

MILL HILL FOLLY

BY

RICHARD WEBBER

I love challenges so when FOLLIES#67 Summer 2007 (p15 entitled 'Lost Property') reported an unidentified folly on a painting sold at auction in April 2007 I decided to investigate. The painting was called 'The Chapel of Mill Hill, a Folly Gothick.' Initial speculation was that this referred to a Mill Hill on the Isle of Wight but as Michael Cousins mentions in FOLLIES#68 Autumn 2007 (p11) my hunch was Mill Hill in London.

I decided my starting point would be to find out more about the artist in question, Frank Mundy Coombs (1906 -1941). I discovered he was both a painter and architect born at Radstock, Somerset 30th July 1906. He was educated at King's School, Bruton (in the same county) where he studied art under Arthur Jenkins. He qualified as an architect and worked as an architectural draughtsman for Hampshire County Council, but relinquished the profession after 4 years. For 2 years he lived at Sark in the Channel Islands where he met Ala Story. In 1935 he joined her in the Storrans Gallery at 106 Brompton Road, London and after 6 months was allowed to organise a mixed show on his own. This show marked a change of direction for the gallery and the creation of a more progressive image for it. In 1936 Coombs and the painter Eardley Knollys took over the gallery as partners and organised a remarkable series of shows, featuring the work of Picasso, Modigliani and Utrillo as well as leading modern British painters like Glyn Philpott (1884-1937) (who, as an aside, recently featured in an exhibition of his paintings at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath which included a portrait of Coombs dated c1930). At the outbreak of the 1939-45 war Coombs joined the Royal Navy and served as a rating until his death in the first air raid on Belfast in April 1941.

So I had two clues. If he worked for Hampshire CCC then maybe Mill Hill on the Isle of Wight was close enough to be a candidate and as he exhibited in London then my Mill Hill was still up there with the best of them. The only other Mill Hill sufficiently large to make it into an AA Road Atlas of Britain was that forming part of Shoreham-by-Sea (W.Sussex) but I immediately drew a blank there.

My contacts on the I-O-W came up with Mill Hill Road, Cowes which was developed in the 19th century with fairly substantial suburban villas but almost definitely not the kinds of places to have Gothic follies in their gardens. However one property at the bottom of that road called West Hill offered some faint hope. This property was built for the Misses Ward, female members of the Ward family who owned nearby Northwood House in the 19thC. Their gardens were large enough and enclosed enough to suggest there might be a mysterious building lurking in its midst.

But before I got the run (around)-of-the-mill my parallel enquiries in North London produced an interesting development. The website www.24hourmuseum.org.uk referred to a Belmont House on The Ridgeway, Mill Hill, Barnet where "further along in the grounds there is a small chapel or hermitage, built in the Gothic style." I got hold of the Heritage Officer for the local community group and he said " Yes it's all there in Nicholas Pevsner's book on the architecture of North London describing the CHAPEL of 1924-25 : An attractive Lutyensesque exterior; pedimented entrance in front of a sweeping roof crowned by a pretty bell-turret. Sober classical interior with apse, barrel-vaulted nave and passage aisles. This chapel is in the grounds of Belmont House (now a

junior school) built 1771 for Peter Hammond, a London brewer. It stands on the Ridgeway, Mill Hill."

So that must be it then. But wait a moment. Follies 67 states that the painting " shows the churchlike end of a building, with a central arched window flanked by two square turrets, minimally castellated and pierced with lancet windows; in front is a three-arched projecting bay." Nothing Lutyensesque about that then. So where do we go from here? The answer: Belmont Mill Hill Preparatory School and its most helpful Headmistress Mrs Duncan.

She wrote back to me to say "you want 'The Old Chapel 'and it's in our school grounds. My understanding is that the Chapel was built shortly after Belmont House was completed in 1760. It was built as a folly and our records do not show that it was ever consecrated. If you stand in the drawing room of the House and look across the grounds to the Chapel, it appears to be a building at some distance away. In fact the proportions of the building are designed to create an illusion, since the distance is less than 100 metres."

Now we're getting somewhere! Barnet Library then helped further by identifying 'Pevsner's' CHAPEL as St Paul's, a completely different structure nearby built in Commissioner Gothick style. All I needed was a photograph of The Old Chapel ... and along it came (reproduced here) extracted from 'The History of Belmont School 'by a former Headmaster Gordon Smith.



The story though does not quite end there. Smith's accompanying text threw up some new mysteries in this intriguing tale. He wrote " It is so obviously a chapel, not only externally but internally as well, with its mouldings and recesses, and yet Brayley and Brewer's 'Beauties of England and Wales' talks of a Gothic dairy of unique elegance and splendidly decorated ... built, at the expense of more than one thousand pounds, in the grounds by former proprietor (Robert Williams)." However the confusion doesn't end there. He goes on to say that " The Hendon Times of February 21st 1947 reported that a Dr Edwin Morley had, in the course of a lecture, shown a slide of 'Mr Williams' Gothic Temple ... built probably as a private chapel for its owner ..."

And let's not forget our old friend Pevsner. Per Mr Smith he describes it as "a pretty early C19 Gothic cottage or hermitage." Well let me see we now have Eyecatcher, Sham Chapel, Gothic Dairy, Gothic Temple, Gothic Cottage and a Hermitage whilst date wise we've got C18, C19 and even possibly C20. For a folly we previously knew nothing about this is turning out to be SOME folly. I decided to check Pevsner myself. The revised edition of 1998, updated by Bridget Cherry, for LONDON 4: North states (p177) "In the grounds to the E a pretty early C19 Gothic GARDEN BUILDING with battlemented corner turrets and a small stuccoed LODGE." Why then does his next sentence read " Further N the CHAPEL of 1924-25 of a steep sweeping roof...." when he presumably doesn't mean St Pauls because he shows that separately on p.174?

In conclusion, you take your pick. Finding out about this folly has been anything but run-of-the-mill. By my reckoning it's a Sham Chapel Eyecatcher but readers are encouraged to make up your own minds. And finally if anyone can find out who bought the picture - and what price it achieved – The Mill Hill School Foundation would be interested in purchasing this work if it ever came on the market again.



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