

George Blair

His life, personality and contribution to our church.

by Julie Williams

Although many in the community now will not know the name of George Blair, he is with us in spirit every liturgy, and more than in spirit, because it is his iconostasis we face when we go into the church, his carvings next to the Royal Doors in which the cosmos infused with Christ is represented by the leaves and the waves, the peacocks and dolphins, held in the arms of the Cross. It is his delicate wooden grille which filters the light from the north window; and it was his design for the gates, which separate the garden from the road and make of it a kind of enclosure. The carvings George did himself, out of lime wood. The grille and the iconostasis, which are of oak, he designed but gave to a friend who was a cabinetmaker to make. He came to Scotland several times in the early days of the church, but more latterly he became ill, and he died last year.

George began his career in medicine, always interested in the psychological aspects of health, dedicated to the care of his patients and committed to what one might call old-fashioned doctoring - that is to say putting the patient first. But early on he felt drawn to be a sculptor, and when I first met him in Greece in 1962 he was already trying to combine his need to earn a living with his need to respond to the artistic impulse which was driving him. At that time he was working on a scheme run by a big landlord in the island of Evia to conduct medical research into the villages and bring them some degree of help, and it was his advice that took me to the mountain village in Evia where later on I did my own work. So our friendship dates from those years. After his time in Evia he for many years alternated spells of doctoring with spells of carving and sculpting, living first near Oxford and then in Wales. Later, after five years spent in a Greek island learning at the local monastery about carving icons and trying to encourage the local people to re-forest their island, he decided in the early 1990s to settle in Scotland, practise permaculture (a special and deeply ecological form of caring for the land), and help us build up the community.

This was a wonderful blessing and encouragement to us and we were full of hope, but it didn't work out, largely because he found the Scottish climate too cold, and a suitable house and garden too expensive. His last dwelling was a cottage in Herefordshire, where he had a little garden lovingly tended, with fruit trees, fruit bushes and a vegetable patch, cared for on organic principles. He kept out the deer and rabbits as best he could, and built a studio in the garden in which he grew tomatoes and worked, amongst other things, on sculptures of symbolic themes that he later had cast in bronze. He also worked on his icons, which he had cast in silver, and which were vouched for by the priest at his monastery in Greece as true to the canons of iconography. His house was spare and full of light, meticulously tidy, with good quality wooden furniture. His hospitality was of the same order, often with his own baking, always his own cooking, with simple vegetarian ingredients, and presented with care.

George had a great capacity for friendship. He would go to endless trouble to help a friend, and he had close friendships with many people lasting over many decades. From the time I knew him he never had much money, and towards the end of his life he had even less. But after I had become ill at one point and had difficulty eating, he meticulously researched into fruit-juicers, how efficient they were and how easy to clean, and then offered to buy me one. I knew that he would have had to put money aside to do this, and in fact bought it myself, and it turned out to be excellent. But when we went to his house on our last visit there, there he was still with his old fruit-juicer, hideously complicated and horrible to clean.

The word perfectionist is somewhat overused, but George was indeed a perfectionist. He was not able, for instance, to be one minute early - or late - for any appointment. His sense of proportion and design was in my belief exquisite anyway, but he would spare no pains in making anything he made as good as it could possibly be, with nothing ostentatious,

everything in balance. The oak of the iconostasis he had 'quarter-sawn' in a way that shows up the veining of the wood; the grille he slightly adjusted between the cross-bar of upper and lower windows so that the lines of the grille and the lines of cross-bar of the window would match. You only have to look at the grooving on the iconostasis and take into account the line of the frames of the carvings and the Royal Doors to see the kind of detail he thought necessary to go towards beauty and equilibrium. When we asked him to make a plan for the gates to the drive, he got books on wrought-iron work out of the library and studied them to see the kind of design that would succeed. And along with his care was a great generosity. He charged nothing for his work on the gates, though he had sent us plans accurate to the last millimetre. His charge for the carvings was very low, and a great part of the cost of the iconostasis - which was not cheap - was for the wood, the cabinetmaker who did the work, and the transport and installation up here.

This characteristic of absoluteness - in principles, in generosity, in artistic vision could make him severe on others, and they did present problems as well as solutions in the making of the church. George, with his own very strict standards and his own artistic integrity to preserve, wanted to be given a brief and allowed to get on with it. Deacon Alexander, having a small but vocal community to satisfy, the traditions of the Church and the exacting requirements of the liturgy to observe, and our diocesan panel to advise him (Bishop Basil, Fr Michael Fortounatto and Mariamna, Fr Alexander



George making carvings for the church

Fostiropoulos and Patsy), needed to be consulted and to consult as to how the iconostasis and carvings would develop. (The grille had an ancient Byzantine pedigree anyway, and George needed no advice from us to make it the thing it is). Fr Alexander Fostiropoulos, who is an architect, had discussed the early Byzantine form of sanctuary with Fr Michael, who was then our priest, and Fr Michael and most of the community liked its openness. George's first design was even more open, for the community too much so. His second was given back with a request for fairly considerable amendments, but this was too much for George who had invested so much time and energy and imagination already. An impasse followed, painful to us all, and for a time I felt, with disbelief, that an ancient friendship was in danger of foundering on the rock of the Church.

But miraculously we all came through. There came a day when we had altered the inside of the church entirely by removing the dry lining and the old plaster that had covered the walls, and laying bare the stonework. Fr Alexander, newly ordained priest, had also researched into the history of the iconostasis, and had found the Middle Byzantine form, intermediate between the open early form and the closed form which was adopted in the 16th century. George came in to the church, remained silent for some time looking at the altered space, and then said 'Of course the iconostasis will have to be entirely re-designed'. That afternoon he came up with a Middle Byzantine design which was approved first by our panel and then by the community. And this is what we now have. George was a person of great charm, with a wonderful smile, and a kind of fidelity I have tried to describe. He was never able to see the church with the icons hung and the gate put up, though he saw photographs of them. But Fr Alexander and I remember him in these things and are endlessly grateful to him that he gave his friendship and his time and his talents to us and to the church so generously.

May his soul be blessed to the ages of ages.