

THE SOLVING OF ‘THE ROYAL SCOT MYSTERY’

Martin J Broadley

In 2008 readers of *Contrebis* were made aware of the so called ‘Royal Scot Mystery’ and its association with the Midland Hotel in Morecambe. The mystery in question – described as being “worthy perhaps of Hercule Poirot himself” (Wade 2008–9, 65) – is to be found half-hidden on a wall map at Morecambe’s renowned Art Deco hotel. Designed and created by the sculptor Eric Gill, it was commissioned by the architect Oliver Hill for what was to be in the 1930s the flagship hotel of the London Midland Scottish railway company (LMS). Covering an entire wall of what was originally designated as the Children’s Room, it illustrates an area covered by the Lake District and the Lancashire coast from Whitehaven to Birkenhead. Important towns – Liverpool, Preston, Barrow-in-Furness, Whitehaven, Birkenhead – are shown, as are significant local landmarks – Lancaster Castle, Furness Abbey, Blackpool Tower, Liverpool’s Cathedrals. Morecambe is symbolised by the Midland Hotel. The LMS company is represented by the Royal Scot Express, billowing clouds of smoke as it races northward from London Euston to Glasgow Central along the West Coast Main Line. The Lake District is paradisiacal, with trees, lakes, a place of freedom: hounds pursuing a fox and a young couple, hand-in-hand, seemingly float through an idyllic landscape. Juxtaposed with this Garden-of-Eden scene are the northern industrial heartlands: coal-mining in Whitehaven, ship-building at Barrow-in-Furness, manufacturing in Preston and mercantile activity at Liverpool – all draped by an oppressive pall of deadening smoke.

Peter Wade described the mystery in these words: “Almost lost in the smoke of the Royal Scot above his depiction of the hotel, Gill marks a place with a circle and the name Tarnside Refuge. Yet, located between Lancaster and Preston, it corresponds to no obvious named place today and its significance was probably known only to Gill and his circle” (Wade 2008–9, 65). Two references to the presence of Gill’s work in Lancashire prompted an attempt to solve this mystery. The first, in Judith Collins’s book, *Eric Gill: The Sculpture* (1998), is a description of a drawing made by Gill in 1928 of a “crucifix headstone for Mary Reeves ... St Thomas the Apostle churchyard Claughton-on-Brock”. Other drawings of the same piece also referred to by Collins are dated 16 August 1927 and 25 April 1928 (Collins 1998, 161). The second is in Fiona MacCarthy’s book *Eric Gill* (1989), where she mentions that Gill would sometimes stay with a May Reeves and her sister Annie in Garstang when he was working on the commissions for the LMS at the Midland Hotel (MacCarthy 1989, 255–6). The brother of these two sisters was Fr John-Baptist Reeves, a Dominican priest. Gill had become a member of the Dominican Third Order in 1919, and it was through his association with the Dominicans that Gill came to know the priest and subsequently his sisters May and Annie. With his interest piqued by these references, Peter Wade set out to find the whereabouts of the gravestone and to investigate the connection, if any, between ‘Tarnside Refuge’ and May Reeves – who was later to live with the Gill family at Pigotts near High Wycombe and become one of Eric’s several mistresses.

The gravestone was successfully located. The question remained as to the date it was made. Based on the dates of the drawings referred to by Judith Collins and those on the headstone itself, Peter Wade suggests that Gill could have made it in either 1928 or in 1932/3. Gill’s diary for 16 May 1933 records that he went “... to Claughton ... Drew inscription at Reeves stone in eve” (Tate Archives A). The inscription was cut some days later by his assistant, Laurie Cribb, who also worked on the Midland Hotel sculptures. Obviously at this point the headstone was already in place. We conclude that it was made in 1928 when the first inscription was added: “Pray for Mary beloved wife of Joseph Reeves who died May 18 1927 aged 67 years”. The second inscription, referred to in Gill’s diary, reads: “Pray for Joseph Reeves who died February 12 1932 aged 71 years”. Joseph and Mary were the parents of May Reeves.

Attempts via the *Garstang Courier* to find the whereabouts of ‘Tarnside Refuge’ proved less fruitful. A house called ‘Tarnside’, located on Dimples Lane in Garstang, was found and enquiries were made of the present owners to see if there had been a change of name at some point. This drew a blank. Lacking firm and conclusive evidence the article concludes: “Whether this was Gill’s Tarnside Refuge and how, if at all, it fitted into the story of Gill and May Reeves is likely, however, to remain shrouded in mystery, much as the place on Gill’s fresco is almost lost in the smoke of the Royal Scot” (Wade 2008, 68). Serendipitous good fortune has provided two wrinkles which solve the mystery. However, in true Agatha Christie style, there is a twist in the tale.

While in Manchester researching an article on Gill’s sculpture, I found in the Salford Diocesan Archives a postcard written in the sculptor’s own hand and dated 10 November 1933. The postcard had been donated to the Archives by a relative of a former secretary of a diocesan organization known as the Link Society. The organization was made up mostly, but not entirely, of graduates and university students. Gill had been invited to give a lecture to the Society at the Holdsworth Hall in Manchester on 15 November 1933. He chose as his subject ‘Money and Morals’. Gill wrote to the Secretary asking if admission was to be by ticket only: “then please send one in good time to Miss May Reeves” (Salford Diocesan Archives). The address on the postcard is: Tarnside, Dimple’s Lane (*sic*), Garstang. This lecture came to be one of Gill’s most important, not to say notorious, public addresses. Robert Speaight later described it as a milestone moment which “introduces the Eric Gill of the later years with what can only be described as a bang” (Speaight 1966, 235). The publication of the lecture led to an acerbic and public dispute in the Catholic press between the author and Fr John-Baptist Reeves.

The postcard clearly establishes a connection between May Reeves and ‘Tarnside’, but the riddle still remained as to the place called ‘Tarnside Refuge’ on the hotel map. This is further complicated by the entries in Gill’s diary marking the times when he stayed with May Reeves, which simply refer to ‘Tarnside’ (Tate Archives B). The Royal Scot Mystery had thus turned into a veritable whodunit?

It was to remain so until I began preparing another article on Gill, this time on his commissions for Rossall School and the Midland Hotel. A footnote reference led to a cache of letters between Gill and the architect of the Midland Hotel, Oliver Hill. The original letters are in a private collection belonging to the sculptor’s nephew, Simon Verity, who very kindly provided me with copies. Although the map was designed and incised by Eric Gill, the actual painting of it was carried out by his son-in-law Denis Tegetmeier, who was married to Petra Gill. Reading the correspondence one sees that the map was the last of Gill’s commissions at the hotel to be completed: there was also some urgency in completing it on time. Gill sent a design of the map to Oliver Hill on 30 May 1933: he in turn submitted it to the LMS Directors. Approval by the Directors was given in early June, with the *proviso* that certain additions be included. Hill, having not heard from Gill, sent a telegram in late June to say that the map had to be finished the week before the hotel was due to open on 12 July. Unaware of this deadline, Gill had to hire an assistant in order to meet the deadline. This would clearly have increased the pressure on Tegetmeier since he was mainly responsible for painting the map. Gill’s note to the architect, dated 5 July, saying that he was to travel to Morecambe on 7 July to help Tegetmeier, demonstrates that the map remained unfinished with less than a week before the hotel was due to open. The delay meant that photographs of the map failed to appear in a promotional brochure for the hotel.

Two days after the official opening, Hill requested that Tegetmeier make yet more additions to the map. This provoked a strong response, Tegetmeier estimated that this would mean “at least another week’s work, if the job is to be finished properly” (Tegetmeier 1933). The extra work was not only burdensome to him, it impinged upon his family whom he had arranged to take home at the weekend: he felt obliged that he “must do so”. Not only that, it was an inconvenience for the friends with whom he and his family were lodging during the time he was working at the Midland. As a result, he explained to Hill: “It’s quite out of the question that I should presume further on my friends’ hospitality here, to get the work done”. The Tegetmeiers were in fact staying with the Reeves family in Garstang.

Tegetmeier's letter to Hill is headed with the following address: "Tarnside (refuge), Dimples Lane, Garstang". It is he therefore who is responsible for the Royal Scot Mystery. 'Tarnside [his] Refuge' was not the only personal addition Tegetmeier made to the map. Corroborating evidence that 'Tarnside Refuge' was indeed his creation came to light during the map's restoration, when the figure of a small child and the initials 'JMT' were discovered just below the depiction of the Midland Hotel. The name of Tegetmeier's daughter was 'Judith Mary'. The figure and initials had been obliterated by subsequent repainting of the map over the years. An image of these 'additions' is to be found in Guise and Brook's book *The Midland Hotel* (2016, 191).

Perhaps Tegetmeier, determined to include his own additions, made enigmatic reference to 'Tarnside Refuge' in recognition of the debt he owed to the Reeves family for their hospitality. The figure of a small child with the initials 'JMT' is possibly an acknowledgment of the inconvenience caused to his own family by their having to stay away from home for another week while he made the requested amendments.

The cloud shrouding the Royal Scot Mystery has finally been blown away.

Author profile

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