

THE VAUGHAN-LEE EMBROIDERED ALTAR FRONTAL, St MARY'S, ILMINSTER PROVISIONAL CONSERVATION PROPOSAL

The design attributed to John Dando Sedding (1838–1891).
Embroidered in 1885 by Clara Vaughan-Lee and her three elder daughters
Coloured silk threads on silk velvet and ribbed silk, with silk fringes



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Statement of significance

This exceptionally beautiful altar frontal (Fig. 1) was embroidered in 1885 by Clara Vaughan-Lee (1841–1911), the widow of Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee (1836–1882) of Dillington, and her three elder daughters, Jessy, Katherine and Christine, and presented by them to the Minster. Their work and gift are recorded in stitching at the top of the main frontal (Fig. 2), normally concealed by the super-frontal. The altar frontal therefore has a special place in the Chancel, which was restored by the architect J. D. Sedding in 1881–82 at the expense of Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee, who died before the work was finished. The reredos above, introduced in 1912, also commemorates Vaughan Hanning and Clara Vaughan-Lee. Sedding went on to restore the rest of the church in 1889.

It seems highly likely that Sedding designed the altar frontal too, making it even more important than we have previously realized. Following the “Arts and Crafts” principle for architects to be responsible for all aspects of their buildings, he was one of a handful who designed embroidery for churches. Very few examples designed by him survive, however (see p. 4). Our frontal has been greatly admired, from photographs, by specialists in Victorian architecture, textiles and design, including Michael Hall and Mary Schoeser, who both endorse an attribution to Sedding.

This altar-frontal is particularly unusual and significant for two further reasons. First, Sedding’s designs were generally more naturalistic; the quite formal style of our frontal recalls the designs of George Edmund Street (1824–1881), who had trained Sedding. Secondly, most architect-designed embroidery was worked by professionals (such as the

Royal School of Needlework or the Leek Embroidery Society); it is rare to know that this one was embroidered by 'amateurs', and to know who they were. The uncharacteristically formal style of our piece suggests that Sedding may have consulted Clara Vaughan-Lee closely about the composition.

Statement of need and provisional conservation proposal

The altar frontal is needed for use at the appropriate liturgical seasons of the year, and we owe it to the makers and donors to preserve it for future congregations as well as our own. It is too large to be stored flat in any part of the church, so at other seasons it hangs in front of the altar, concealed by different frontals. Inevitably it suffers minor damage every time it is handled, which can be arrested but not reversed. Since 2022 it has undergone emergency conservation twice, in situ, and protective Tyvek envelopes have been made to enclose and protect both parts (these campaigns funded by members of the congregation).

For its long-term survival, the frontal needs more fundamental conservation, starting with close inspection of both parts in studio conditions. Alison Lister (Textile Conservation Ltd, Bristol), who has carried out the previous conservation, has been asked to submit a report with costed proposals. As well as remedial conservation, this will include mounting the frontal (both elements) on a light-weight board, with handles of some sort at the back, so that in future it can be handled without touching the silk velvet and embroidery. This will also allow the main frontal and super-frontal to be held straight, rather than sagging in the centre as they are liable to do at the moment (Fig. 1).

The inspection will also be an opportunity to assess the history of past interventions, and the extent to which any of them could or should be addressed. For instance, the principal section of the main frontal appears to be buckling, perhaps because an interlining has been introduced (Fig. 3). Even if it is not possible or desirable to remedy this, establishing the cause of the buckling could inform the future care of the frontal.

The super-frontal has suffered much more than the main frontal, partly from having been folded up and stored in a chest in the past. Some of the velvet pile has been lost, and many couched silk threads are loose (Fig. 4). It will be a matter of judgement where to re-secure these and where to leave well alone, as every new stitch weakens the velvet ground.

A detailed report with treatment proposals will be submitted by Alison Lister in mid-October, following delivery of the frontal and super-frontal to her studio and consultation with the writer of this statement (acting for the PCC and Fabric Committee of the Minster). A Faculty is now requested, in advance of obtaining these proposals, to enable us to proceed with fund-raising for the project – with the objective of completing the conservation in time for Passiontide next year.

Funding for the packing and transport, and for Alison Lister's pre-conservation report, has generously been offered by Ewen Cameron, great-great-grandson of Clara and Vaughan Hanning Vaughan-Lee.



Lucy Gibbs
on behalf of the PCC and Fabric Committee, St Mary's Ilminster
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Fig. 3. Detail of the main altar frontal, showing the buckled surface of the principal section, possibly caused by a later interlining.



Fig. 4: Detail of the super-frontal showing lost pile and loose embroidered threads

Other church embroidery designed by John Dando Sedding



St Augustine's, Kilburn, altar frontal, 1868–74



York Minster Festal frontal (detail), 1869



St Clement's Bournemouth, chancel screen (detail), 1873



Holy Trinity, Sloane Square, London, Passiointide altar frontal, 1888; and detail below

