

Cable Street Mural

This interview with Paul Butler was recorded by Roger Mills as research for a book he is writing about the cultural history of Cable Street in the East end of London. It is a work in progress, due out in October 2011.

“...I was in a few shows like ‘Art for Society’ at the Whitechapel Gallery and was developing a sort of left-orientated practice. I read in the paper one day about the mural being painted by Desmond Rochfort and Dave Binnington at Royal Oak under the Westway flyover. There was big illustrated article about it and somebody drew it to my attention. And I thought it makes complete sense to paint murals. So I wrote to Desmond and Dave Binnington – I somehow got an address – and said I’m an artist and can I talk to you about what’s involved in painting the Royal Oak. My original contact with Desmond and Dave was, I think, about 1979.

I think I did not get a reply for quite a long time. But eventually I did and at some point I went up and looked at the mural with them. Then later I got a note from Dave Binnington out of the blue – I suppose, a year or so later – saying would I be interested in a project in relation to the Cable Street mural. He invited me to go over and meet him at Cable Street. There was this huge blank wall as I remember it. There was nothing much on it. I think maybe he’d squared it up or something. He explained that he wanted me to paint some praedella panels along the bottom of the mural (the great frescos... would have the main motif and then they’d have a detailed series of images along the bottom which would show the narrative in more detail called the praedella). He came over to my place subsequently and brought loads of books and he introduced me to Phil Piratin and gave me loads of books on the history of Cable Street and the whole East End context. We started to talk about which images should be included in the praedella panels. I got the feeling that he’d done a lot of research, which he was very good at. He was very thorough and meticulous in his historical research. He was deeply involved in that aspect. He was working on the mural initially by himself at that point. And I must say, looking at the wall, it was a Herculean job he’d taken on. And I did get a little bit of a sense that it was a hell of a job for one guy to take on. It’s hugely physical. It would have been too much for any single individual to take on..

(On the subject of the first vandalising of the mural) I did a residency in a mine in Yorkshire, Maltby Colliery, in 1981. And it must have been immediately after that. So it must have been 1981. He’d started squaring it up and drawing out the design. And he had some of the upper parts, some of the buildings where they come curving over at the top, the pliers flying through the air and the egg and some of the figures at the top of the mural. And he started drawing other elements of the design. And then I heard that the mural had been attacked and that it had graffiti daubed right across it – ‘British nationalism’ and ‘rights for whites’ or something like that in very big letters. I went over to a crisis meeting to talk with Dave and Vivien Lovell (from GLA) and I think there may have been somebody else there (from Tower Hamlets) and we talked about this terrible crisis. Dave was pretty agitated and very upset. I can’t remember in detail what he said but I think he said he couldn’t go on. So he quit the project, and I took it over.

I got in touch with Desmond Rochfort and said – I've got this huge project. Can you help? And I think he probably put me in touch with Ray Walker. I don't think Ray knew Desmond much, he might have known him slightly... I guess he (Desmond) knew of Ray. So we met up and we started talking about what needed to be done. In some ways I kind of relished it. It was a great opportunity for me – I relished the idea of taking it on. I was pretty inexperienced and I was probably biting off far more than I could chew. But I think in the end I managed to chew it. What happened, I guess, after that was that we had to renegotiate the whole project because the whole lower part of the mural – two thirds or three quarters of it had to be completely re-rendered. They had to remove the render and re-render it at enormous cost. I'm hazy about the details of how it was funded but the money came from a mixture of Gulbenkian, Arts Council, Tower Hamlets, The Edward Austin Abbey Fund* and the Greater London Arts Association. I think I was paid about five thousand quid or something. It was not much at the time, bugger-all really. I think I worked on the mural something like four days a week. And for nine months that wasn't much money.

We had to learn all about the technology of the Keim paint system. Desmond had some knowledge of it. He'd used it on the Royal Oak mural. But it was a steep learning curve nevertheless. We were in touch with Keim Kunstlerfarben in Germany, the paint manufacturing company that make this system. It's old technology which goes back to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. it's a kind of fresco technique. They had to take the mural back to the brick, re-render it with a porous render made from river-washed sand and lime.... finished with a wood float which was an open porous ground. Then it had to be primed with a calcined flint primer. The Keim paint was basically pure mineral pigment in suspension in water which you painted on to this porous ground and then you sprayed it – I think we had to leave it twenty-four hours – with a silicate solution which made it fuse with the ground. It was very permanent. But it was also very vulnerable to any oil-based material because it would soak into the substrate. And you couldn't use the Keim system on that. That's why the last time we repaired the mural, because we couldn't afford it, we had to use acrylic and paint over it, which is not satisfactory at all, which is why it's peeling now. I did explain that to them at the time – that it was only a temporary repair. That was in 1994! Ray repaired it once and I repaired it twice. Each repair was due to vandalism.

(The following relates to the first attack)

We had to wait a long time for the mural to be re-rendered. And then we got started at the start of 1982 or 1983. It was finished in 1983 and it took the best part of a year to paint. I don't know the origination of the idea for the mural or the involvement of the public art workshop, or with the Basement. I didn't have much contact with the Basement. When we were based there we were fairly isolated. We just had a little room and we went in there and worked on it. And a lot of the time we didn't necessarily coincide. Sometimes you'd be working on your own. We divided the mural up into sections. The lower part was divided into three sections. We got a very large piece of paper in the room in the basement of St. George's Town Hall and squared it up then we went away and did our drawings independently for our different sections and then brought them back and put them together on this big drawing. We re-drew it, researched it in terms of all the figures. The curved neck of the horse is definitely a motif which was in Dave Binnington's original idea. But it's not his

drawing. I took the design idea from it. Then we worked up the design on the basis of a lot of strong interlocking curves and diagonals, trying to keep it as dynamic as possible. The right-hand section from the edge of the parapet is all Desmond Rochfort. The central section, right up to the lorry and across to the figures on the mattress is all my section. I painted the figure in the white shirt (throwing a stone). And then from the brown horse to the left is Ray Walker's section. The top section we kind of repaired collectively between us. Quite a lot of it is Dave Binnington's original design. All the curved buildings and windows at the top are what remains of his original painting, which nevertheless had to be repaired. I remember Desmond did all this afresh – the gyrocopter, I think, had been sketched in and he painted it. This figure in the top left is recognisably one of Ray's figures. I painted all these figures across here. I was just getting a bit more confident in my work. That figure peeking over the mudguard is Desmond's. So this was a collective effort really.

Ray and I bonded, as they say. All three of us got on well but I think there was a stronger connection between Ray and I. We went to the pub next door, and we used to socialise. I'd go to his studio and we'd go out for a drink. I went for a weekend with him not that long before he died, with his wife Anna and the boy Roland. I remember Ray telling Roland to punch him in the stomach as hard as he could. And, of course, Ray's guts were like iron. He used to do martial arts. He was a short stocky guy but he used to do these very graceful, balletic, moves.

I sort of got them together. In terms of the design concept we were picking up on what Dave had done. The curve of the horse's neck and the way the distortion is curved derived from those ideas. The section of the mural that Ray painted was, I think, extremely good quality. His section is a beautiful piece of work. We pretty much saw ourselves as equal partners. I did see myself as pivotal because I was in the middle of the mural and I had to do a great deal of invention. In terms of researching the subject matter, for instance for the horses we went down and drew some old nags at the farm in the East End. The central horse's head, which I painted, is an amalgamation of the drawings I did at the farm and photos from racing newspapers. The figure with the white shirt I took from a contemporary photograph, but the original image was a quarter of an inch in the photo. I took it and blew it up and then posed in front of the mirror wearing a shirt to get the folds right - and the hand holding the stone and so on. We all made a huge contribution towards the mural, but none of us claimed ownership of it. We were extremely proud and extremely pleased with it, I have to say. The whole period we were working on it, which was about nine months or getting on for a year, was a fantastic time. It really was fun to do. It was a great moment in our lives and I think we were really pleased because it was a hell of an achievement.

You've got to remember when the scaffolding was up against the wall you had about six floors, or lifts, of scaffolding going up. So when you were working on it you never really saw the bloody thing! You literally couldn't see it. What you had to do was – to get a diagonal line like that of the chair, or the door or the wheels or whatever – you knew what you wanted but you had to climb all the way down the scaffold and walk a distance away to see if the diagonal needed to tilt a little bit more over to the left, then you'd have to go all the way back up, redraw it, come all the way back down and have another look. So it didn't half keep you fit. Battling the wind on the top of the scaffolding, you paint would get blown off, flying off, spattering all over for miles. It was very, very high.

We never went up the ladders, we used to go straight up the outside of the scaffolding - just used to grab hold of the poles and go straight up like a monkey. But once they fully got the scaffolding down and we could see it we realised that it was an uneasy mixture of styles. It is flawed, it's problematic. I think that we all probably realised that it's a piece of work which had to reconcile these four different artists and it would have been miraculous if it had been totally coherent. But bearing in mind the difficulties of integrating it I think we succeeded quite well really. We were pleased.

The first time I restored it was after it got paint-bombed. It was really, really bad. These gloss paint-bombs did terrible damage. They absorbed into the ground. That's why it's deteriorating now, because after we stripped it we found we had to use acrylic primer. We couldn't think of any other way of doing it. We would have used gloss but that would have done further damage. I worked on it then for a few months. It was quite a big job. I was working with Steve Rushton who was a colleague of mine who I roped in. Terrified the poor guy because we had two scaffold towers which were above the maximum height, higher than they ought to have been and they swayed frighteningly, especially if it was windy. We had outriders – braces, but it still felt a bit hairy. The British National Party was standing for election at the time and when the election actually happened we thought we'd better cover the mural up with tarpaulins. So we got these huge forty feet by forty feet tarpaulins and tried to put them up right across the mural to protect it on the day of elections. But it was a windy day and these tarpaulins started to get wrapped around the scaffold tower and we were nearly blown off. It was extremely scary. The tarpaulin would get whacked up against the thing. It was like a galleon. We were both very nearly killed. I don't know how we lived. We took terrible risks. I shouldn't have subjected poor Steve to that.

When I was working on it I went down the road to get fish and chips for lunch and when I came back I found that my car, which was parked near the mural, had white gloss paint poured all over it and all the tyres slashed. Then someone phoned the local paper and claimed to be from an organisation called C18* who were a pretty nasty paramilitary organisation, and said something like – We punctured his tyres and we would have punctured his lungs if he had been there. So they said they'd give us a police guard and so we had this copper who stood around at the bottom of the scaffolding for a bit and he said – Don't worry, we'll be here. But he was there for about a day or two, and then he disappeared. Sometimes Steve and I would be right up at the top of the scaffold tower working on the mural and we'd look down and we'd see these blokes in bomber jackets with the collars turned up and we'd think – Shit! They're going to shake the scaffolding tower and we'll fall off like bloody apples out of the tree. And then one day when we were looking down we saw this smart looking geezer turn up with three or four burly minders. Eventually I climbed down to see who they were. This guy was having his photograph taken in front of the mural and it turns out that he was one of Oswald Mosley's bodyguards. He must have been in his eighties. He was wearing a pinstripe suit and saying – I was there! The irony of that was just priceless.

The mural looked all right when we repaired it that time round. But I made it clear to them that it wouldn't last. And it hasn't. It's lasted quite well relatively. I had to completely repair that horse's head which is heartbreaking really, because what you see now is really an acrylic painting whereas the original painting in the Keim was

brighter and fresher. Then, when we'd repaired it, we had it coated with anti-graffiti paint from about half way down. And that has soaked in and darkened it somewhat. Also, at the top some of the colour has faded a bit. It's a terrible problem now, how to deal with it. It needs to be re-rendered in sections and completely re-painted unless I can research the paint technology, which has evolved and changed quite rapidly. There might be a resin-based paint that can be used which can retain some sort of brightness. The trouble is that it will reflect light – it will have a sheen.

When I was restoring it people in the street would make suggestions. I loved it. I loved that aspect. It was fantastic, people would keep turning up - from South Africa, somebody would come from Sweden, someone from Australia, Canada. They came from all over with their backpacks just to see the mural. So I was very pleased not just because of the mural as an artwork but because of its symbolic value. I loved the interaction. I never really wanted to be a so-called isolated easel-painter – although that's what I've tended to become more recently.

In 2009 I was one of the artists-in-residence in Daugavpils, which is the birthplace of the artist Mark Rothko (in 1903), in what is now Latvia. They're trying to create this big Rothko Centre. Rothko was Jewish and when he was nine he and his parents fled Eastern Europe. Being in Latvia did remind me of the huge suffering of people and it shouldn't be forgotten that for those people in Latvia it's still very fresh for them. Huge numbers were deported by the Germans to Poland, to the concentration camps and the labour camps in Germany in countless thousands and then the Russians came and more were deported to Siberia. And what's happening now in that part of Europe reminds us that these issues are hugely relevant.

When Farida Zaletilo, who is one of the prime movers who is developing the Rothko Centre in Daugavpils, was in England, I took her to see the mural. She's from Uzbekistan. Her father was deported to Siberia when she was about five and she didn't see him again for about fifteen years. He came back but died shortly afterwards. She's extremely conscious of the suffering of the Jews and the suffering inflicted by fascism in Latvia and all of that part of the world. I was showing her the mural and telling her a little bit about the history of it – how Mosley had tried to march through Stepney, then I suddenly looked at her and there were tears rolling down her face. Its symbolism is very real. The fact that it keeps attracting attacks by far-right groups proves that it's still a potent symbol.”