

St Thomas's Salisbury Nave Altar

Matthew Burt writes about the design of St Thomas's nave altar, made in his workshop in Hindon, Wiltshire:

The church is a summation of the care and contribution of each generation, a manifestation of centuries of love as care. I was keen to reflect that love and support by contributing our times in an unashamed but not confrontational way.



Matthew Burt (L) with John Foster, St Thomas's redevelopment project team leader, with the newly-installed nave altar, February 2020

The concept of the altar is very simple. All things spring from one source. The design is a metaphor for that straightforward premise. The altar emanates from an explosive centre, directly beneath the dais that supports it. From this notional centre, expanding upwards and outwards, seemingly spring 1,152 pieces of English oak, which I refer to as staves. The staves emerge from the dais as the base of the altar, in the form of a rectangle of only 480 x 240 millimetres, each visible stave being 10mm wide at this point, 48 front and back and 24 on each side.

They continue to expand upwards and outwards, reaching towards the altar's surface until each is 40 millimetres wide/square. Here they culminate as the altar's surface.

Each stave represents the individuals of the church, springing from one source culminating into a cohesive whole. The altar's surface, consisting of 1,152 40 x 40-millimetre squares, is made from the polished end-grain of the expanding staves. End-grain looks into the tree's growth, the annular rings. It is like looking into time, a narrative of the tree's life, showing the lean, the good and the indifferent years, each one manifesting its individual story; the myriad of experience that makes up the people of the church represented by the end-grain picture of their lives led.

The staves are made from English 'Tiger' oak, the roots of which have been colonized by *Fistulina hepatica*, the beefsteak fungus. The oak's timbers, which are rich in a natural preservative, called tannin, react with the colonizing fungus in the form of streaks of darker colour, running through an otherwise pale grain, creating a rare and maverick tree. I enjoy mavericks.

The floor beneath the altar consists of radiating boards in natural coloured English oak, expanding away from a rectangle of polished copper, that the altar sits upon. Light is directed at this copper to reflectively illuminate the altar's staves in a warm golden hue.