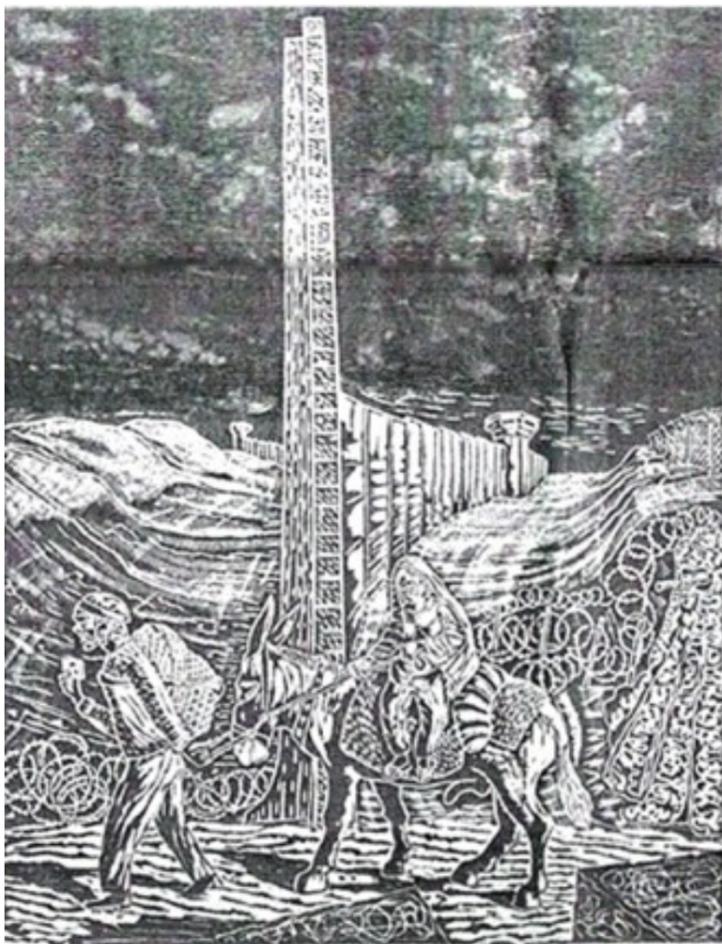


We few, we happy few.

Five contemporary artists, whose religious work can be found in churches and cathedrals across the UK, and who often compete for the same commissions, support one another in an informal fraternity. Simon Jenkins joins the brothers in Suffolk.



Brothers in art: above: left to right: Mark Cazalet, Nicholas Mynheer, Thomas Denny, and Roger Wagner; left: *To Bethlehem, linocut and chine*, by Mark Cazalet

A GROUP of artists go to Bunhill Fields, in London, to visit the grave of William Blake, and gather at his memorial headstone. The stone announces vaguely that the poet and artist is buried "near by"; so they ask an attendant to point out the exact spot.

"He's buried in that bit of grass over there," they are told, "16 layers down, in a pauper's grave." The grass, unmarked by a stone, is now a spot where children play.

The visit to Blake's resting place is part of a day's pilgrimage, during which the group travel across London from the room in a West End house where "Jerusalem" and *Songs of Innocence* were written, to Westminster Abbey, where the young Blake sketched many of the tombs, to make engravings.

The artists - Nicholas Mynheer, Mark Cazalet, Thomas Denny, Roger Wagner, and Richard Kenton Webb (who is unable to join us) - have been creating art works in a rich variety of media since the 1980s, but it is only in the past decade that they have come together in a sort of accidental brotherhood.

Accidental, that is, in that the group came into being only when two or three of them kept bumping into each other at exhibitions frequently enough to become friends, and then realised the value of meeting regularly.

Despite its current all-male membership, which is not intentional, the brothers have at least one sister, in the form of the Anglican nun and art historian Sister Wendy Beckett, who has admired and supported several of the artists individually over many years, and has encouraged them to meet. In return, Sister Wendy is highly esteemed by these artists, who believe that she was significant in re-establishing the importance of sacred subject-matter in art.

I CATCH up with four members of the brotherhood when they gather at Snape Maltings, in Suffolk, set among the whispering reed-beds

Mark Cazalet

Cazalet trained at Chelsea, and then Falmouth College of Art, before going on to post-graduate scholarship in Paris and India. The experience of working abroad expanded his references, materials, and

ways of working, laying the foundation for a richly diverse body of work. He has undertaken many commissions for churches and cathedrals, working in textiles, glass, murals and mosaic.

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along the River Alde. They are getting together for an exhibition, "The Ocean in a Tree": with paintings, prints, and drawings by two of their number, Roger Wagner and Mark Cazalet.

The Maltings' cavernous old buildings are now home to galleries, shops, and restaurants, as well as the

concert hall, which is an important venue in the Aldeburgh Festival. Fortunately, though, the Crown Inn is just a short walk up the road, and after we all meet in the Maltings' park - a jolly affair, as the friends are clearly thrilled to see each other - we set off through the fields. I fall in with Cazalet, a painter, and we

prepared to declare their Christianity. "I think all of us, to various degrees, have found that a fairly serious stumbling block in our careers," he says.

Nicholas Mynheer explains to me how the group spend their days together - sometimes travelling to the places where a significant artist or writer once lived and worked, at other times visiting each other's studios to see creative work in progress.

THE group's first outing was to Bedfordshire, to visit sites connected with John Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Since then, they have had days devoted to Theodore Powys (a mystical novelist of the 1920s and '30s), the metaphysical poets George Herbert and Thomas Traherne, the painter Stanley Spencer, and others.

"We're very different as people and as artists as well," Mynheer says. "On the Bunyan day, we all turned up, without telling each other, with a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. I had my grandfather's penny-halfpenny copy, while at the other extreme Roger had a copy about which even the museum people said, 'Wow, that's a first edition, hand-coloured!' It included some pages that had been coloured by Roger when he was about six. It was very funny that each of us had a copy, but all of them different."

In the pub, we settle comfortably around a large table for talk, beer, and lunch. I ask them what is the common denominator i. t. writers and artists they choose to spend their days on.

"They're heroes of ours," Wagner says. "One of our inspirations was the book *Divine Landscapes*, by Ronald Blythe (Features, 2 November). He included the places associated with Herbert, Bunyan, and others, in his book, and we started off by following in his footsteps."

"We could go together to major museums, art fairs, and collections," Cazalet says, "but I think the model we've evolved has a pilgrimage element about it." Mynheer says: "It was certainly extraordinary, walking across the countryside on the *Pilgrim's Progress* and Bunyan day. That felt very special."

Meeting together has led to some creative collaborations, different combinations of the artists working together. Mynheer has recently begun work on an altar for Mirfield, where it is hoped that Cazalet will create a glass chapel. Wagner and Mynheer have designed and made a cover for the Romanesque font in Iffley Church, near Oxford. "In practical ways, we can be terribly useful to one other," Denny says. "When I was working on the Millennium window for Durham Cathedral, Mark and Richard came down and spent a while looking at my figures - and it was only then that I realised I hadn't seen a catastrophic fault in proportion ... The length of the arms - they were too stunted." Helaughs. "That, of course, would have been accentuated to a monstrous degree when you were looking up at the window." AS I listen to them talking around the table, I reflect that, for a group of artists to become a brotherhood, there ought to be some sort of manifesto. That was certainly the case for the Pre-Raphaelite

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'Part of getting together is maybe admitting that on your own you're very lonely'

quickly start talking about faith and art.

All five artists have created works for sacred spaces, ranging from parish churches to great cathedrals, and three of them work extensively in response to church commissions. I ask Cazalet what value there is in, for him, in meeting together as a group.

"Part of getting together is maybe admitting that on your own you're very lonely," he says. "There's a great deal of comfort in being together, because you do share the issues you're facing. Commissions come with tremendous baggage, unexpected frustrations, and bizarre delays; so talking about it all is very important for me."

Are they consciously religious in their work; I ask "Absolutely, yes, and unashamedly," he says. I suggest that it is rare to find artists who are