

## “A triumph of art” or “blatant vulgarity”: The Reception of Scott and Skidmore’s Screens

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## Conserving and Restoring the Hereford Screen

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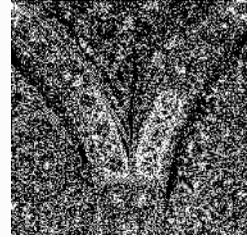
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# “A triumph of art” or “blatant vulgarity”: The Reception of Scott and Skidmore’s Screens

One object by **Alicia Robinson**



## Abstract

This article provides a broad narrative of how the screens designed by architect and designer George Gilbert Scott and made by metalworker Francis Skidmore for the cathedrals of Hereford, Lichfield, and Salisbury, have been regarded since they were produced. It examines debates surrounding removal, retention and rescue, and the twists and turns in the reception history of the Hereford Screen in particular. The article quotes lesser-known voices who influenced the fate of the Hereford Screen, and draws on new research conducted in the archives of Hereford Cathedral and Lichfield Cathedral. An index describing some of the documentation relating to the history of the Hereford Screen in the cathedral archive is available at the bottom of this article as a downloadable appendix.

## Objects of Debate

At the time of their making, exhibition, and first installation, the three major ironwork cathedral screens created by George Gilbert Scott in collaboration with Francis Skidmore, for Hereford (1862), Lichfield (1861), and Salisbury (1870), were regarded as magnificent creations.<sup>1</sup> However, by the middle of the twentieth century they aroused strong and sharply divided opinions. The three screens had contrasting fates and afterlives. Many views were aired in public, and there was also much debate behind the scenes.

The role of screens in cathedrals and churches has been fiercely debated for centuries. They have been variously in and out of favour in terms of style, and as a means of providing separation and visual porosity—or indeed the opposite—depending on material and construction. When the Hereford Screen was exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition in London (prior to its installation in the cathedral), its caption in the accompanying publication considered the screen in the context of the long early history of open screens, from Constantine’s conversion until the twelfth century, after which “they were altered into solid walls.”<sup>2</sup>

In erecting the new screen at Hereford in the position he chose, Scott recorded that he felt “at liberty (I am not sure how justified) to adopt an arrangement founded rather upon utility than history”, clearly giving priority to the way the cathedral worked at the time over historical authenticity.<sup>3</sup> Scott’s promotion of ironwork as a suitable material in this context was also

thoroughly modern, and was generally well-received by contemporaries when the screens were unveiled and in the decades immediately following. Writing in about 1880, the author of a guidebook to the region is one of many at the time who admired the Hereford Screen, describing it as “one of the greatest works in metal in the world”; and as an innovative work of art that served liturgical needs while also respecting its historical surroundings:

*The Screen, which is entirely of wrought metal work, the metals used being iron, brass and copper, is a triumph of art. It illustrates the Ascension of our Lord; and the beauty of the work, its position and office in the Cathedral, and its structural qualities, cause it to harmonise well with the grand Norman work by which it is surrounded . . . It is one of the largest works of art, in metal, in the world, and redounds to the credit of both its designer, Sir G. G. Scott, and its maker, Mr. Skidmore.*<sup>4</sup>

The debate about cathedral screens heated up in the twentieth century and three key factors combined to mitigate against the preservation of screens in general, and of the Hereford Screen in particular: taste, function, and condition. In *Country Life* an article in 1960 was entitled “Screens or Vistas in Cathedrals?”, followed by one on the “cleavage of opinion about cathedral screens”.<sup>5</sup> Reservations about aesthetics came to a head, combined with changes of liturgy, meaning that the separation created by screens was no longer thought desirable. Moreover, the cleaning and maintenance of screens posed a difficulty from very early on. At Hereford, Skidmore was asked to quote for cleaning and repairs of the screen as early as 25 June 1875 (presumably largely from the effect of gas light). Cleaning the lower and upper parts of the screen was added to the duties of the vergers and under-sexton respectively.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-1960s, the Dean reported that the screen was “thoroughly dilapidated and corroded”.<sup>7</sup>

## The Removal of the Hereford Screen

Reservations about the Hereford Screen were expressed from the outset, including by Scott himself.<sup>8</sup> In the publication accompanying the 1862 International Exhibition mentioned above, the designer and maker were praised, but it was commented that the use of the screen “in a church where the Protestant service is performed seems more than questionable”.<sup>9</sup> References to its possible removal were made as early as 1934, when the Central Council for the Care of Churches advised the Dean, following his request for their counsel, that it “would not view with favour the removal of the screen”.<sup>10</sup> But the Friends of the Cathedral vigorously lobbied the Dean from 1935, keeping up the pressure for the removal of the screen. While the Dean was clear that the debate was “too much an issue of national importance to allow ourselves to be guided by local opinion”,<sup>11</sup> the Bishop described the screen as “a great many shams”.<sup>12</sup> In 1936 the Central Council urged extreme caution, and expressed the view that the removal of the screen might be approved if considered as part of a wider scheme to reinstate the choir in the position which it originally occupied.<sup>13</sup> The Central Council visited in 1939, at the request of the Dean and Chapter, and reported that they were:

*strongly and unanimously of the opinion that the screen ought not under any circumstances to be destroyed [sic]; preferably it should be retained in an honourable position in the Cathedral, or removed to another building if this were not possible. It is a characteristic production of a famous architect and well-known metal craftsman, designed for the Cathedral, carried out in lavish manner, and worthy of preservation as a fine piece of work of its period. Future generations may well appreciate it more highly than many to-day.*<sup>14</sup>

By 1952 the Central Council had “an enormous file” on the screen.<sup>15</sup> The Royal Fine Art Commission was also consulted, recording their discussion at a meeting in January 1949 with the

Dean about the screen obstructing processions and causing a loss of “contact” between choir and congregation. Later that month, however, the commissioners wrote a letter adhering to their opinion that the screen should stay in situ (figs. 1 and 2). They cited reasons for its suitability, such as its “sympathy with the ‘jewelled’ character of the stained-glass windows” and the ability of a screen to create “that sense of recession so important in a mediaeval building”. Exhibiting perhaps a heightened sense of historical self-awareness, they also mentioned the importance of protecting building elements of historic interest, a principle that they argued “applies especially to a work of a period which is suffering an ‘aesthetic eclipse’”.<sup>16</sup>

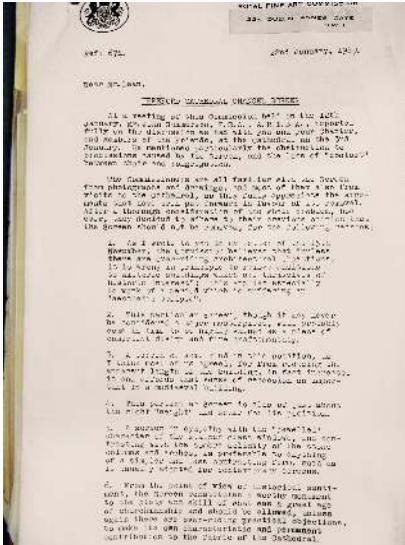


Figure 1  
Letter from Royal Fine Art Commission to the Dean of Hereford Cathedral, page 1 of 2, 1949. Collection of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives.

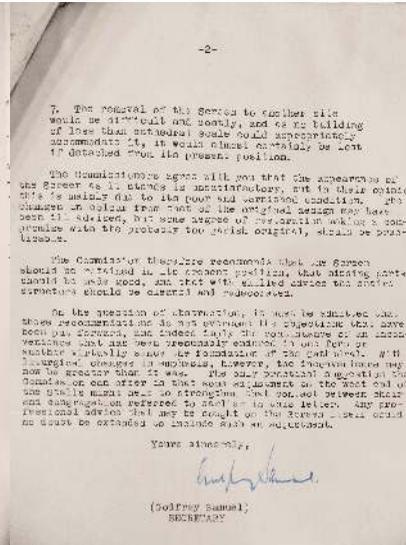


Figure 2  
Letter from Royal Fine Art Commission to the Dean of Hereford Cathedral, page 2 of 2, 1949. Collection of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives.

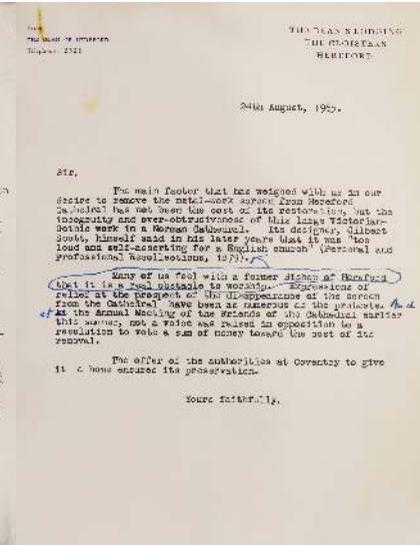


Figure 3  
Letter from Dean Robert Peel Price, Hereford Cathedral, to the authorities at Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, 29 August 1965. Collection of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives.

In April 1959, after a parallel campaign arguing for its own removal, Salisbury’s screen was taken down, establishing a significant precedent for Hereford. Canon Ralph Dawson, the Treasurer, had the decisive role and seems to have been proud of his influence.<sup>17</sup> Momentum surrounding the Hereford campaign accelerated, and in July 1964 the intention to remove the Hereford Screen was first announced at a meeting of the Friends of the Cathedral. In June 1965 the decision was agreed, provoking widespread and heated public debate. A letter written by the Dean of Hereford in August 1965 (fig. 3) reports that the Friends of the Cathedral had unanimously approved the decision, and gives two main reasons: that the screen was “a real obstacle to worship” and the “incongruity and over-obtrusiveness of this large Victorian-Gothic work in a Norman Cathedral.”<sup>18</sup>

On 10 June 1965 Cyril Scott of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry wrote that he was anxious to acquire the screen. The £2,000 purchase price requested was almost entirely for dismantling and transport. On 9 March 1966 Jane Fawcett of the Victorian Society wrote that they could “only contemplate removal if preservation in entirety” was assured, and the Art

Gallery confirmed by a letter of 15 July 1966 that they wanted the entire screen as the highlight of a new museum on the industrial history of Coventry.

The Cathedrals Advisory Committee (CAC) Chair wrote to the Dean about the “spate of protests”, but the Dean of Salisbury confidentially lobbied the Dean of Hereford against the CAC. Quoting Canon Dawson, he reported that the Salisbury Screen was “still in Salisbury and cherished by the Sarum ironworks”, run by Mr Shergold.<sup>19</sup> Numerous letters sent to *The Times* in February and March 1966 included those by Sir John Betjeman and Sir Nikolaus Pevsner writing in favour of the screen. A local architect passionately argued for its restoration, and Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, Architecture Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, wrote a bitter and long article headlined “Hereford’s Pride and the Destroyers”,<sup>20</sup> while the Architectural Correspondent of *The Times* described it as “a most beautiful example of its kind and in very good condition”.

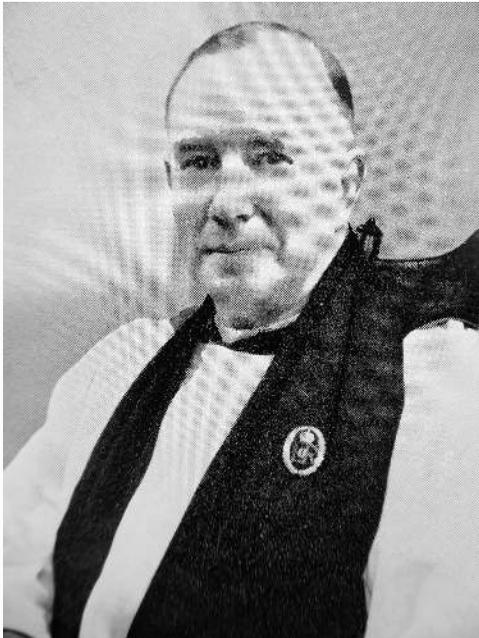


Figure 4

Photograph of Dean Robert Peel Price, reproduced in the 34th Annual Report of the Friends of Hereford Cathedral, 30th April 1968. Collection of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives. Digital image courtesy of Hereford Cathedral Library and Archives.

However, the Vicar of Holt in Norfolk represented the opposing view in his relief to have clergy in charge and not “the cacophony” of Victorian societies. Canon Dawson wrote to *The Times* of the “depressing enormity” of the screen, describing it as “a purely Victorian fabrication which was a mistake when it was put up and is a mistake now”, and of its “spiky, blatant vulgarity”.<sup>21</sup> Using the wider context of Scott and Skidmore’s careers to undermine their aesthetic judgment, he also argued that “the fact [they] placed the same type of screen in such diverse settings as Salisbury, Hereford, Worcester, Durham, Ely and else in itself proves their own architectural insensitivity.”<sup>22</sup> Early in February 1967 the screen was taken down. Some expressed relief. Mary Moorman, wife of the Bishop of Ripon, wrote, “Thank heaven the Dean and Chapter of Hereford are at last removing the monstrosity which has long disfigured the Cathedral there.”<sup>23</sup> In the opinion of the current Canon Treasurer, Dean Price was left “a broken man” by the whole issue. He resigned on 30 April 1968 to work in

Bournemouth and it was reported that “Local people will know that the controversy this event caused was much greater in London than in Hereford.”<sup>24</sup>

Henshaw & Son of Edinburgh was asked to dismantle the screen, and they packed the approximately 14,000 component parts with newspaper and straw into forty-six crates which they delivered on 16 March 1967 to the Herbert Gallery. However, the industrial history display in which the screen was to be included was never realized, and the screen remained in store in Coventry before once again being brought to public attention in the early 1980s. Shortly thereafter, it was given to the V&A, arriving still in its original crates in 1983, and found to be in need of considerable work.

Thus began the most expensive fundraising campaign ever mounted by the V&A for the restoration of one object: in the region of £850,000 was needed, with a further £25,000 for the

lighting scheme that was installed. As part of the fundraising campaign and the 1991–4 project to redisplay the ironwork galleries with the screen at the central point, the V&A commissioned a stencil to be designed and painted on the wall for which the screen was destined, with just its electroformed figures on display (fig. 5). By 1999, the necessary funds had been raised and the restoration, reassembly, and redisplay of the screen was then carried out. Almost four decades after its removal from Hereford Cathedral, the resurrection of the screen was completed, and celebrated with an “unveiling” on 24 May 2001.



Figure 5

John Ronayne, *Design model, to scale, for redisplay of Hereford screen, and for a full-size mural of screen to be stencil-painted onto gallery wall*, pen and brown ink, relief figures in card painted with gold paint, mounted within thick white cardboard box frame, London, 1992 (part of V&A Ironwork galleries redisplay project 1991-94), Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Inv. NCOL.93-2017). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

Having survived a complicated reception history, the screen is now the highlight of the ironwork galleries at the V&A, directly overlooking the Main Entrance (fig. 6). After decades of debate and controversy, this collaborative creation, visually referencing the past but modern in much of its manufacture, is once again considered a masterpiece of metalworking. The screen is regarded, studied, and enjoyed as a magnificent work of art within an international context, as it had been when first exhibited in 1862.



Figure 6

Francis Alexander Skidmore and Sir George Gilbert Scott, *The Hereford Screen*, 1862, painted wrought and cast iron, brass, copper, timber, mosaics, and hardstones. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Given by Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry (M.251:1 to 316-1984). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

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## About the author

Alicia Robinson is Senior Curator, Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics & Glass, and responsible for the Ironwork collection and galleries and French sculpture 1600–1914 at the V&A. Since joining the Museum in 1985 as Assistant Curator she has worked in various roles including as Director of Apsley House – the Duke of Wellington’s house and collection, then run by the V&A (1996–2004). Most recently she planned the Neoclassicism display for the V&A’s *Europe 1600–1815* galleries and has published and lectured on subjects including Catherine the Great and Neoclassicism in St Petersburg, Rodin sculpture, and Victorian Gothic Revival ironwork.

## Footnotes

1. See, for instance, in *The Builder*, 10 May 1862 and *Illustrated London News*, 30 August 1862. They also collaborated on screens elsewhere, such as Worcester Cathedral, but these three have the most metalwork.
2. John Burley Waring, *Masterpieces of Industrial Art and Sculpture at the International Exhibition, 1862*, 3 vols. (London: Day & Son, 1863), 2: Plate 113; text describing the screen

which is illustrated as Plate 112.

3. George Gilbert Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections* (1879), ed. Gavin Stamp (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 479.
4. D. R. Chapman, *Hereford, Herefordshire and the Wye* (c. 1880), 37 and 38 (copy in Hereford Cathedral Archive, ref 5891/19).
5. Richard Mount, "Screens or Vistas in Cathedrals?—An Old Controversy Revived", *Country Life*, 29 September 1960, 672–73.
6. Hereford Cathedral Archive, ref 7007/1, 447–48.
7. Dean Price in "Thirty First Annual Report of Friends of Hereford Cathedral" (1964–5), 8.
8. Scott described it as "too loud and self-asserting for an English church." See Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections*, 291.
9. Waring, *Masterpieces*, 2: Plate 113.
10. Letter from the Central Council for the Care of Churches (hereafter CC) to Dean, 11 December 1934 (Hereford Cathedral Archive, ref 5891/2).
11. Dean letter to Mr Lee, 11 January 1936 (handwritten copy in Hereford Cathedral Archive).
12. The President (i.e. Bishop) in "6th Report to the Friends of the Cathedral" (1938), 10 (Hereford Cathedral Archive).
13. CC letter to Dean, 9 May 1936 (Hereford Cathedral Archive).
14. On page 1 of the three-page report by the sub-committee of the CC following their visit to the cathedral on 7 July 1939, for consideration at the CC meeting in October 1939 (copy of report sent to the Dean on 24 July 1939; Hereford Cathedral Archive).
15. Letter from CC to Dean, 15 August 1952 (Hereford Cathedral Archive).
16. Royal Fine Art Commission's letter to the Dean, 22 January 1949, 1.
17. Canon Ralph Dawson, Treasurer of Salisbury Cathedral 1958–68, wrote guides to the cathedral including *Guide Yourself Round Salisbury Cathedral* (1962). He was interviewed by Malcolm Southan in 1967 and recalled by Southan in 2015; see Alicia Robinson, "Lauded, Lambasted, Lost and Found: The Salisbury Cathedral Screen Cross by George Gilbert Scott and Francis Skidmore", *Journal of the Antique Metalware Society* 23 (2015): 11. On 23 April 1967 Dawson wrote to the Chapter Clerk at Hereford, for circulation to the Dean and Chapter, describing events at Salisbury and his role and criticizing the Cathedrals Advisory Committee (Hereford Cathedral Archive).
18. Letter from the Dean of Hereford, 24 August 1965 (Hereford Cathedral Archive).
19. "The Sarum Iron Works, Proprietor B. Shergold, 13 Guilder Lane, Salisbury, Wilts: Distinctive Hand-forged Ironwork" (letterhead on photocopied letter from Shergold to Jane Fawcett, Secretary of the Victorian Society, offering to make new items, at a range of costs, from parts of the screen for its members; V&A Metalwork Department archive). Bert (ram) Shergold set up the ironworks in the early 1920s. He died in 1976 (information given to the author by Antony West who worked with him from 1965).
20. Peter Fleetwood-Hesketh, "Hereford's Pride and the Destroyers", *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 1965.
21. (Canon) R. S. Dawson, letter to *The Times*, 25 February 1966.
22. Dawson, letter to *The Times*, 25 February 1966.
23. Mary Moorman, letter to the *Church Times*, 24 February 1967. Mary Moorman was the daughter of the historian G. M. Trevelyan.
24. "34th Annual Report of Friends of Hereford Cathedral", 30 April 1968, 9.

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