

John Angel's War Memorials

by David Baker, May, 2021.

One of Bridgwater's neglected attractions is the wonderful war memorial in King Square by John Angel unveiled in 1924. The previous year he had completed an equally remarkable war memorial in Exeter. The object of this article is to describe and interpret these two monuments and provide a brief summary of John Angel's life.

The Bridgwater War Memorial

Originally commemorating the fallen of the Great War (1914-1919) it now also records the names of those who died in World War II and subsequent conflicts. Their names are recorded on bronze plaques attached to a broad granite plinth above which appears a group of symbolic bronze figures. (The most reliable account of them and their meaning can be found in "The Buildings of England, Somerset : South and West", Pevsner and Orbach, 2014).

The female figure of civilization, seated, holds aloft in her right hand the orb of the world on which dance the four corners of the earth connected by the band of brotherhood. Beneath her feet she crushes the writhing forms of strife, bloodshed, corruption and despair. On her lap the book of law is upheld by crouching child angels whose outstretched wings protect the figures at the back representing labour, motherhood and education. The idealism of Angel's work is all the more poignant in view of the outbreak of World War II only 15 years later. His work was inspired by "The New Sculpture Movement" which was already becoming out of date by 1924. The best time to see this memorial is after heavy rain which removes the contributions of the local birds.



Civilisation on her plinth



She crushes the evils of war



Labour, Motherhood, Education

Images of Bridgwater memorial by David Baker

The Exeter War Memorial

John Angel's Exeter City War Memorial was erected in 1923 in Northernhay Gardens. There is another war memorial in Exeter which is The Devon County War Memorial by Sir Edwin Lutyens; a simple cross outside Exeter Cathedral. The committees responsible for these two memorials found it impossible to work together. Angel's memorial was dedicated to 948 men and women of Exeter who died in the Great War although their names do not appear on it. Commemorations to those who fell in later conflicts have been added. The monument consists of a shoulder high, cross shaped plinth with a twenty feet high pedestal at its centre both made of Devon granite. On top of the pedestal is the eight feet high, bronze, striking, female figure of victory. She stretches skyward her right arm holding a spray of laurel leaves and in her left hand she suspends a long sword. Beneath her feet she crushes the dragon of evil. Resting on each of the four crosses of the plinth are the more than life size, bronze, figures of a soldier, a sailor on a ship's hull, a prisoner of war, chained and semi naked and a VAD Nurse holding a bandage. These four figures are naturalistic as opposed to the symbolic nature of victory surmounting the pedestal.



The Exeter City war memorial

Comparison

Both these memorials are listed as Grade II* by Heritage England. Exeter's figure of Victory seems triumphant. She treads the dragon of Evil underfoot. Does the Dragon represent the evil of war itself or just our defeated enemies? The four lower figures are lifelike representations of those who served and gave their lives in the war.

There are no military personnel on Bridgwater's memorial. Symbolically Civilization treads the evils of war underfoot and she protects the civilian population. John Angel seems to say that those who died gave their lives to ensure the triumph of civilization. Perhaps his Bridgwater memorial is more

in keeping with today's view of war than his Exeter monument.



Detail of VAD Nurse



Victory crushes the dragon of war beneath her feet

Images of Exeter memorial by Smalljim - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=54198039>

The Life of John Angel

John Angel was born on 1st November 1881 in Newton Abbot, Devon, son of a tailor and one of ten children. At the age of 14 he entered a seven year apprenticeship with a wood carver. Showing talent he received formal training at the Exeter School of Art and the Lambeth School of Art. At the Royal Academy School he was strongly influenced by his mentor, George Frampton, a leader of the New Sculpture Movement (see below).

In 1919 he was elected to the Royal Society of Sculptors and began designing his war memorials at Exeter and Bridgwater, completed respectively in 1923 and 1924.

In 1925 he, his American wife and two children moved to the U.S.A. at the request of architect Ralf Adams Cram with whom he collaborated by making sculptures for the Pittsburgh East Liberty Presbyterian Church. Many commissions followed this. Apart from brief visits to England he spent the rest of his life in America. He often worked in stone and his ecclesiastical sculptures and statues of prominent Americans can be found in many American cities for instance at the New York cathedrals of St. Patrick and St. John the Divine. He died at Sandy Hook, Connecticut in 1960 and is remembered as one of Americas foremost sculptors



John Angel by the Exeter memorial in 1950s

The New Sculpture Movement

This movement lasted from 1880 until 1910 although some artists, such as John Angel, continued to work in this style further into the 20th Century. Another exponent of this style was F.W. Pomeroy who designed the Admiral Blake Statue at the Cornhill which was unveiled in 1900.

In contrast to the preceding stylized Neoclassicism the New Sculpture Movement emphasised naturalism and its subjects were often ideal figures from poetry or mythology. Bronze was the favourite medium. A famous example of this style is Alfred Gilbert's Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain in Piccadilly Circus usually known as "Eros".