

## Reredos and Altar Frontal

**The Commission:** I first visited the church in 2000 when I was asked to submit designs for a new altar frontal. I felt that the sanctuary area was gloomy, crying out for a colourful reredos to lead the eye from the altar up to the Great Window. The Rev. Peter Lock, who was the vicar at that time, suggested I submit designs for both frontal and reredos.

**Inspiration:** My inspiration for the reredos came from the book of Revelations: from the Apocalypse of the Blessed Apostle John....."the time is at hand" John writes to the Seven Churches in Asia, "Grace and peace be yours from Him who is and ever was and is still to come, and from the Seven Spirits that stand before His throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, first born of the risen dead who rules over all earthly kings....." (*Ronald Knox translation from the Vulgate*) The seven semi-abstract twisted columns of the reredos represent the seven spirits or angels envisaged by Saint John.

Early in my career I was influenced by the jewel-like colours against gold leaf on the small Italian primitive panel paintings in the National Gallery. Today my aim is to revive the vitality of Opus Anglicanum [English Work] which was our great contribution to early medieval European religious art. The work was exquisite, using much silkwork and goldwork on linen, silk and velvet backgrounds, and the designs were lively. Before producing the designs for the reredos I spent much time in both the Victoria & Albert and the British museums. I am stimulated by their collections and especially by the early gothic and Renaissance galleries. I have also found the mosaics of Ravenna and St Mark's Basilica inspirational, and have used the colours they suggest in the work. I intended glowing reds and golds, and the sombre colours of Byzantium should warm and enrich the grey shadows of the church, and I am continuing this effect with the altar frontal - The Miracle of Fishes on which I am working at present.

**The Work:** Peter Lock liked the scheme I presented and proposed it to the PCC. After much discussion the project was given the go-ahead by the new vicar, Rev. Michael Camp and the PCC. The Diocesan Advisory Committee finally approved the designs in August 2002 and I started work on the reredos. The angels of the reredos are worked in freehand machine embroidery on gold satin lame with applied textile layers of wild silk, Indian silk and silk organzas in many colours. There are literally millions of individual stitches in the work and I have used miles of sewing thread in its creation. Over a period of two years each angelic column with its praying or praising hands took a minimum of 130 hours intensive work. I use the Irish industrial sewing machine as a "painting" tool; however, I am limited by the diameter of the tambour frame (about 9") that holds the stretched fabric as I stitch. The angels are applied to a rich plum-coloured velvet background interlined with heavy cotton and stretched over a canvas-lined frame. Alongside my Cope of Martyrs for St Paul's Cathedral, at 8' x 11' the reredos is the largest work I have designed. As my studio ceiling is less than eight feet in height I have only been able to view the work in its entirety since bringing it to the church virtually completed; consequently the last three weeks spent on this exciting project were a nerve-racking - but ultimately an especially fulfilling time.

*Susan Riley  
Artist in embroidered textiles  
and ecclesiastical vestments*