

Mr Fisher's Altar Ego

Marilyn Swain describes the work of an early twentieth-century enameller

THIS IS A LOCAL STORY with a happy ending, though one which largely takes place just over the border in Nottinghamshire. To claim that it is a Lincolnshire tale would be to stretch the truth, therefore, but it will no doubt interest Lincolnshire readers nevertheless, especially as a county saleroom was involved.

In 1928 Alexander Fisher was commissioned to design an altar set to be placed on the high altar in the chapel at Kelham Hall, near Newark. How easy it is for facts to become distorted is clear from published sources. On 29th June 1928 the Nottingham Guardian Journal printed the following: "Furnishings for the new chapel... are being given very generously, the most notable being a beautiful altar cross and two heavy candlesticks in silver silk and enamel by Alexander Fisher." A description made by the Society of the Sacred Mission Guide (undated but circa 1970) states: "The ornaments of the high altar are made of steel coated with silver and were designed by Mr Alexander Fisher." When the contents of Kelham Hall were sold in 1974 by Spencer's of Retford the candlesticks were correctly described as being of silver plate.

Alexander Fisher (1864-1936) became a renowned specialist in enamelling, having originally studied painting at the South Kensington Schools between 1881 and 1886. He exhibited at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1896 and his work was highly acclaimed by the influential journal 'The Studio' to which he became a contributor.

Made in the latter part of Fisher's life, the Kelham set is impressive: the cross is forty-two inches high and the silver-plated-on-copper sheet has been hammered over a wood core. The oval depicts Christ in majesty with robes of red and white enamel on a sky blue ground. The

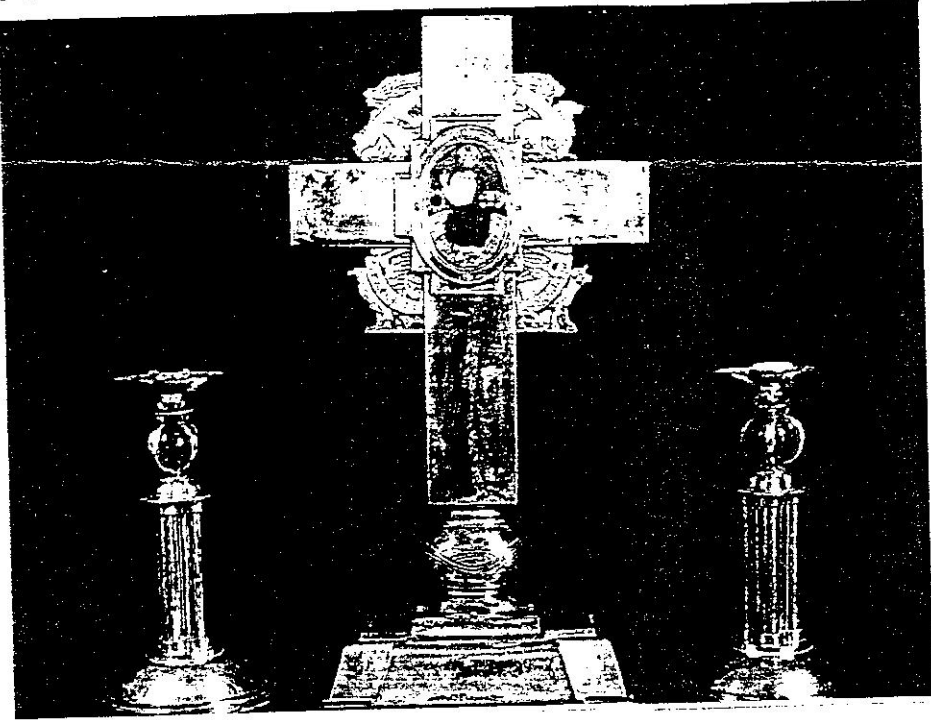
angles of the cross feature panels depict the four evangelists while the accompanying quadruple cluster candlesticks, twenty inches high, have blue enamel globes below the dished sconces.

For the past twenty years the set has resided at Stoke Hall, near Newark, but it came on the market again when the hall's contents were sold and raised a sale price of £6,000 in Grantham earlier this summer. Happily the pieces were bought by the Friends of the Southwell Cathedral and are now destined to stand on the nave altar in the minster.

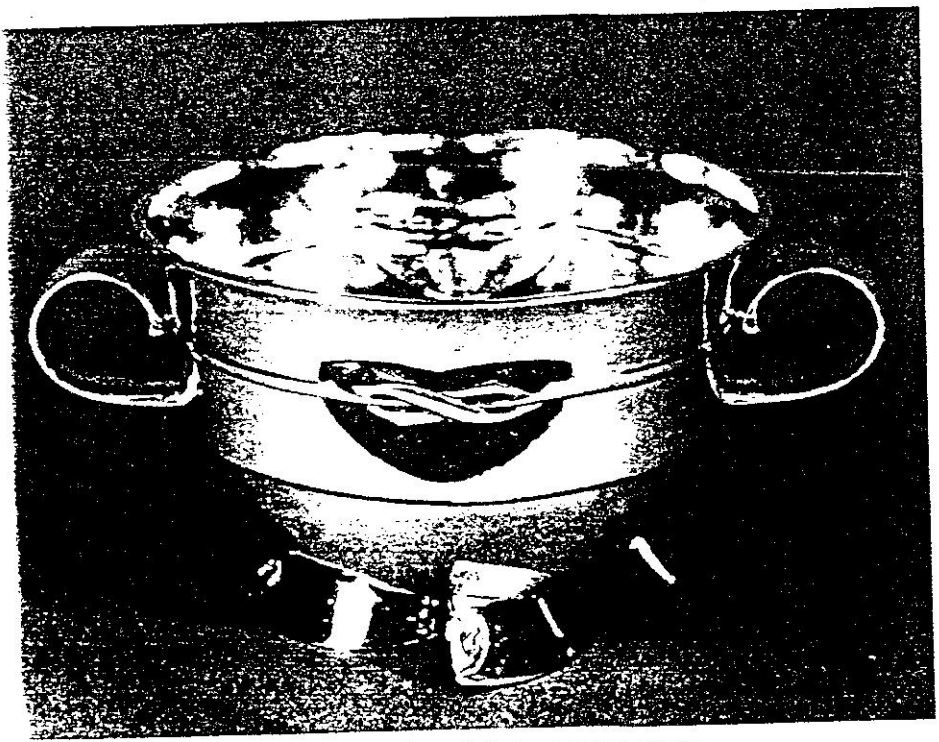
The combination of silver (or, in this case, silver-plate) and enamelling has a long history, but it became particularly popular with the craftsmen of the Arts

and Crafts movement. Among these, and probably better known than Fisher, were Omar Ramsden and Alwyn Carr. C R Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft and - particularly fashionable at the moment - Archibald Knox, who designed many pieces both in silver and in pewter for Liberty and Co in the early years of this century. (A silver bowl designed by Knox and decorated in blue and green enamel is illustrated here for comparison.) Fisher's set is a fine example of the art, and it is nice to know that Lincolnshire played a part in keeping it together. □

Marilyn Swain runs her own saleroom in Grantham and is honorary secretary of the Society of Fine Art Auctioneers.



Cross and altar candlesticks by Alexander Fisher



Silver and enamel bowl designed for Liberty & Co by Archibald Knox