



# The Berwick murals

*The Bloomsbury murals at Berwick church in East Sussex are without parallel. As the church launches a restoration appeal to save them, a new book by its parish priest offers new insights - as LOUISE SCHWEITZER discovers*

## THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP IN BERWICK CHURCH

BY PETER BLEE

*(St Michael and All Angels, £15 plus £3.50 p&p berwickchurch.org.uk)*

The murals at St Michael and All Angels at Berwick, near Alfriston, owe their existence to a unique set of circumstances: art critic and museum director Kenneth Clark's passionate desire to offer artists wartime employment, the then Bishop of Chichester George Bell's belief in the Church as patron of the arts, and the fact that a colony of painters just happened to live around the corner at Charleston.

Add to the mix the architect who declared that as the interior had been 'modernised' in 1856, it could reasonably be decorated without interference to historic fabric, and the stage was set for a modern decorative ecclesiastical scheme without parallel.

The Rev Peter Blee, rector of Berwick since 2003, has told the story anew in sympathetic detail, minutely chronicling the background, genesis and execution of the famous wall paintings, as well as taking a fresh look at the personalities involved.

What Mr Blee achieves here is a straightforward analysis of the differing artistic approaches of Vanessa Bell, her lover Duncan Grant and Vanessa's son, Quentin Bell. Mr Blee's own

training in natural science and interest in landscape design seem to have held him in good stead in his assessments of style, period and content; his priestly life enables frequent and illuminating biblical reference.

Sensitively, he paints the looming tragedies behind Vanessa which he believes endowed her work with particular beauty. Her adored son Julian was killed during the Spanish Civil War and her daughter Angelica, her model for Mary in the Berwick mural *The Annunciation*, had recently learnt that she was the daughter of Grant and not Clive Bell (Vanessa's husband). Vanessa's sister, the acclaimed writer Virginia Woolf, had died, drowned, in 1941.

It is fascinating to learn how the pictures were constructed. Photographs illustrate the models: here are Duncan, Quentin and Angelica posing for *The Nativity*, and the figures by the manger are the sons of the Charleston gardener, together with the daughter of Charleston housekeeper Grace Higgins. Grant himself features as Christ in Glory, accompanied by his friend and patron, Bishop Bell.

Unveiled in 1943, the murals remain, to some extent, controversial. They were painted by atheists. Church decoration belongs to a pre-literate age which possessed the patience and observational ability to interpret visual imagery. They are modern, despite constant reference to the old masters of art history. But we have them, and now we have Mr Blee's marvellous book to help us understand them. ♦



Above and left: Berwick church murals

