

ALEC MILLER, GUILDSMAN AND SCULPTOR IN WOOD (URSWICK CHURCH COMMISSIONS)



For more detailed information about Alec's life please see *Alec Miller: Guildsman and Sculptor in Chipping Campden*, written by his daughter, Jane Wilgress and published in 1987 by Campden and District Historical and Archaeological Society.

For detailed study of Robert Ashbee and the Guild see <http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk> website.

Alec Miller was born in Glasgow in 1879, one of seven children; his father was a cabinet maker and as a 'dissenter' held strictly to the Sabbath day observances.

He left school aged 12 and was apprenticed for seven years to a Miss Anstruther (later Mrs. Mackay) who had a studio for teaching woodcarving. He was a good student. By the age of 14 he was 'becoming useful at very elementary bench work'. Around this time he and older brother Will joined an evening drawing class, followed by wood carving classes conducted by the Kyrle Society. In 1896 he became a student in evening art classes in

Glasgow High School under a Mr William Paddock and 'it was here that the young apprentice became the young artist'.

In 1898 Alec was promoted to journeyman status and was taken on a visit to London for the first time and was introduced to the writings of Ruskin and Morris and both he and Mrs Mackay shared an interest in the writing of C.R Ashbee and in 1902 he was introduced to Mr Ashbee and the Guild of Handicrafts. The introduction led to an offer of work which he took up shortly after the Guild left London and set up in Chipping Campden. It was to be his home for 37 years, although the Guild ceased to exist after 1909. The combination of Ashbee as designer in woodwork and Miller as carver proved very successful and much sought after.

In 1910-11 on the recommendation of Ashbee Alec and his wife Eleanor went to Pennsylvania, USA, where Alec fulfilled an important commission for the cloister at Bryn Mawr College (40 carved stone gargoyles in all).

'In the years of the first World War Alec did a lot of work for the church and Town Hall at Ulverston' (records his daughter) but this is in fact inaccurate since most of the work undertaken was at the Church of St. Mary and St. Michael, Great Urswick, a few miles from Ulverston, some dated from 1911 or 1912 onwards.







The dedication in the sanctuary reads: ‘To the glory of God and in pious memory of the ancient family Petty of Urswick Sarah Jane Petty of Stockbridge makes this offering’

A further piece carved by Alec Miller (a prayer stool) at Urswick is dated 1926.



This piece is dedicated ‘In loving memory of her father George Petty and Sarah Jane his sister this is given by Georgina Marian Jackson and her daughters Mary and Doris 1926

During the 1920s Alec Miller made several successful visits to America, encouraged by Wendell Herbruck from Ohio and his works gained much media attention. In the 1930’s he was back in America, carving, writing and lecturing, this time on the West Coast and found California both attractive and conducive to his work; many offers of work and commissions were made to Alec and the final move overseas was made in the late 30s.

He published books in 1948 (Stone and Marble Carving) and in 1949 (Tradition in Sculpture) and was still working out of his Santa Barbara studio in his 80’s.

Alec Miller died in 1961 having returned home to visit Janet Ashbee but she died before he could see her; he died in May and was buried at St. Nicholas’ Church, Wade.

As you see and experience the wonderful and varied carvings of Alec Miller in the church of St. Mary and St. Michael at Urswick, perhaps pause to

reflect on the words of Lewis Mumford who wrote of him: '***he has always remained in the position of the student and the disciple.***'
A master craftsman, indeed.