The original 1930s designs for Nuffield College included a large chapel at the request of the University Advisory Committee. By the 1950s, however, there was less enthusiasm and a general feeling, shared by Lord Nuffield, that a large space was unnecessary. The present Chapel was designed in the 1950s by Thomas Barnes, one of the College architects, with the encouragement of Dame Margery Perham, Nuffield College’s first Official Fellow, and the Reverend Roy Lee, the first Chaplain. An attic space was used by converting two rooms into one, retaining a step over a major joist.

The famed English painter and print-maker John Piper was asked by Margery Perham to advise on the Chapel’s design and decoration. He suggested the contrasting very pale grey and red walls with deep grey around the windows, together with matching chequer board floor. Piper also designed the white pews edged in black, influenced by those of St Thomas à Becket Church, Fairfield, in the Romney Marshes which had been the subject of a series of John Piper drawings.

Piper was not originally asked to design the windows but during the course of giving his general advice he offered designs. He provided the drawings for the stained glass made by Patrick Reyntiens (with whom Piper had worked on large commissions at Eton College Chapel and Coventry Cathedral). The largest of the windows, the North Window, depicts the Five Wounds of Christ, with the feet, hands and heart isolated, drawn in outline with the only colour being the gashes of blood. In contrast, the double windows in recesses at the north and south of the Chapel are full of colour; the north in warm red and gold, with the south in cooler shades of grey and green.

Piper was also responsible for the design of the altar table and the original pair of wooden candlesticks. Piper designed the originals in a Laudian tradition, to act as a link between the metal sculptures and wooden altar and pews. They were carved by craftsmen at S.T. Good & Co., Chinnor, and were considered controversial at the time, with their squat vase-like shape and glossy black surface.

The altar is made of unstained beech with black ebonised top and matching panels on the front. Piper suggested the purchase of the steel reredos by John Hoskin, a noted sculptor in metal. Piper chose the piece after seeing it in a gallery and he interpreted the vertical feature of welded wire as an abstract symbol of Christ on the Cross. Although this wasn’t what Hoskin originally intended, he did accept this interpretation. Hoskin also designed and made the cross of welded wire which stands on the altar. The golden curtain behind the altar was woven by students at the Royal College of Art.
The Chapel was completed in 1961 and was dedicated on 13 December 1961 by the then Bishop of Oxford, Dr Harry Carpenter. Regular services were held in the Chapel at noon on Fridays during term-time, with communion services once a term and special services to celebrate the important events in the Christian calendar. Nuptial blessings, christenings, funerals and memorial services for people associated with the College have all taken place in the Chapel.

Following the retirement of the last Chaplain, Rev. Dr. Margaret Yee, a Chapel Committee was established in 2007. The Committee’s remit includes the organizing of termly religious services and cultural events which take place in the Chapel.

The Chapel is open to the public during Oxford Preservation Trust’s annual Open Doors event in September.

Contact Us

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