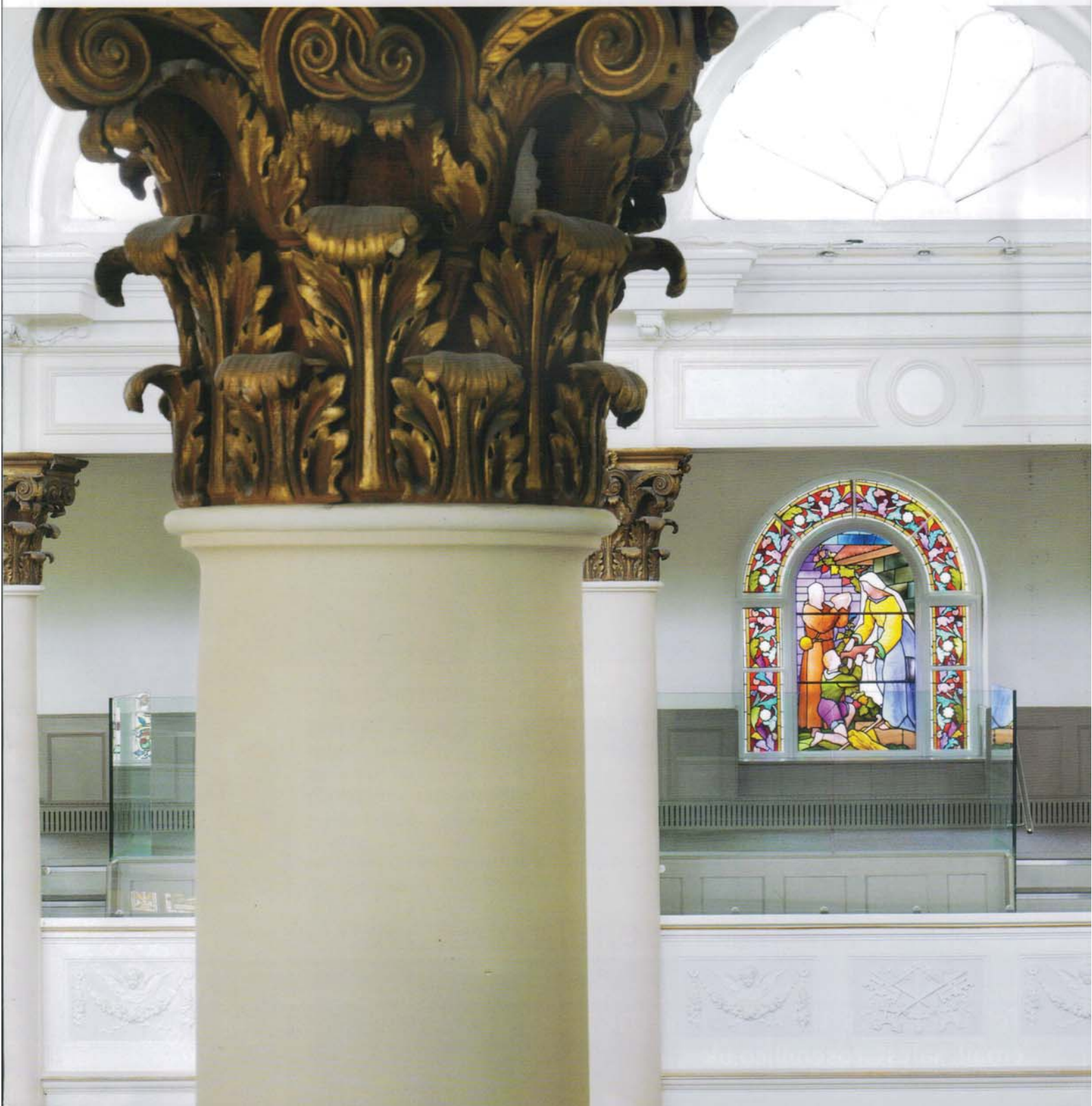
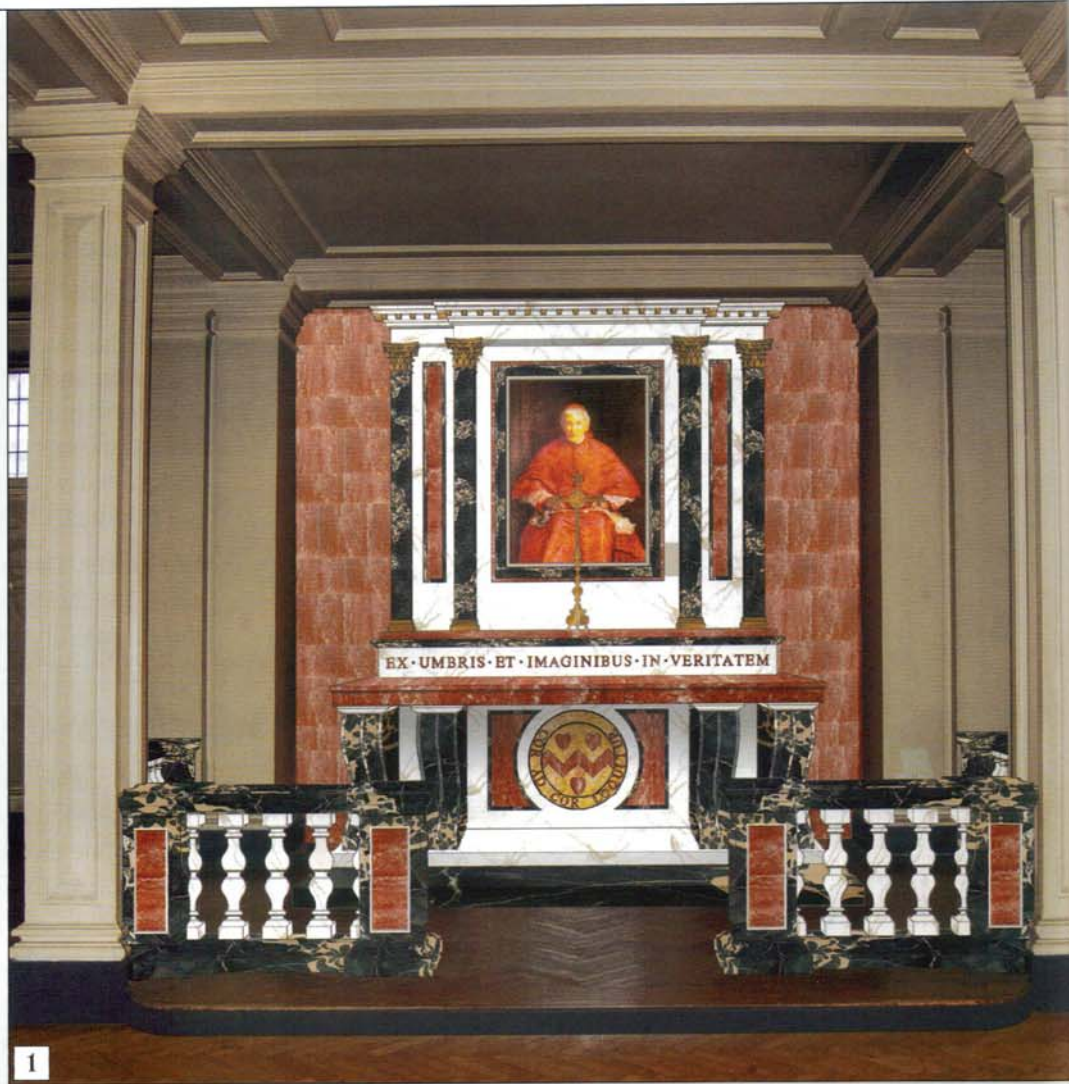


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# CHURCH

building & HERITAGE  
REVIEW





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## The Newman Chapel at The London Oratory

by Russell Taylor

### Introduction

Cardinal Newman will be beatified by Pope Benedict on Sunday September 19 during his state visit to Britain. In thanksgiving to God and in honour to Cardinal Newman the Fathers of the London Oratory commissioned the creation of this new chapel and its altar. Designed by Russell Taylor Architects it is currently under construction and is to be completed in early September before the Pope's visit.

The main material used in the chapel is scagliola an artificial marble with a 400 year pedigree, also used to decorate the chapel of St. Joseph in the Oratory.

### Cardinal Newman

In 1845 the distinguished clergyman John Henry Newman was converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism. He was ordained a priest in the Catholic Church and in 1848 brought the Congregation of the Oratory from Rome to England. He founded the Birmingham Oratory in February 1848 and then asked Father Wilfrid Faber to establish the London Oratory in May 1849.

In 1879 Father Newman was created Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII. Cardinal Newman continued to live at the Birmingham Oratory until his death on August 11, 1890.

1> Chapel perspective

2> Calvary Chapel  
as existing

In 1991 he was proclaimed 'Venerable' and in 2009 Pope Benedict approved the authenticity of a miracle through the intercession of the Venerable John Henry Newman, thereby opening the way for his beatification.

### The Oratory Church

The London Oratory of St. Philip Neri and the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (popularly known as the Brompton Oratory) is a Grade II\* Listed Building.

Construction commenced in 1880, the architect appointed following a competition was Herbert Gribble (1847-1894). His design was favoured ahead of those produced by more well-known names such as Henry Clutton, Temple Moore, J.D. Sedding and G.G. Scott Jnr. Previously Gribble had worked as the principal assistant to J.A. Hansom on the church (now cathedral) of St. Philip Neri in Arundel. Thus with the stylistic agility typical of many Victorians he moved from French inspired neo-Gothic (Arundel) to Italian neo-Baroque (the Oratory).

The Baroque of the Oratory does not have the inventive distortion of Borromini or the neo-Classical power of Bernini, it has the more measured approach of someone like Carlo Maderno. The competition rules required the design to be "Italian Renaissance" and Gribble's design undoubtedly falls within that broad category.

The church was consecrated in 1884, but at that time it still lacked its outer dome (built 1895-6), its twin west towers (never built), and much of the interior decoration and fittings.

The character and style of the interior has been formed over many years by the introduction of altars and statues (many being genuine

Baroque pieces) and by extensive additions by Commendatore Formilli from 1927-32, and other leading architects and designers.

The result, the interior we see today, is more positively Baroque, the result of many hands and minds, within the spaces created by Gribble. Gribble provided the framework which over the years has been completed and embellished by others and the work has continued for over 100 years. There have been variations and differences of emphasis but it is a remarkably consistent story of design following the principles of Classical and Baroque design.

### The Design

The new Newman Chapel aims to be another chapter in the story of Classical and Baroque design within the Oratory. The location is the space below the Organ Gallery, previously the Calvary Chapel and a somewhat neglected area also used for the storage of maintenance ladders.

The heart of the new chapel is a new altar complete with gradine and reredos. Centred in the reredos is an oil facsimile of the famous Millais portrait of Cardinal Newman. It must of course dominate the whole chapel, therefore everything should work to support it. The original portrait was commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery and therefore has a public, formal quality well suited to the size and character of the new chapel. (The original now hangs on loan in Arundel Castle).

As the coloured design drawing shows the painting is positioned in a light-coloured reredos divided by small Corinthian pilasters. The pilasters resolve the portrait dimensions to the square space containing the altar >32



- 3> One of the four console brackets in the workshop
- 4> The pilaster shafts
- 5> Parts of the reredos panels
- 6> Carving lettering for the roundel
- 7> Inlaying lettering with black scagliola

and reredos. Colour helps to relate the painting to the reredos, the altar and the architecture around it.

The mensa of the altar is supported on paired volute consoles aligned with the reredos pilasters, giving a vertical movement. It seems desirable to create as much vertical movement as possible because the ceiling of the chapel is exceptionally low.

Between the altar and the reredos on the gradine Newman's motto "EX UMBRIS ET IMAGINIBUS IN VERITATEM" ("Out of shadows and images into the truth") is inscribed. Below the mensa, between the paired consoles there are Newman's arms and his motto associated with the arms "COR AD COR LOQUITUR" ("Heart speaks to heart").

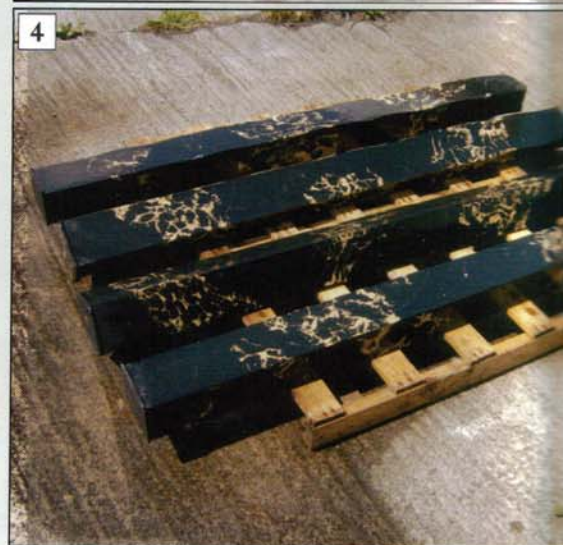
### Scagliola

The altar, gradine and reredos are made of scagliola also the wall behind the reredos. The making of these elements is being done by Richard Feroze and the work is now nearing completion.

Scagliola is an artificial marble made of hard plaster and pigments. It was developed in the early 17th century in Southern Germany and Italy and was introduced into England in the late 17th century. One of the earliest examples (c.1670) is the inlaid chimney surround in the Queen's Closet at Ham House. It was used for many grand architectural interiors, including Lancaster House, Buckingham Palace, Castle Howard and Goodwood.

To say that scagliola is an artificial marble is not to say it is in any sense an unworthy or inappropriate material, it is a material in its own right with a worthy history. Its manufacture is highly skilled requiring a rare degree of craftsmanship. The advantages of scagliola over natural marble are not necessarily cost, in the case of this project there were four crucial considerations:-

1. Speed of execution. Application for approval was made in April there where therefore only 26 weeks from application to final completion on site, an extraordinary accelerated programme by any measure.
2. Certainty of delivery, necessary because of the short programme. Natural marbles may not necessarily have been available.
3. Choice of colour. In theory almost any colour is possible but in practice natural marbles must be the starting point for the scagliola to look right. Here the colours used have been selected to harmonise with the Millais painting but "tweaked"



a bit to achieve certain effects.

The scagliola colours are based on:-

- Black and gold: Portoro
- White: Calacata Borghini
- Red: Travertino Rosso
- Dull Yellow: Travertino Dorato

4. Continuity of use. Scagliola has been used in many places on different occasions. Most recently for St. Joseph's Chapel also designed by the writer and the scagliola also made by Richard Feroze (see *Church Building May/June 2005*).



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### Conclusion

The design of this new chapel and the materials used follow an established tradition. It is a common misconception that to work in a tradition means there is no creativity. Often modernist architecture and design seems to want to call attention to itself, to be seen as something that makes a clean break away from almost everything that has gone before. That is the very opposite of the aim of this project, it seeks to be a worthwhile addition to the collective work of art that is

the London Oratory. Music sets a good example: the voices in the choir are all individuals with a unique sound and personality but they are all singing from the same song-sheet. ■

*The next issue of Church Building and Heritage Review will describe the completed project.*

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Richard Feroze: [www.richardferoze.com](http://www.richardferoze.com)