



Something beautiful for the divine artist

Ron Ferguson considers the history of Orkney's Italian Chapel.

I HAVE a precious object in my study.

It's made of bits and pieces, nuts and bolts, and washers.

When you look more closely at it, you can see that it's a clock. Look more closely again: on top is a figure, with his head on a spring. He's wearing a preaching stole, and is clutching a Bible. Then turn the stole around, and it's a football scarf in the colours of Cowdenbeath FC.

Then you see a hymn board. Turn it around, and you see the improbable words 'Cowdenbeath 5, Rangers 1'.

Your eye travels down and you see figures – it's a congregation.

Then at the bottom a figure is playing an organ. The organ stops are nails. The title of the piece, scratched on the back, is simply 'The Sermon'.

The artwork was made for me as a parting gift by John Morson, the Scottish Episcopal priest in Kirkwall when I was minister of St Magnus Cathedral.

What cost a few pence has become a much-treasured, much-admired gift.

Looking at it again, my mind moves to something else that's made of bits and pieces, yet is highly significant – Orkney's Italian Chapel. In 1943, more than 600 Italian prisoners-of-war, captured in North Africa, were sent to Orkney to work on the Churchill Barriers, a massive series of concrete causeways which seal the eastern

approaches to Scapa Flow.

Camp 60 consisted of a series of huts. The prisoners planted flowers and made concrete paths, until the whole area was transformed. In their spare time, they built a theatre, and a recreation hut with a concrete billiard table. One thing the men wanted, though, was a chapel. Permission was readily granted by the British camp commandant.

Late in 1943, two nissen huts were joined together. A sanctuary was built at the far end. The altar, altar rail and holy water stoop, were moulded in concrete. Wood for the tabernacle came from a wrecked ship. For the entrances on either side of the sanctuary, gold curtains were paid for out of the prisoners' welfare fund.

The man whose vision it was, Domenico Chiocchetti, painted a beautiful picture above the altar – The Madonna of Peace.

It was based on a holy picture he had carried on his person all through the war. The lovely sanctuary made the rest of the nissen huts look scruffy, and the camp commandant, who got completely caught up in the project, managed to get enough plasterboard to line the whole building.

In Spring 1945, the prisoners left Orkney, leaving behind causeways linking the southern islands, as well as the legacy of a beautiful chapel. Before returning home, Domenico wrote to the people of Orkney:

“

The chapel is yours, for you to love and preserve. I take with me to Italy the remembrance of your kindness and wonderful hospitality. I shall remember always, and my children shall learn from me to love you.

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What a legacy from these rough-handed, cursing journeymen, with photographs of their loved ones in their pockets, who made, out of scraps, something beautiful for the divine artist, who is God.

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty, and the base things of the world and the things which are despised, God has chosen.

1 Corinthians 1:27 ■