

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Memorial in Winchester Cathedral

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This year, 2023, marks the bicentenary of the birth of Hampshire's prolific, but frequently overlooked, author Charlotte Mary Yonge. Although her life and work is being celebrated in a variety of ways during the year it is appropriate to consider the way she was memorialised after her death in 1901.

On 26 March 1901, the *Westminster Gazette* reported the suggestion that Charlotte Yonge should 'be laid to rest in Winchester Cathedral'. It had been remarked in the *Daily Chronicle* that: 'The purity of her life, her consistent religious teaching, as well as the literary skill which made that life and teaching a power, well deserve[d] this final tribute.'¹ This was not to be and, on 29 March, she 'was laid to rest ... in the churchyard at Otterbourne'.² In view of the author's life-long connections with the village and its church it is probable this would have been her preferred final resting place. That said, it is indicative of the esteem in which she was held that there were those who felt that she was worthy of being honoured in the same manner as Jane Austen.



Following her burial, the question arose as to how she should be memorialised. In a letter to *The Times*, the Revd Henry Walter Brock, a former vicar of Otterbourne, argued that 'whatever may be done in other directions the principal memorial should be directly connected with the village'.³ Support for this came from the current vicar, the Rev Henry Albany Bowles, who suggested that the remainder of the memorial fund should be devoted towards the building of the proposed church in the new parish of Chandler's Ford'.⁴

¹ *Westminster Gazette*, 26 March 1901, p.5.

² *The Times*, 30 March 1901, p.9.

³ *The Times*, 13 April 1901, p.12.

⁴ *The Times*, 18 April 1901, p.4.

With respect to the Cathedral, the Dean of Winchester, the Very Revd William Richard Wood Stephens, in a letter dated 29 March 1901, argued forcefully for a memorial in the Lady Chapel. He made the point that the author not only 'laboured throughout her long life with such energy and zeal in the cause of religion' but also 'frequently worshipped in the Cathedral and was deeply attached to it'. Pointing out that the Lady Chapel had been undergoing substantial repair and restoration, he suggested that a new reredos was needed to complete it. More pertinently:

A very handsome one might be obtained for about £500, to be carved in wood in Ober Ammergau, representing some scenes in the Passion of Our Lord. Could there be a more appropriate memorial to one who devoted her life to the service of the Divine Master and the extension of His Kingdom?⁵

Other options, however, needed to be considered.

To progress the matter, on 23 May a meeting convened by the vicars of Otterbourne and Hursley was held at Wolvesey Palace, at which the Bishop of Guildford, George Henry Sumner,⁶ presided. The following proposals for memorialising Charlotte Yonge were reviewed:

- a reredos in the Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral;
- the completion and equipping of the new Southern Cross (Melanesian Mission) ship;
- sanctuary furniture for the same;
- the endowment of Otterbourne Schools;
- a reredos, windows or an organ, for the church of St Matthew Otterbourne; and
- a scholarship at Keble College, Oxford.

From these proposals, 'it was unanimously resolved that a worthy memorial should be placed in Otterbourne Church, and a substantial majority voted in favour' of the reredos in Winchester Cathedral. An appeal was to be launched and the next meeting was scheduled for 13 June.⁷

⁵ Hampshire Archives and Local Studies Ref: TOP 244/3/4.

⁶ George Henry Sumner, suffragan bishop of Guildford, was the husband of Mary Sumner, founder of the Mothers' Union. She was a close friend of Charlotte Mary Yonge who edited the Union's newsletter for a decade before her death.

⁷ *The Times*, 30 May 1901, p. 4.

Subsequently, a letter appeared in *The Times* signed by the Bishops of Winchester and Guildford and the Dean of Winchester, appealing for donations. With respect to the memorial in the cathedral the exact form would depend upon the amount donated. Two options were either ‘a carved oak reredos in the restored Lady Chapel ... [or] a stained glass window near to that ... [commemorating] Jane Austen’.⁸

The fundraising and contingent decision-making was overseen by the “Miss Yonge Memorial Committee”. It, however, struggled to raise the necessary funds. For example, a newspaper report in April 1902 commented that: ‘The amount at present contributed or promised is rather less than £600, and about £400 more will be required to carry out the proposed memorial in a satisfactory manner.’⁹

In the event, sufficient was raised for memorials in both Otterbourne Church and Winchester Cathedral. The former took the form of a memorial brass bearing the inscription: “In honour of Christ crucified, and in memory of His servant, Charlotte Mary Yonge, this rood and chancel entrance were dedicated on the Feast of All Saints, AD 1903”.¹⁰

The sermon at the dedication service was preached by Bishop Sumner, ‘who spoke of Miss Yonge’s saintliness as exemplified in the life she lived before them.’¹¹

Eventually, the reredos in Winchester Cathedral, designed by Charles Eamer Kempe, was dedicated after evensong on Monday 3 July 1905, with a descriptive report published in the *Hampshire Chronicle*:

... the structure ... [is] of oak and mahogany, richly gilt and coloured, giving it an effective appearance. The reredos is divided into three panels, the centre and smallest having a gilt vase with lilies, symbolical of the purity of the virgin. On the right panel is a figure of the virgin in bold relief kneeling before a desk on which there is an open Bible, on the scroll being the words: *Ecce ancilla Domini; fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum* [Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be according to thy word]. In the left panel there is a figure of the Angel Gabriel

⁸ *The Times*, 28 June 1901, p. 4.

⁹ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 26 April 1902, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 26 March 1904, p.7.

¹¹ *The Times*, 2 November 1903, p.12.

holding a golden sceptre. The scroll here runs: *Ava Maria, gratia plena* [Hail Mary, full of grace]. A frieze with floral carvings in the panels and crocketed spires surmounts it.

For the brief service of dedication in the Lady Chapel, there was a large congregation including, not surprisingly, the vicar of Otterbourne. Its essence was captured in the first prayer read by Bishop Sumner:



In the faith of Jesus Christ, we dedicate this altar-piece to the glory of God and the memory of His servant, Charlotte Mary Yonge, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

Following the service 'the congregation ... inspected the reredos.'¹² It can be viewed in the Lady Chapel by present day visitors to the Cathedral.

Photos

- 1) Charlotte Mary Yonge grave at Otterbourne (Roger Ottewill)
- 2) Charlotte Mary Yonge reredos (Simon Newman)

¹² *Hampshire Chronicle*, 8 July 1905 p. 4.