

Sculptors' creations haven't worn well

Way We Were



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NEXT time you visit the cathedral, take a look at the statuettes that surround the south-west door where most of us enter.

These, and more around the nearby west door, were all made by the Belgian sculptor Theodore Phyffer (1821-76).

This year is the 150th anniversary of completion of this set of sculptures and may be a good point at which to reflect on Theodore's contribution.

In the 1860s the energetic cathedral Dean, Henry Alford, decided it was time to fill the many vacant niches round the cathedral exterior, most of which had stood empty since the ravages carried out by Puritans during the 1640s.

As ever, the main obstacle was financial, but this was partially solved when Theodore Phyffers, a Belgian sculptor working in London, offered to complete statuettes at the price of £24 each.

Theodore had studied sculpture at his home town of Louvain before coming to London in the 1840s to further his career.

In 1847 he married Maria Colquhoun, daughter of a warder at Millbank prison. They had two sons, Felix and Victor,



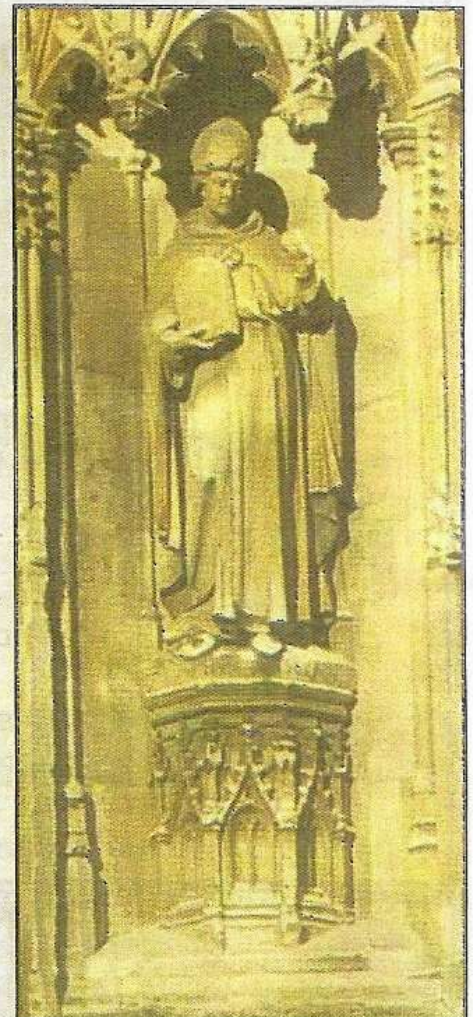
INFLUENTIAL MAN: Thomas Cranmer, a former Archbishop

both sculptors, and three younger daughters – the family lived near Sloane Square.

Benefactors in Canterbury were invited to come forward to sponsor their chosen figures.

The Dean started the ball rolling by paying for the statuettes of King Ethelbert and Henry VIII.

The Dean's wife followed suit, financing Queen Bertha, while



HOLDING THE TABLETS: St Augustine of Canterbury

the Archbishop, Charles Longley, paid for King Alfred.

Others followed suit – the Ladies of Canterbury clubbed together for the figure of the Black Prince, and the headmaster of King's School, Dr Mitchinson, financed Archbishop Theodore.

By summer 1865 the local press had announced completion of some 60 new figures.

but do possess some artistic integrity



HOLY SPIRIT: Pope Gregory receives instructions from dove

Since then, neither time nor critics have been kind to Phyffers and his figures.

Despite his toughening of the Caen stone through "imparting a hardened surface by a chemical solution of flint", the figures have not all weathered well. Several have lost inscriptions, facial features and limbs.

Modern writers have referred to their "diluted enthusiasm" for



THE LADIES' CONTRIBUTION: Edward, the Black Prince

Phyffers's "insipid style".

But is this really fair? Wherever possible, Phyffers inserted traditional details to educate or please the visitor:

Pope Gregory receives suggestions from the Holy Spirit via a dove on his shoulder; Ethelbert, King of Kent, holds a model of his church; beneath Augustine's foot we see the mask of paganism; Cranmer reads his



KING OF KENT: Ethelbert with a model of his church

First Prayer Book; and what the Black Prince is doing is hard to tell.

Without his creations, we'd still be looking at boring empty niches.

■ For more on Phyffers and a full list of his surviving figures, visit the Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society website at canterbury-buildings.org.uk.