

A Resurrection

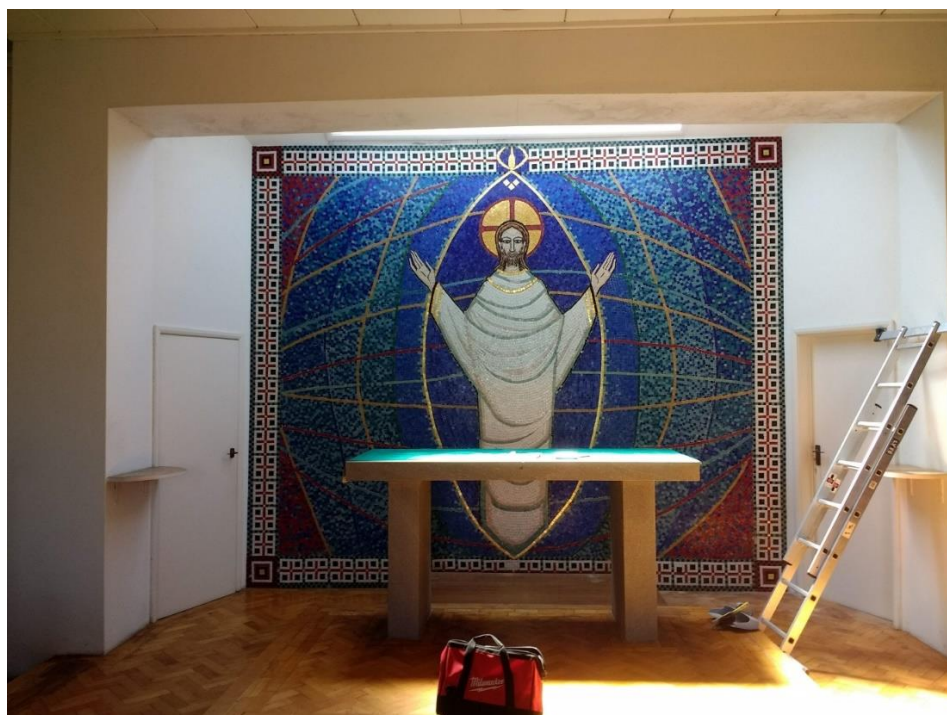
By Michael Rieveley: Rieveley Ceramics, www.rieveleyceramics.co.uk, 07747 394280 / 01286 650702

In spring 2018 I received an enquiry from David Hughes, director of Lawray Architects' Wrexham office, on behalf of the Catholic Diocese of Wrexham to investigate the possibility of moving a large mosaic from its current location in a church. A visit to assess the possible chances of a successful removal was the next step. Initially David Hughes was hoping to accompany me. However, arrangements were delayed and in June I and my assistant Alex Haycock went unaccompanied to view the mosaic.

The Church of the Resurrection of Our Saviour, Morfa Nefyn, in which the mosaic was housed, was built in 1968. In addition to the mosaic were 12 *dalle de verre* windows. They had all been commissioned specifically for the site from the late artist Jonah Jones (1919–2004), a prominent artist in Wales where he was particularly influential. Examples of his commissioned and private work can be found in buildings, public and private collections throughout the UK. The church had been closed in 2016 due to a lack of congregation and the site and building put up for sale. It was now due for demolition.

It is to the credit of the Diocese that they recognised and valued the importance of preserving such relatively modern work of both religious and artistic significance from an abandoned building, and were also willing to fund their removal, with the intention of providing new locations for them.

On entering the church for the first time, the windows were boarded over. But in the centre of the church on the recessed wall behind the main altar, illuminated by an overhead skylight, the scale of the mosaic, the luminescence of the glass tesserae and its striking appearance were immediately apparent.



The mosaic began at floor level. Rising to 3.55 metres and 4.25 metres in width, it was made up of around half a million glass tesserae. The mosaic was attached to a cement-rendered brick wall, which was structural and supported the main roof. Having surveyed the mosaic and investigated the method of attachment and the substrate, we were also able to take with us four of the glass tesserae that were loose and could be easily removed for closer inspection, from which we would be able to investigate the method of fixing.

My firm, Rieveley Ceramics, sent a report back to David Hughes indicating several options for removing the mosaic, with recommendations as to which option would have the best outcome in preserving the mosaic, along with the practical issues and an assessment of the environmental impact. At this point we had developed a basic understanding of how we would achieve the objective, though it would require a great deal of further research and trial runs before any attempt to remove the mosaic itself could begin. A requested estimate of the cost accompanied the report. Given the unknowns and the complexity, our estimation was necessarily “ball park”. Shortly after, I was asked to provide an additional costing for reinstalling the mosaic at a yet undecided location, and a further “ball park” estimation was sent. It was with some relief, not a little surprise and a degree of pride that our initial guesses proved overall to be remarkably accurate.

A period of waiting took place while decisions were taken by the Diocese. In December a meeting between David Hughes, the project manager for the new building in which the mosaic was to be rehoused, and ourselves was arranged at the church in Morfa Nefyn. It was there that Rieveley Ceramics received formal instruction to proceed with the removal and eventual reinstallation of the Jonah Jones mosaic. The question of timing was discussed, and the chosen new location was revealed to be a newly built Catholic school in Rhyl, which would be ready to have the mosaic installed around July 2019.

While this allowed plenty of time, we were then told that the developer who had purchased the Morfa Nefyn church site was believed to be anxious to gain possession. Although we had carried out some work on the basic principles of a removal, a lot more work was required to evolve the method fully before we could be confident of a successful outcome. It is common when working in the commercial sector that time limits introduce new complications, although, given goodwill on all sides, these matters can generally be resolved. This was the case here, and we were given roughly three months to complete the removal: a tight but not impossible deadline, under the circumstances.

The removal of some half-million individual pieces of glass tesserae and their transfer onto a portable backing that would allow reassembly while maintaining the integrity of the artwork were challenging. I consulted with colleagues and carried out extensive research but was unable to find any records of something of the same nature having ever been done previously. There was nothing for it but to set about trialling the method we had devised by ourselves until we were fully satisfied that we had found a workable solution.

The first section of the mosaic was taken down on 11th February 2019, with further sections following. By 13th March we were able to transport the mosaic from the church back to our base in Caernarfon for storage, minor repairs and preparation for its reinstallation.

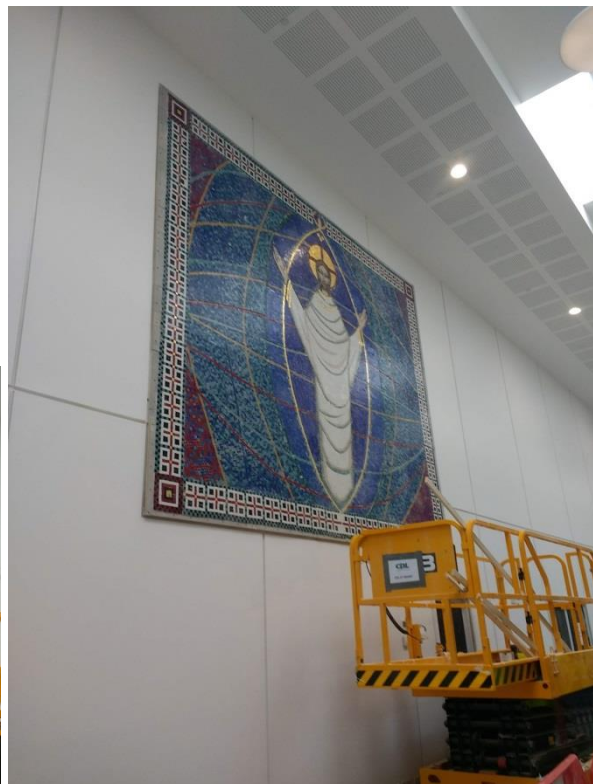
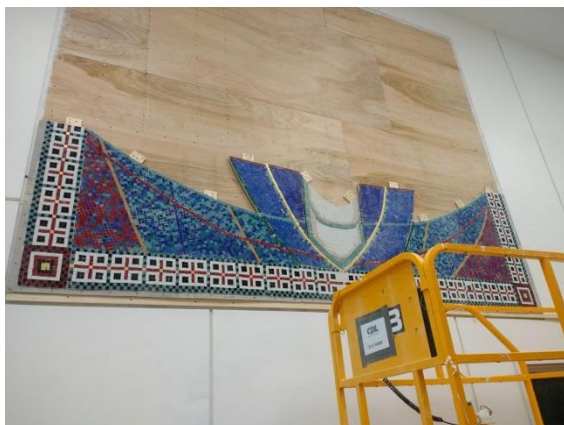


On 8th July 2019 the reinstallation phase got underway as we transported the mosaic to Rhyl. A decision had been taken to place the mosaic in an elevated position, requiring the use of a MEWP (mobile elevated working platform) and a skilled operator. Knowing that many modern buildings have a limited lifespan and that the mosaic might one day need to be relocated yet again, I had made the suggestion that provision for this possibility should become part of our brief.

Consequently, the mosaic is now divided into twelve sections, with the internal edges echoing the linear curves that are apparent in the design.



The sections were lifted into place with the base of the mosaic being just under three metres above floor level. The lower sections were the first to be secured, allowing the next level to be put in position and secured, and so on until the upper sections were put in place, reaching to a full height of over six metres from the ground. The odd dislodged tesserae were then put back in position before a final cleaning of the mosaic surface was undertaken and our work on the *Christ the Holy Redeemer* mosaic by Jonah Jones, at its new location, the Christ the Word Catholic School, Rhyl, was completed.



The conserving of this mosaic was very much a collaboration between the organisations and individuals involved and the help of many others from whom advice was sought. Special thanks must go to the following:

The Catholic Diocese of Wrexham; David Hughes, Director of Lawray Architects' Wrexham office; Martin Walsh, Project Manager of Kier Construction, and also Graham Bellis; Lesley Durbin of

Jackfield Conservation Studios (Emeritus ICON); David Townsend Jones, Peter Jones and Naomi Trodden of Scene and Word Ltd (all of whom are Jonah Jones's children); Gareth Jenkins; and, last but not least, Alex Haycock, whose hard work and dedication enabled a successful conclusion.

The twelve *dalle de verre* windows were removed separately from the Morfa Nefyn church to be restored and then put into a new location by Owen Luetchford and Stacey Poultney from the Architectural Glass Centre at the Swansea College of Art, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.



Further information about the artist Jonah Jones can be found online at the following links:

http://www.sceneandword.org/cofio_jonah_jones/

<https://www.artandchristianity.org/jonah-jones-morfa-nefyn>

All photographs by courtesy of Michael Rieveley