main chapel (qv).

THE SIDE CHAPEL

In the side chapel (light switch is behind curtain on the right hand wall) the small window is by John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens and is made up of five layers of glass. The window is known as ‘The Beginning and the End’ (also known as ‘The Epiphany’ and ‘The Adoration of the
Kings’). John Piper is recorded as saying ‘There is a small devotional chapel with a window of stained glass of modest size, which shows the Virgin and Child and the Magi bringing gifts. This scene is set above The Sleeping Beasts of Paganism*, and in the lowest section are the first and last acts of the Christian story - Adam and Eve with the Serpent to the left, the Last Supper to the right. My designs, with full-size cartoons, were all interpreted in glass by the Reyntiens studio at Beaconsfield with their usual sensibility and brio. The inspiration for this design was a carved stone tympanum in the Romanesque village church at Neuilly-en-Donjon (Allier) in central France.’ Christ is seen lower left washing the feet of the disciples. A photograph of the stone carving at Neuilly-en-Donjon hangs on the opposite wall. *This has also been seen as a depiction of ‘the lion and the lamb’.

The altar in the side chapel is formed out of a single piece of stone known as ‘Aberdeen marble’ which came from the same source as the kitchen table top at Fawley Bottom, John Piper’s home in south Buckinghamshire (on the Buckinghamshire/Oxfordshire border and sometimes described as being in Oxfordshire).

The ceramic tiles are by Geoffrey Eastop (1921-2014), who also made the Ceramic in the main Chapel (qv). He worked with Piper for at least 20 years and had a pottery at Piper’s home, Fawley Bottom.

Bronze screen and gate. The sixteen foot bronze screen, incorporating a gate between the main and ante chapel, is by Jacqueline Stieger (b. 1936). It was made in her studio in East Yorkshire and the design is a trellis frame covered in forms of leaves and flower heads which she found in her garden and the surrounding countryside. The work was modelled and cast in sections, using the lost wax process. In this, shaped wax is covered in an outer fireproof material to make a mould from which the wax drains when heated upside down. The molten bronze is then poured into the empty
mould and this technique preserves the fine detail of the original wax form. It took many days to cast each section, weld them together and bolt them on to the sides of the frame, providing a dense decorative structure.

**THE MAIN CHAPEL**

The chapel was deliberately built with no fixed structures, in order to make the space as flexible as possible. The chairs and other furniture can be arranged in various configurations, to suit whatever function is taking place.

The main window was designed and built by John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens. John Piper wrote: ‘The Chapel, in which I am involved, is large as college chapels go and its west window is a prominent feature inside and outside in the court. The subject of the stained glass, which I designed, is a modern ‘Light of the World’, with a great circular light penetrating and dominating all Nature’. The window is seen at its best in the late afternoon in summer, when the coloured light bursting through from behind the curtain wall delivers an image both of hiddenness and of revelation.

A Fellow recalls a conversation with John Piper who thought that ‘...only limited views of the light of life can be found quickly’. The Fellow was trying to photograph the new window and ‘when I offered that I had had to crouch near the altar position to capture anything on film that I was happy with, he [Piper] agreed that kneeling on the floor near the altar position was where he had intended that the light should ‘shine on you’ and you appreciate its glory. He added that this was not necessarily a ‘theistic’ interpretation but open to each viewer to take their own meaning from it.’ (See Background Notes under ‘The Windows’ towards the end of this guide for more details).

**The deposition.** Beneath the main window and to its left, a ceramic shows the descent of Christ’s body from the cross. It was designed by John Piper and made by Geoffrey Eastop and it is a second version of an earlier one. Geoffrey Eastop wrote in his ‘40 years of Studio Pottery, 1992’: “The other [than the side chapel
ceramic tiles] project for Robinson College originated from a visit from the college to the large studio [at Piper’s home, Fawley Bottom] where a ‘Deposition of Christ’ had been carried out in ceramic sometime earlier. This panel was made in several large interlocking pieces about 1” thick with yellow figures in relief against a black background and fixed quite crudely with heavy nails to a piece of an old barndoor. The combined effect of these elements, devoid of any kind of artiness, was extremely strong and in some way linked with the source of Piper’s idea, an ancient cave chapel in Germany, carved out of the solid rock. The original work was much appreciated by the college, but as it was not for sale a second version had to be made and this was eventually installed in the main chapel in 1982.” The inspiration for the design and the plans are on display in the Antechapel.

To the south of the ceramic, next to the South Door, hangs a collage by Barbara Neville Shaw (1930-2006) entitled Working Figures, Robinson College, which depicts the building of the Chapel. The artist lived in Duxford near Cambridge and was said to be a modest person who had a late career start. Mainly self-taught, she enrolled at Cambridge School of Art in the 1970s and was represented through Trumpington Gallery, Cambridge. Her work focused on the movement of the human figure derived from her knowledge of dance and choreography.

The staircase. The Chapel originally had no interior staircase, which made access to the South Gallery extremely limited. In 2001 it was decided to mark the retirement of the first Warden of the College, Professor Lord Lewis of Newnham, and a staircase was built and dedicated in honour of his contribution to the College.

The Umney plaque. Peggy Umney was David Robinson’s Personal Assistant. Her important role in the negotiations leading to the establishment of College is indicated by the wording of the plaque.

The South Gallery. Wymondham, Norfolk by John Piper (Print, 1971). The church depicted is at Wymondham Abbey, which was founded in 1107 by William D'Albini. The Mystery of Communion, an oil painting on the side wall is by Susan Edwards-McKie, reflecting the nature of college and community. The artist, wife of a College Fellow, comments on her own work in terms of a ‘College community in which every person is of equal importance, each contributing in the great variety of human ways to the spirit of the whole, is always more than the building and a collection of individual acts. And yet, it is within the communion of spirit
that individual excellence in all its forms flourishes, feeding back into the community by which it is nourished, in an endless cycle of giving and regeneration.’

The North Gallery. The Organ was built in 1980 by the Danish organ builders Thomas Frobenius and Sons. This was one of the first organs that the company installed in England. For Robinson College, Frobenius created an instrument that is consistent with the 'continental classical' manner of voicing for which their organs have become known, and which creates a distinctively bright and lean sound.

Voicing the Organ. A three-part collage by Barbara Neville Shaw hangs on the wall above the choir area.

The College has a fine tradition of choral singing.

Furnishing and fittings. The grand piano is a Steinway, a gift to the College and is used for services and concerts in Chapel. The table, lectern and other furniture were designed by Isi Metzstein and John Piper and made from Canadian maple. The chairs were originally blue and covered with a woven seagrass. Over time the blue stain naturally darkened to a dark brown, and when the grass began to wear, the chairs were re-upholstered in beige leather to match the Massangis stone. The wooden altar cross, the hymn boards and altar book rest were designed by Chris Hughes, second Senior Tutor and his wife Maureen Hughes and made in the College workshop. The altar cloths were selected by the second College Chaplain, John Grice, and Chris Hughes from Vanpoules of Crawley. There is silverware designed by Gordon Christophe Brown and used in services: candlesticks engraved by Kindersley donated by Jan Vaugon and a silver cross donated by Peter Kornicki.

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The architects and the construction.
The Glasgow Architects Gillespie, Kidd and Coia were established in the late 1920s, with Jack Coia (1898–1981) in sole charge by 1930. In 1945 he was joined by Isi Metzstein, initially Professor of Architecture at Edinburgh University and then moving to Glasgow School of Art, and Andrew MacMillan, Professor of Architecture at the Glasgow School of Art. Architects Yorke, Rosenberg Mardall (YRM), in particular partners J. Penoyre and R. Davies, were brought in to provide the working drawings that co-ordinated the design and they managed the construction phase. The Clerk of Works was Peter Battle, who subsequently became the College Maintenance Superintendent. The Quantity Surveyor was Victor Bugg, Senior Partner of Davis, Belfield and Everest.

Jacqueline Stieger and the bronze work
Of Swiss origin, Stieger’s parents were living in London when Jacqueline was born, but the family moved to the East Riding of Yorkshire the following year. She studied at Edinburgh College of Art between 1954 and 1959. She eventually settled in Switzerland, where she met the Austrian-born sculptor Alfred Gruber, with whom she established her most significant creative partnership. They married in 1966. Gruber and Stieger left Switzerland in 1969 for Yorkshire. They bought an old house with outbuildings at Welton and immediately set about establishing a workshop and foundry. With family and friends nearby, they soon settled down in the area. They had been introduced to Isi Metzstein (1928–2012) and Andy MacMillan (1928–2014), lead partners of the Scottish architectural firm of Gillespie, Kidd and Coia, a few years earlier by their friend Richard Swaine. He had worked with Metzstein and MacMillan as site architect on The Lawns, the halls of residence project at the University of Hull, which was completed in 1968.

Gruber’s first professional encounter with Metzstein and MacMillan was the commission for a bronze relief for INSEK Laboratories, East Kilbride (completed 1970). As sacred art had featured heavily for Gruber and Stieger in Switzerland throughout the 1960s, so sacred design, informed by modernism and motivated by liturgical reform, brought commissions for Gillespie, Kidd and Coia. Gruber and Stieger had commissioned numerous high quality photographs of their work in Switzerland, and were able to familiarise Metzstein and MacMillan with the sculptural interiors at Rudolfstetten, Sarnen and elsewhere. Clearly impressed, they asked Gruber to design an integrated scheme for St Margaret’s Roman Catholic church, Clydebank. Gruber prepared a schematic model. Metzstein and MacMillan were delighted with it and awarded the commission to Gruber. However, he fell ill and was soon unable to work. Diagnosed with cancer, he died at the age of 40 in February 1972. Metzstein and MacMillan tentatively approached the newly widowed Jacqueline Stieger and asked if she would be willing to take on the project. As she put it: ‘The best thing I could do was get on with the work. I wanted to prove that it was a really good interior. I wanted to do it for him [Gruber]’.

Stieger had perfected her use of the lost wax process for sculpture, jewellery and medals, and continued to cast her work at her foundry at Welton, East Yorkshire. However, the sheer size of the Robinson commission made it a considerable undertaking, and she was grateful for the assistance
of a young student, Richard Disbrow, who was taking a year out from his architectural studies at the School of Architecture in Hull to develop an understanding of sculptural practice. Even with assistance, the commission took almost a year to complete.

The traditional use of decorative metalwork on doors generally focuses on the embellishment of hinges or latches. With her customary problem-solving approach, which aimed to fulfil both aesthetic and functional needs, Stieger adopted a more subtle approach. The decorative bronzes are positioned to guide the user to the discreet door handles, which are formed of panels that seem to open up or peel away from the door, adding aesthetic vitality to their function². Stieger described the forms as ‘almost like clouds’. The West door is opened on major College occasions.

The Windows, John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens

John Piper was an artist who excelled in designing stained glass. He became entranced by it aged 10 in Notre Dame and he began a lifetime interest in seeking it out. It strongly informed his move into pure abstraction in the mid 30s and permeated his art and thinking thenceforward. He longed to work in the medium but it was not until late in 1953 that the opportunity to work in the medium presented itself at Oundle School Chapel⁵. Piper greatly admired French medieval glass, such as that at Chartres, but he was also aware of modern art trends. He had a wide artistic experience, coupled with a deep love and knowledge of architecture; he was also a religious man. Each window was a deeply considered undertaking because, while he had a wide appreciation of the liturgy, he often consulted friends in the clergy to ensure his ideas were liturgically appropriate. This, combined with a sensitivity and understanding of how coloured light filled the interior spaces of churches, meant his designs were site specific.⁵ No other artist has ever produced such varied designs for stained glass. His great originality was also apparent in the design process; although he did not make the windows, he created full-scale colour cartoons for each one. These were executed in gouache, frequently with the details picked out in collage, the colours vivid and dramatic.²

Patrick Reyntiens OBE (b 1925) is regarded by many as the country’s leading stained-glass artist and is noted for his work with artist John Piper in pioneering modern techniques in stained glass. During the 1960s Piper and Reyntiens designed and built the windows for the lantern of the Roman Catholic (Metropolitan) Cathedral in Liverpool (designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd). The Cathedral was a landmark in the development of modernist architecture in post-war Britain and the glass was also a ground-breaking work at the time, using coloured glass embedded in concrete and epoxy resin.

The principal window in the main chapel is semi-abstract. Piper was consulted about the window from at least as early as 1977, so the window must be understood as part of the architecture - a sentiment shared by Metzstein, who partly explained the curtain wall in front of it by pointing out that a stained glass window is not a picture hung on the wall of a building, but part of the building's structure - a view of stained glass prevalent in Northern Europe in the post second world war period.

The Chapel is dominated by the step-motif visible throughout the college buildings. From outside the Chapel, the window appears like an upside-down stepped pyramid, and this is mirrored by the same shape, but the other way up, in the Library window on the other side of the main entrance to the College. From inside, the step motif therefore forms the base line of the Chapel window, which - to add to its design challenge - is also curved. Piper had encountered problems in previous works in modern settings - especially with the Baptistry Window at Coventry (1959-62) where the existing
dominant mullions had inhibited the design of the angled bay windows, and similarly in the Chapel at Churchill College (1967). In 1978 Piper received a letter from Yorke, Rosenberg Mardell guaranteeing that the mullions in the Robinson window would be kept as narrow as possible, and with the letter a drawing of the elevation of the window from the interior so that Piper could begin the design.

Once the design was complete, Reyntiens took a team of glaziers to Germany and ordered £14,000 worth of glass. Peter Pears once commented that the two driving forces behind Piper’s designs were religion and nature. Both of these are in full evidence in the semi-abstract window which depicts the sun with its light diffused through the rich colours of abundant trailing foliage. The idea that nature is the means through which God is revealed is, of course, an idea associated with Romanticism. Yet Piper was keen not to be seen simply as Romantic in this way. In a letter to Paul Nash (12 January 1943), he wrote: ‘The value of abstract painting to me, and the value of Surrealist painting to me are (paradoxically if you like) that they are classical exercises, not Romantic expressions. They are disciplines …which open a road to one’s heart - but they are not the heart itself.’

The circle of light in the main window is echoed in the circles on the flags in the triforium and the cylindrical design of the legs of the altar table, lectern and the wooden columns of the organ – the latter unusual as Frobenius designs are usually angular.

In terms of the wall in front of the window, a former Fellow of College writes: ‘I note that the public ‘puzzlement’ about the apparent partial obscuring of the main window is referred to in Frances Spalding’s book about John & Myfanwy Piper (Oxford, 2009, 453-455). In this context I thought it worth relating an over-dinner conversation my wife and I had with the Pipers on their attending their first College Guest Night. I had said that I had found photographing the window (after it was installed) was difficult in terms of finding a satisfactory ‘viewpoint’ to capture the glory of the light through the window and thus do it justice. I had had similar troubles with Coventry. From memory, John’s (condensed) comments were:-
• His belief that churches give up their secrets too readily – you walk in and see the architecture, the windows and the paintings (etc.) and, just as readily, leave without taxing one’s beliefs, views etc.
• Like one’s own faith, he felt that one should explore (‘peek and pry’ he said, as I remember) around a church to find unexpected items, treasures and views to inform one’s own position/beliefs.
• Coventry was one attempt at this, whereby walking east (as through your life), the glories can only be appreciated looking backwards – with everything only revealed at journey’s end at the altar.
• Robinson was similar in that only limited views of the light of life can be found quickly. When I offered that I had had to crouch near the usual altar position to capture anything on film that I was happy with, he agreed that kneeling on the floor near the ‘then’ altar position was where he had intended that the light should ‘shine on you’ and you appreciate its glory. I think that he added that this was not necessarily a ‘theistic’ interpretation but open to each viewer to take their own meaning from it.’
Emeritus Professor Trevor Page, Newcastle University, UK.
The Ceramics and Geoffrey Eastop

Two friends of John Piper became closely associated with Robinson College: landscape architect Bodfan Gruffydd and ceramicist Geoffrey Eastop. They had already worked together on a children's play area at Maudsley Hospital, London in 1969 and they then worked on their own aspects of Robinson, Bodfan Gruffydd designing Robinson College Gardens and Geoffrey Eastop working on the Chapel ceramics.

For the ceramic tiles in the side chapel, Eastop wrote: 'The last major commissions completed at Fawley Bottom (Piper’s studio) were both architectural and came about as a result of the construction of the new Robinson College at Cambridge University. John Piper designed the very large window in the main chapel and also a window in the small side-chapel. Stoneware wall and floor tiles were required for the small chapel which were large, 12"x18"x1 ½" thick. The glaze which was eventually chosen had the appearance of a variegated sandstone and gave the chapel the satisfying sensation of the old blending with the modern' [From 'Geoffrey Eastop: 40 years of Studio Pottery' 1992]. Eastop also made the Ceramic in the main Chapel.

The source of Piper's idea for the ceramic was an ancient carving in the solid rock in the Externsteine, a distinctive sandstone rock formation in the Teutoburg Forest, near Horn-Bad Meinberg in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The date of the carving is disputed but generally accepted as in the 12th Century [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OS5xiuKOAoM https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Externsteine_relie]. The earliest known picture of the Externsteine is a 17th century copper engraving, of which Professor Max Herberhold (a former Bye Fellow) has kindly donated a copy to the College [1663 etching of the stones with the hunting lodge by Elias van Lennep. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Externsteine]. This is on display in the antechapel.

It shows the descent of Christ's body from the cross - the Deposition as told in John 19:38ff. It shows Nicodemus standing on a stylised tree and taking Christ's body from the cross along with Joseph of Arimathea, who bows under the weight. Mary holds Christ's head while the disciple John looks on. The figures are in Saxon costume. Above the cross the sun and moon hide their faces, while the half-figure of God the Father gestures with his right arm at the scene, and with his left arm encircles a child-like figure representing Christ's soul; his left hand also bears flag of victory. Below the cross, Adam and Eve, held by a serpent, raise their hands in supplication. Hugh Fowler-Wright, Piper biographer, writes: 'I attach images of the cartoon drawings that Piper made to create your Deposition ceramic. It is full sized (Piper liked to make his cartoons full scale) and two sided as I believe it was pricked through directly onto the clay. You will note it is cut into the separate sections that go to form the 'jig-saw' assembly you have on the chapel wall.'
Hugh Fowler-Wright writes: ‘The Deposition of Christ. This particular composition was directly inspired by The Deposition at the Externsteine, near Detmold, west Germany. The Externsteine in the Lippe country was a place of pilgrimage during the Middle Ages and the grottoes were mainly created by the monks of the Benedictine Abbey of Abdinghof in Paderborn in 1115. Only The Deposition, a huge 5.5m by 4m carving, remains of what was believed to be a whole series of carvings depicting the Way to Calvary. It shows Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus taking Christ's body from the cross with Mary and St. John standing either side. God the Father reaches down from the sky and Adam and Eve are entwined in the tree beneath the cross. This bent and crushed tree is thought to represent the Irminsul (a pillar worshipped by early Anglo-Saxons) humiliated by the triumph of Christianity. This carving is viewed as one of Europe's outstanding works of the twelfth century.

Piper had seen photographs of this monumental rock carving and unusually this was sufficiently inspiring in itself for him to make some paintings in 1972 based upon the composition. Later, in 1976, he decided to make a ceramic panel of the scene from interlocking ceramic pieces under the technical and expert guidance of potter Geoffrey Eastop. These pieces were then nailed to an old barn door and fixed at the end of his stained glass studio. This was spotted by Robinson College, Cambridge when they visited this studio whilst Piper was designing a large window for their new chapel.’

The Organ
Frobenius had earlier installed 2 instruments in the UK, one at Queen's College Oxford (1965) and one at the parish church of Stoke d'Abernon, Surrey (1975). For the Robinson instrument's design and installation, Walther and Erik Frobenius worked in conjunction with the College Architects Gillespie Kidd & Coia, and with Dr Gerald Gifford, a Professor at the Royal College of Music in London, who was Consultant for the project. The sloping roof of the Chapel dictated the instrument's appearance, and the 'tiered' layout in three stepped cases, a distinguishing feature of the organ, reflects the stepped design of the building's windows and galleries. Because the organ was designed and built at the same time as the chapel, the casework for the organ forms part of the integral structure of the chapel and is in maple to match the rest of the furnishing. The organ's tonal concept adopts what is known as the 'Werkprinzip' format at 16', 8' and 4' pitches, with the pipework disposed in three separate cases. The swell-Positiv (with transparent shutters) is situated in a Ruckpositiv position behind the player, the great organ is contained in the central case which also houses the console, and the pedal organ is placed behind. The instrument, which has mechanical action with electric stop action, is greatly admired for its role in serving the Chapel's music and is more widely known through recordings and broadcasts. Since the Robinson organ was installed three more were built in the UK – Oundle School (1984), All Saints Kingston on Thames, and Canongate Kirk in Edinburgh (1988), the latter being the 1000th organ built by Frobenius.

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Footnotes – sources for material used in the text
1. Chris Hughes Founding Fellow and second Senior Tutor. Former Chair of the Chapel Design Sub-Committee. 2012 memoir on Chapel (archive ref. RCRF 4/2)

2. Gerardine Mulcahy-Parker (Stieger biographer); 2018 Jacqueline Stieger and Alfred Gruber: sculptors, architects and the challenge of compromise. In: Katharine Eustace, Mark Stocker and, Joanna Barnes (Editors) October 2018 Sculpting Art History: Essays in Memory of Benedict Read. 373 – 387; Gerardine Mulcahy-Parker personal communication.


5. Hugh Fowler-Wright (Piper biographer) pers. comm. and David Fraser Jenkins & Hugh Fowler-Wright, 2016. The Art of John Piper Unicorn Books. Hugh points out (personal communication.) that there are Piper archives in the Tate and the Fitzwilliam Museum.

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Professor Morna Hooker (Founding Fellow, Chapel Committee)
Dr Steve Trudgill (Visual Arts Committee)