

ST PAUL'S  
EPISCOPAL

## English Altar

*By the Rev. D. Dixon Kinser, Rector*

St. Paul's is a one-of-a-kind architectural treasure. Our 1928 nave is one of the finest examples of Ralph Adams Cram's gothic revival work. Yet, did you know that one of the most distinctive features of the whole church is our high altar? You see, Cram gave St. Paul's an "English altar."

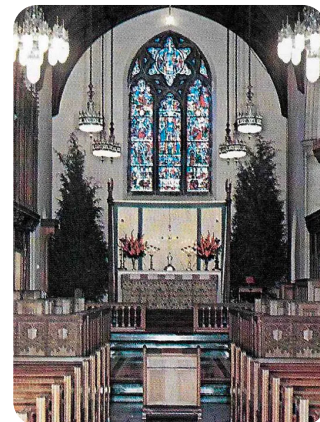
"English altar" is a name that came to be used to describe what is, perhaps, the most common form of church altar in ecclesiastical history. It is an altar, affixed to the east wall of the sanctuary, that is surrounded on three sides by curtains. The rear curtain, called the dossal (from the French word *dos* meaning "back") spans the entire rear width of the altar while the side curtains, called riddels, hang on rods that project out from the rear wall. Those rods are supported at their ends by tall "riddel posts" on which were set sconces for tapers. Depictions of these altars can be found throughout paintings from the middle ages because their popularity extended all over Europe.

The reason these are now known as "English altars" has to do with the Reformation, during which many of the ornaments of the church were considered theologically inappropriate and even dangerous. Consequently, there was a great scourging of medieval art and decoration from churches because it was seen as too Catholic. By the time of the Counter-Reformation, when decoration came back into churches more modern, Baroque tastes prevailed on the continent. The English, however, took a more of restorative approach, bringing back the classic altar with its dossal and riddel curtains. Consequently, these altars came to be called "English" by virtue of the fact that the greatest concentration of them reemerged in churches on the British Isles.

When Cram designed St. Paul's current sanctuary in 1928 he gave us one of these altars. I didn't realize how profound this was until I spoke to the late Marc Bryson, St. Paul's parishioner and former president of the Forsyth County Historical Association. Marc explained to me that Cram did very few of these altars in the United States and that St. Paul's is one of only two or three places in the world where you can find this kind of altar in a Cram church. That makes our most special worship space even more special.



*Eastertide 1939*



*Christmas 1959*

I've included pictures that our archives team has found, showing the high altar in its English configuration. These are from the late 1930s and the 1950s. You can see the dossal and riddel curtains in many different colors, and it seems Cram's original design included an "English" configuration for the side altar as well. Based on what the archives team can deduce from photographic evidence, the riddels were taken down and the riddel posts were moved back and affixed to the wall sometime in the mid-1960s, leaving only the rear dossal curtain.

On Sunday, November 4, 2018, parishioners encountered the high altar restored to Cram's original vision. All the original pieces were still there and a small committee worked with local craftsmen to move the riddel posts back into their forward position (the holes remained in the marble from where they used to be) and to fashion new curtain rods. The Ecclesiastical Arts Committee chose the fabrics for the new dossal and riddel curtains.



*Restored High Altar*

Our prayer is that restoring our high altar to its English configuration will allow a new generation of parishioners to enjoy the grandeur of St. Paul's according to Cram's original vision. But more so, we pray that all this work will open our hearts to worship God more fully and faithfully as we join God's mission of healing the world. And that is something Cram would have envisioned when he built St. Paul's.



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