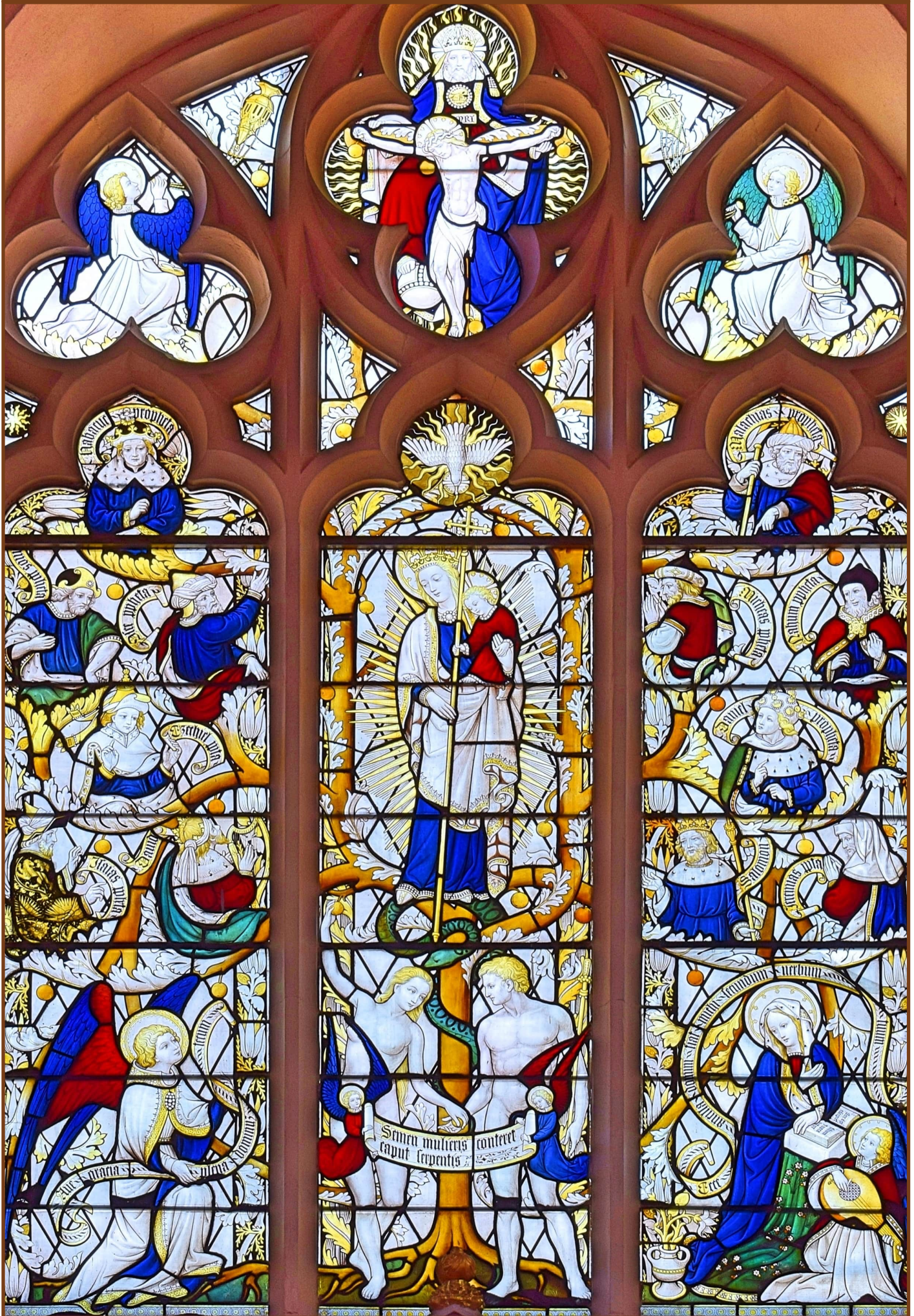


LITURGICAL EAST WINDOW
ST MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH - GOSPORT



Comper Church Window Discovered in St Mary's

Whilst conducting research into the history of St Mary's Catholic Church, built in the 1850s on Gosport High Street, a current parishioner of Gosport, Clarinda Mansfield, chanced upon a surprising claim in a Facebook group discussing church architecture, art and history. It was suggested that the stained-glass east window above the high altar of St Mary's in Gosport may be the work of Sir John Ninian Comper (1864-1960), one of the best celebrated Gothic Revival architects in Britain. This was unexpected, as the window has long been attributed to the German Architect, Gottfried Semper (1803-1879).

Excited by the possibility, Clarinda delved into the history of Comper's work where she came across a reference to the town of Gosport. Comper allegedly completed two stained-glass windows in Gosport, though their condition and whereabouts were unknown, being listed as most likely destroyed during the bombings of World War II.¹ Armed with her knowledge of Comper's artistic style and with reference to his body of work, Clarinda made a careful study of the window over many weeks. It became evident that the Gosport window reflected Comper's artistic style & technique. Might the history books have been mistaken in attributing the work to Semper? Might this be one of Comper's Gosport windows thought to have been lost during World War II?

Comper is well known for the unusual signature mark, a strawberry leaf with fruit and flower, which he used to sign his work. Clarinda made a careful search of the Gosport window but could not find no such signature. Although strawberry fruits and flowers are visible within the pattern of the Virgin Mary's garment situated at the bottom right corner of the Gosport window, the design did not match the distinctive strawberry signature. Yet there was an explanation. Comper only began using his strawberry signature around 1903 as an *homage* to his father who died suddenly whilst giving strawberries to children in his home parish of Aberdeen. The Gosport window almost certainly had been completed before the signature came into use.

Needing to be certain the window was indeed by Comper, Clarinda reached out to several historians, committees and experts who were supportive of the window's connection to Comper.² It would be a visit to the Victoria & Albert Museum, to view Comper's original drawings at the Royal Institute of British Architects' collection which proved most fruitful. Included amongst Comper's designs and sketches kept within the archive, Clarinda examined five pencil drawings which Comper had labelled *Gosport*. Seeing these for the first time, Clarinda could not contain her elation as the designs in pencil matched the Gosport window perfectly. It was incontrovertible: the stained-glass window of St Mary's Catholic Church was indeed the work of famed architect Sir John Ninian Comper.

This discovery has since been ratified by the CBCEW Art, Architecture & Patrimony Committee and it is likely that other expert bodies will follow suit.

Such a significant find naturally leads to more potentially exciting possibilities and further questions. Who commissioned Comper to work in Gosport? He was in high demand and most of his works were for the Church of England. It is surprising he would be commissioned to work at St Mary's, a Catholic Church. There was only one other known occasion of him producing work for a Catholic Church. Might St Mary's contain more of Comper's work yet to be discovered? And what about the second window? Was it lost after all? These are questions that still need to be explored. Yet all was made possible thanks to the perseverance and intrepid spirit of Clarinda Mansfield whose commendable example serves as an inspiration. Now, Comper enthusiasts and all appreciators of beauty can visit the sacred space of St Mary's Catholic Church here in Gosport to see his magnificent work in stained glass, which once was thought lost, but is now found.



Clarinda Mansfield

¹ p268, *Gazetteer: Hampshire & Isle of Wight, Sir Ninian Comper* by Anthony Symondson & Stephen Bucknall

² **David Ashford**, *Lo and Behold Bible*; **Canon Alan Griffiths**, Arts, Architecture & Patrimony Committee—Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth; **Dr Mark Kirby**, Chairman of Council - The Ecclesiological Society; **Andrew Derrick**, Deputy Chair - The Ecclesiological Society and Director of Architectural History Practice; **Sophie Andreae** CBE, Vice Chair - Patrimony Committee CBCEW



Frame 1, 2 & 3: Two angels with golden bowls and incense. *Revelation 8:3-5* explains this amazing way of how our prayer may be handled in heaven. “Then another angel with a gold incense burner came and stood at the altar. And a great amount of incense was given to him to mix with the prayers of God’s people as an offering on the gold altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, mixed with the prayers of God’s holy people, ascended up to God from the altar where the angel had poured them out. Then the angel filled the incense burner with fire from the altar and threw it down upon the earth, and thunder crashed, lightning flashed, and there was a terrible earthquake.”

Frames 4 & 6: Six of the twelve minor prophets, also known as the Twelve Prophets, can be seen on the window: Habakkuk, Amos and Hosea (Osee) on the top left (Frame 4) and Malachi, Micah and Nahum on the top right (Frame 6). They are all focused on the coming Messiah, who sits within the arms of his mother, Mary. The window also features other Old Testament figures who anticipated the birth of Christ: Ezekiel, Isaiah, and King David on the left and Daniel, Jeremiah and King Solomon on the right.

Frame 5: The middle panel of the window depicts the Fall of Adam and Eve. The tree of life within the Garden of Eden neatly acts as the theme for the Jesse Tree window. The image summarises how Christ came to undo the actions of Adam and Eve and to fulfil Old Testament prophecy. It also explains the special role of Mary in bringing Christ into the world.

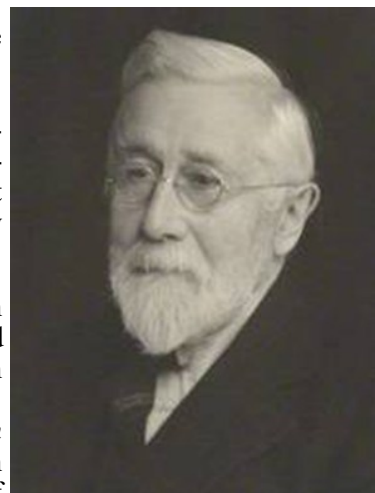
Frame 7 & 8: The Annunciation across both sides, Angel Gabriel appears on the left panel greeting the Virgin Mary on the far right.

*Credit: David Ashford of Lo and Behold Bible
The Twelve Prophets (Sirach 49:10) – Lo & Behold*

Sir John Ninian Comper (1864—1960)

Sir John Ninian Comper, architect and stained glass designer, was born on the 10th of June 1864. He was a son of Rev John Comper, a priest of the Scottish Episcopal Church. In 1882 he spent a term studying drawing at Ruskin School of Art in Oxford. In 1883 he moved to London where he worked as a voluntary assistant in the studio of Charles Eamer Kempe (1837-1907), a designer and manufacturer of stained glass. He also attended classes at the South Kensington School of Art. He decided to embark on a career as an architect and in late 1883 was articled to the Gothic Revival architects George Frederick Bodley (1827-1907) and Thomas Garner (1839-1906) of Bodley & Garner.

On completing his articles Comper commenced practice as an architect in London and in 1888 formed a partnership with William Bucknall (1851-1944). Ninian designed and worked on Anglican churches throughout the country and became one of the most influential church architects of his day. *In all, he designed fifteen churches and renovated, restored, altered, decorated and furnished many more. He was knighted for his services to architecture in 1950.* The only other Catholic church he was known to work on was at Downside Abbey in Somerset. He died on the 22nd of December 1960. His ashes are buried in the north aisle of the nave of Westminster Abbey also called the Warriors Chapel, the window of which he also designed. *‘Comper’s ultimate objective was to bring man to worship God through beauty. He believed that the church of intrinsic beauty speaks today to many a cultured mind of youth and age; to win such minds by beauty of architecture and music may not be everything, yet it is by way of beauty that all are won...’*



Sources and other suggested readings:
www.loandbeholdbible.com (search for Gosport)
www.taking-stock.org.uk/building/gosport-st-mary/
www.architecture.arthistoryresearch.net (search for Ninian Comper)
 Sir Ninian Comper by Symondson and Bucknall

ST MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH IN GOSPORT - A BRIEF HISTORY

Occupying the site of an eighteenth century wooden chapel, the church was built in three phases in the second half of the nineteenth century. With the presbytery and war memorial, the frontage makes a highly prominent contribution to the Gosport High Street Conservation Area. The main feature of the interior is a fine east window by Ninian Comper.

The baptismal register for Gosport Catholics goes back to 1759, when there was already a chapel in South Cross Street. The 1834 Strangers' Guide to Gosport refers to a small Catholic chapel behind the Independent Chapel in Middle Street (now High Street). The present site was acquired by a member of the Earl of Shrewsbury's family in 1776 and a chapel built behind cottages fronting Middle Street, two years before the first Catholic Relief Act of 1778. This small wooden chapel was enlarged in 1830 and 1834, when the Spanish queen Donna Maria Francesca D'Asis De Bourbon died at Alverstoke Rectory. Her remains were interred in the sanctuary until 1885. The Rev Dr Angelo Baldaconi was appointed to the mission in about 1849 and started building the present church in 1855. The architect was Robert Edward Philips of 51 Lincoln's Inn Fields (Fr Baldaconi had previously served the Sardinian Chapel at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and may have met the architect, who is not known to have built any other Catholic churches, during his time there).



Progress was slow, as fundraising was difficult in this poor mission attended mainly by garrison soldiers; the nave was reported as having been roofed in by June 1856, and in February 1857 Fr Baldaconi reported that 'the eastern aisle, chantry, cloister, and entrance for the military, with their panelled and groined ceilings, are nearly completed, besides the outward porch and part of the tower'. However, work was suspended in July 1857 as debts rose.

Fr Baldaconi died in 1868, and work resumed under his successor, Canon Thomas Doyle. *The Tablet* reported on 26 September 1874 that 'work of improvement has been going on during the past four months...Under the superintendence of Mr Henry John Hansom, architect, of Battersea, Mr Lowe, of Gosport, has effected a great transformation, which has materially improved the appearance of the church. The windows, which were formerly anything but perfect in an architectural sense, being merely old sash windows fastened over the openings, have been filled in with elegant stone mullions, while the roof, nave and sanctuary, have been very skilfully improved'.

Canon Doyle died in 1896, and left money in his will for a presbytery and 'additions and improvements', which were completed in 1898 (*The Tablet*, 15 October 1898). The additions included the rebuilding of the west end which might be attributed on stylistic grounds to the Rev. A.J.C. Scoles, an architect-priest active in the Diocese of Portsmouth at this time. A stained glass window was later added in the sanctuary, from designs by Ninian Comper (his drawings of 1904 are deposited in the RIBA Drawings Collection).

In 1919 a large war memorial in front of the church in the form of a large stone crucifix was unveiled.

Description

The church has a gabled nave and gabled liturgical south aisle, with no more than a small front area to the High Street. Sanctuary with chapels on either side. The church is hemmed in by buildings on its west and east sides and the significant elevation is the liturgical west front to the High Street. This has a tall narrow nave with a four-light window with Decorated tracery above a pointed arched doorway with a trumeau between two doors with a corbelled shaft supporting a niche containing a statue of Our Lady in the tympanum with rich foliage decoration to either side. Plain lancets either side of the doorway. The lower, gabled liturgical south aisle has a single doorway and a circular window above of four encircled quatrefoils. All this work is of 1897-8. In front of the church is a large gabled war memorial cross of 1919, its panelled base with an ogee frame. The liturgical west front is of uniform build with the attached presbytery of 1897-8.

The interior is surprising, especially for its Gothick tracery. The nave has six bay arcades, that to the liturgical north simply defining blank recesses. Depressed arches and moulded surrounds without capitals or bases. Large three-light clerestory windows to the liturgical north, truncated ones to the liturgical south, all with pointed trefoiled lights. The walls are plastered, with the exception of the liturgical east wall which is of red brick and pierced by four open circles, the lower pair opening through to the sanctuary, the upper pair part blocked and part glazed to the exterior. It is believed that plaster was at some stage removed from this wall. Broad pointed sanctuary arch with semi-octagonal responds. The depressed arches are repeated in the form of the roof trusses with quatrefoils in the spandrels. The aisle has a blind arcade to its outer wall with two-light windows above. The aisle has the first of the curious panelled ceilings, canted, with bosses and ribs, of Georgian Gothick character. The sanctuary has a high altar and reredos against the liturgical east wall. Arcaded Gothic with painted panels. Fine three-light stained glass window above, on the theme of the Tree of Jesse, by Ninian Comper. Either side of the sanctuary are elongated chapels with canted ends and decorative plaster ceilings of Georgian Gothick character. Chapel altars with Gothick panel tracery on the walls behind. Stations of the Cross as painted panels, said to have been cut down and to have been painted by a member of the congregation. Pieta, after Michelangelo's in St Peter's Rome, presented to the church by the Woolfrey family between 1910 and 1930. Brass eagle lectern from an Anglican church. Plain octagonal stone font and open pine pews.

The church, presbytery and war memorial were listed Grade II in April 2024, following Taking Stock. The list entry can be seen at: [Church of St Mary, including the attached presbytery \(32 High Street\) and war memorial, Non Civil Parish – 1488749 | Historic England](#)

Entry amended by AHP 19.02.2025, with additional information provided by Clarinda Mansfield, Parish Administrator.

Heritage Details: Architect: Robert E. Philips
Original Date: 1855
Conservation Area: Yes
Listed Grade: Grade II

www.taking-stock.org.uk/building/gosport-st-mary/