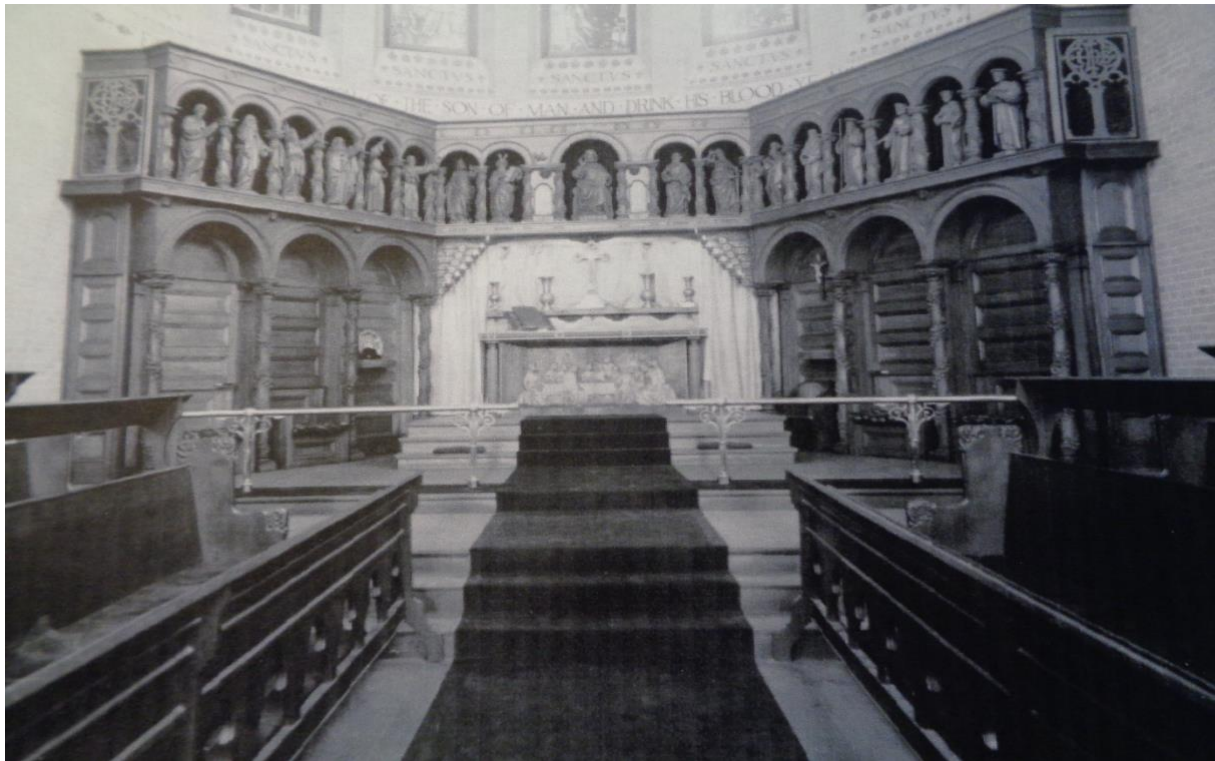


From Arts & Architecture: The Cornforth Family

When our first Dean, H. Martyn Hart, arrived in Denver in 1879, he was welcomed by a small group of parishioners from the little Church of Saint John's in the Wilderness. Having moved from a dusty room above a saloon to a small wooden church, they witnessed Hart's dynamic energy as he fostered the growth of the congregation and in just a few years brought about the construction of a magnificent Victorian Romanesque cathedral. The dean's plans for the interior of that great structure included the creation and installation of a large carved oak reredos behind the altar. According to a local newspaper at the time, he had made a study of carved woodwork, and chose to have the reredos, filled with figures of saints and prophets, carved in Oberammergau, Austria. Its renowned carver was Joseph Mayr, who personified the Christ in several of the Passion Plays. His son-in-law, Peter Rendl, who had played the part of St. John, carved the pillars of the reredos, which were entwined with vine branches and bunches of grapes. The Dean explained that the whole idea represented the assertion of our Lord, 'I am the vine; ye are the branches'. He also planned for a "frieze to surmount the entire structure, which is to be carved with bunches of grapes hung from vine branches and leaves." (Denver Republican, 12/12/01)

All but three of the carved figures had been installed in the reredos by 1903, when sudden disaster struck the cathedral. We have heard the stories about the massive fire that demolished that grand structure, and the brave rescue of stained glass, the reredos wall and also the carved figures—some actually carried out by Dean Hart himself. In a surprisingly short length of time, the vestry was able to secure the present property in Capitol Hill, and soon a temporary Chapter House was built, containing classrooms and meeting spaces. The rescued treasures were stored there until the new cathedral was completed.

This photograph of the apse in the newly opened cathedral, taken in 1911, shows the restored oak reredos wall with all the figures in their places. No frieze above the reredos has yet been added there.



Compare that photo with a current view of the reredos, with a row of elaborate gothic carvings surmounting the reredos wall.



Obviously, the carvings do not appear to be the “frieze” of grapes and vine branches that the Dean had mentioned, but how these carvings came to be installed, and the Dean’s approval of them, leads us to a story of a family whose long history of service and devotion to Saint John’s Cathedral begins with entries from Vestry minutes in 1914;

*“To the Dean and Vestry of Saint John’s Cathedral,
Gentlemen: will you be good enough to accept from my Mother and myself certain carvings from Oberammergau for the completion of the reredos.*

*Truly yours,
Bertie B. Cornforth”*

From February 3:

“Designs were submitted for decorating the reredos”.

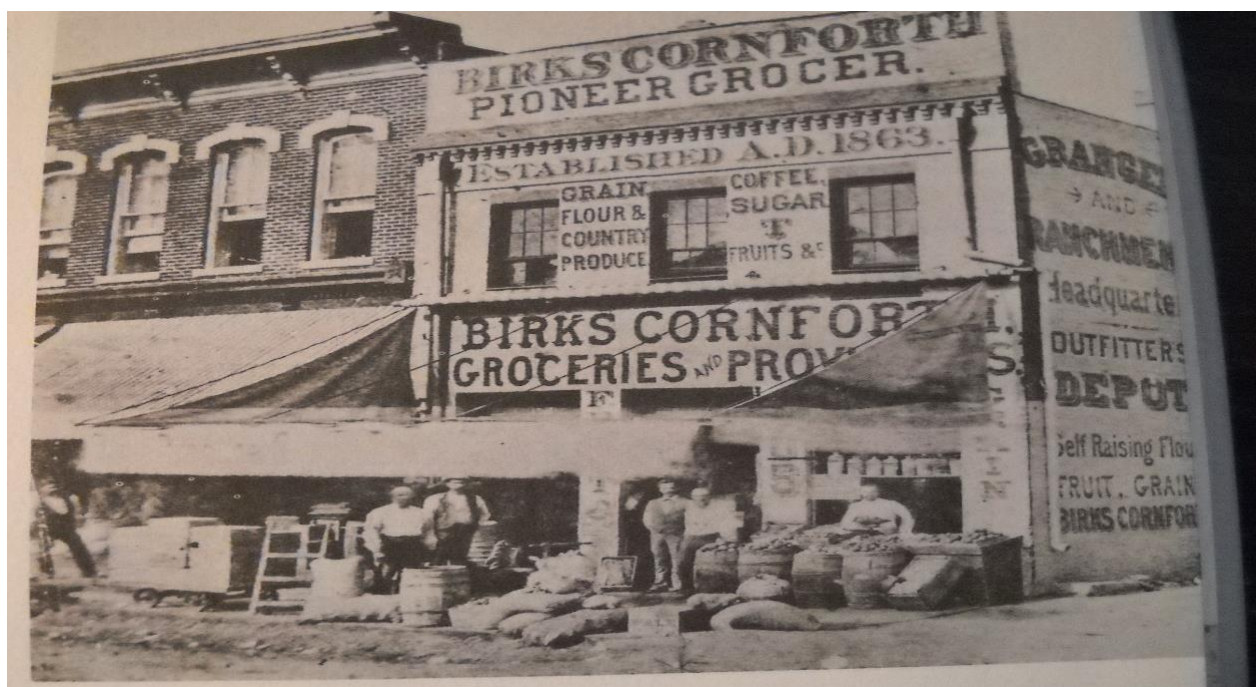
From July 26:

“The Dean and Vestry accept with much pleasure the gift of carved wood for the completion of the reredos, presented by Mrs. and Miss Cornforth....He (Dean Hart) also stated that the carvings which would complete the reredos were ready but it was necessary that a letter from the donors (Mrs. and Miss Cornforth) proffering the same, together with a letter from the Dean and Vestry accepting the same, should be sent.”

From these notes, we know when and how the Gothic carvings were added to the top of the reredos, with the obvious blessing of Dean Hart, but there is another interesting and enlightening story about the donors whose generous contribution made the carvings possible.

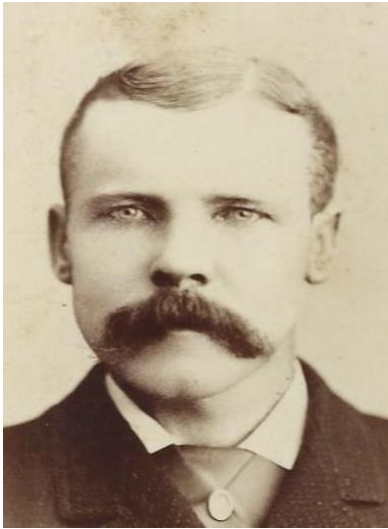
The Cornforth family story begins with Birks Cornforth, born in Macclesfield, England in 1837. He worked as a young man in dry-goods houses, and in 1858 emigrated with his sister and two brothers to Sumner, Kansas where they established a grocery business. Birks often traveled west to Denver with cattle trains loaded with merchandise, and in 1860 he decided to make Denver his home. Returning to England in 1862, Birks married his childhood sweetheart, Caroline Cooper, and brought her back to Denver, where he began his own grocery business. As good Anglicans, Birks and Caroline became members of the small church of Saint John's in the Wilderness, whose priest, Horace B. Hitchings had just arrived. Their eldest daughter Carrie was baptized by Hitchings in 1864.

As the years passed, the Cornforth business grew, and was listed in the Denver Directory as "Birks Cornforth Wholesale & Retail Green fruit, wine, Liquors, cigars, etc." A Denver resident at the time remembered the Cornforth grocery store: "Birks was an Englishman and his store was filled with the best potted foods his native land could send him for the delectation of palates of the many English here." Another reminiscence states "Birks fitted up one of the finest retail stores in America and filled it with the choicest goods to be had for money, all displayed in the most attractive manner."



Denver Public Library Western Collection

Birks was not only a successful businessman, but also served as a director of Denver's Freight Tariffs & Transportation Standing Committee, and was a member of the prestigious Society of Colorado Pioneers, founded to recognize and assist pioneers who arrived prior to 1861.



Birks Cornforth



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

In 1880, a young clerk, George Knifton, began work at the Cornforth grocery. We can imagine that in the following years he must have grown close to the family, for on November 2, 1882, he and Carrie Cornforth were married by Dean Hart in his grand new cathedral—the first wedding to be held there. The Cornforth family continued to be steadfast in their devotion and service to St. John’s. A document, found in the base of the baptismal font from the first Cathedral, lists baptized children and includes the names of the other three Cornforth children: Alfred Gaskell, Bertie Randall, and Elsie Barber. Birks had been serving on the Saint John’s vestry since the early 1870’s in both the old church and later in the first cathedral, and son-in-law George Knifton continued the tradition, serving on the vestry from 1897 to 1908. He was also head of the ushers in both the old and new cathedral, and daughters Bertie and Carrie were commended for the “admirable work done by them” in the Ladies Aid Society.

Not only do we have the many written records of the active presence of the Cornforth family at Saint John’s, but in addition to the loving gift of the reredos carvings, there are also colorful stained glass memorials added to their contributions to the beauty of the cathedral, as well as their long years of devotion. In the north windows of Memorial Hall, the figure of St. Mark, the winged lion-- one of the four glowing medallions created by Connick Studios representing the four Gospel writers—has at its base the words “George Henry Knifton 1856-1934 Carrie Cornforth Knifton 1863-1949”.



And on the west wall of our beautiful St. Francis chapel, the brilliant stained glass panels by artist Edgar Britton, portraying the Annunciation and Nativity, were given by daughter Elsie Cornforth Armstrong “To the glory of God and in memory of Birks and Caroline Cornforth.”



In an obituary written by Dean Hart in 1906, he remembers “In 1862 our friend Dr. Hitchings took charge of the parish, and it was in the following year that Mr. Cornforth brought his bride to Denver, and ever since that time he has been a liberal supporter, a constant attendant and a regular communicant. For eleven years he served on the Vestry. I remember him well as I passed through in 1872, and when I came again in 1879 to look over the prospect (*Hart had been invited to become the rector at St. John's*) it was his sanguine expectation and liberal offer of \$1,000 to build a new church, which had no little influence in deciding me to come; and ever since that day he has been a staunch friend and ready helper.”

From the earliest days of the Church of Saint John's in the Wilderness, through the building of two cathedrals, we have been blessed with the long service and devotion of the members of the Cornforth family.

May they rest in peace.

