



EARNING HER WINGS: Sculptor Rebecca Kemp with her 'wings' now hanging in St Elizabeth's Church, Norwich.

The Angel of the East?

With an open brief to create candlestick holders or Christian art of some description out of church gates, sculptor Rebecca Kemp came slightly unstuck.

Rebecca clearly did not have designs to be a candlestick maker. She had rather bigger ideas than that. And the end result, a rather striking sculpture hanging in the entrance of a church in Cadege Road, Norwich, has the look of the Angel of the North about it.

It all started in the spring of 2001. Having graduated the year before at the Norwich School of Art and Design, Rebecca was half way through a voluntary year of work with the church she now works for, as well as co-running a breakfast club at the Blyth-Jex School every day.

It was at the breakfast club that she met Tim Yau, a Norwich Youth for Christ schools worker at the time and a member of St Elizabeth's Church in Cadege Road.

Rebecca said: "It was Tim who first made me aware of the opportunity for the commission at his church. The church had already approached a sculptor who has work in the Cathedral, but their budget couldn't quite stretch to his talent - so my friend Tim had suggested my name as a possibility."

The 25-year-old added: "Having never taken on such a project before I was certainly hesitant, but my friend seemed so keen on me meeting up with the vicar at the time, Sam Wells, which I did."

The vicar then explained the idea behind it all. There had been hardened steel gates on the front of the church, but they had been taken down only to take up room in his garage for months. Not only was he keen to shift them, he was even keener to see them transformed into one or more pieces of artwork for the church.

Initially the thought behind the content of the sculptures was to be candlestick holders,

When Rebecca Kemp was commissioned to transform church gates into something sculptural, the art student's imagination took wing. **EMMA OUTTEN** met a woman and her creation. Pictures by **SIMON FINLAY**

and/or narratives of Jesus's life as wall pieces.

Rebecca, who lives at Trowse, said: "With this in mind, I agreed to go away and think/sketch out some ideas and get back to him."

"After many pages of sketching, I simply couldn't quite put my finger on what or how this was going to work - and the thought of producing simple narratives of Jesus's life didn't completely grab me."

"So, I was in a bit of a quandary. Do I decline the opportunity or do I take a risk, step out and say yes to the commission, unsure of my ability to conclude the artwork?"

In the meantime, Rebecca applied to do the Artist Access to Art Colleges project at the Norwich School of Art and Design, and was delighted to be accepted. To Rebecca, this was another confirmation that the commission was possible.

"It's funny, sometimes you just know you need to do something even if it goes against all common sense. So I took the plunge and



A close-up of the sculpture created by Rebecca.



Above, the famous Angel of the North.

went for it. However, I still needed to come up with a concrete idea."

She added: "All along I'd been considering what I should do, but nothing seemed to stick, until I simply asked God what He wanted me to do."

"I just needed to hear what He said, and when I got an image of a wing in my head, I was confused, but time and time again, this image kept cropping up in my mind." She added: "I felt that that was what I was to do."

Rebecca then approached Mr Wells with the idea, he seemed fine with it, and she got on to the task.

It was by now autumn 2001. The Artists Access project kicked off on October 1 and the gates were delivered soon after that. The dismantling and construction began.

"Having access to the metal workshop was fantastic," said Rebecca. "So much space, technical help when needed and good working environment is always beneficial, and I think for other students, it was refreshing to have something of good size being created in the space. Over the next few

weeks, working mainly with reference to my sketch book, the form of the wing developed - firstly cutting up the gates with an Oxyacetylene cutter, then using the forge to heat and hammer the steel into shape until welding into place the skeleton of the wing.

Christmas came, the art school closed for a month, and I managed to break my foot playing football before a month of travelling, but when I resumed work in March, there was still plenty to do."

The next stage of the adventure involved cutting out about 300 or so individual feathers from sheet steel from the art school supplies and beginning to build the body of feathers that were to create the main visual form of the wing.

"By this stage, the wing was very heavy and very awkward to move, but I was on target to have it finished by Easter 2002," said Rebecca.

So, with the wing nearly complete, Rebecca reported back to the parochial church council on her progress with the sculpture.

"It was at this meeting that I discovered

that not everyone was immediately thrilled with the art work, perhaps it didn't fit into the 'Christian art' stereotype that may sometimes be held," she said.

"The vicar, Sam Wells, was always welcoming of the idea, but clearly it wasn't just him who had to be convinced. However, over the course of the next few months, I received confirmation that St Elizabeth's would like the wing."

It was agreed that the wing would be transported to the church, installed, and then dedicated on December 1, 2002, by the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James.

With the deadline looming, all that was then needed was to transport the sculpture there in one piece and install it - a task that seemed much more of a challenge than the actual making.

Meanwhile, an outside specialist in metal fabrications and ironwork was introduced to the project, and designed specialist fixings that met the needs for the wing to be permanently installed in the church.

The journey to take the wing to the church

took place on a sunny Friday in late November. Equipped with cream cakes as thanks, Rebecca sought the help of friends, fellow art students, technicians and caretakers.

Having hired and parked a 20ft flatbed lorry the other side of the art school fence, the Norwich School of Art and Design's metal technician skillfully lifted the wing up and over the fence and on to the lorry with great ease.

"I was very optimistic for a successful day," said Rebecca. "The journey to the church in the lorry was uneventful in itself. Indeed, it wasn't until we reached the church that the unpredictable adventure really began."

Rebecca had arranged for several people to help at the church. She knew it would take up to 10 people to lift and move the wing because it weighs in at just over half a tonne.

"I was fairly confident that there would not be a problem if that amount of people turned up, only for various reasons, there were seven of us..."

"Time and time again, they tried to lift the wing, but it became obvious fairly quickly that the plan was not going to work."

"The community wardens who had come to offer their services, had work to do, so off they went, leaving just four of us."

Determined not to give up, another plan was soon hatched: there was a building site opposite.

"So off two of us went to seek the foreman's office. Having smiled sweetly and explained the situation, I was very doubtful that they would be able to help but, much to my amazement, they jumped at the chance."

The next thing Rebecca knew, there was an expert forklift driver at the church, lifting the wing off the lorry and up to the entrance of the church.

"It was all so beautifully executed, it could have been a wonderfully choreographed piece of ballet," she recalled gratefully.

"I could never have predicted that."

The next problem was how to get the sculpture inside the church. The four of them used four scaffolding poles to roll the installation inside.

The following week, the wing was hoisted up into place and installed precisely above the main church beam, just in time for the Bishop's blessing.

Now studying for an MA at the Art School, a year or so has passed, and as far as Rebecca is aware, the churchgoers at St Elizabeth's very much like their "wings".

And yet Rebecca has often wondered whether such a sculpture could benefit from being in a more public space.

"Whether it is an 'Angel' of the East or something completely different, it would be a shame to not seek for a sculpture that encompasses and celebrates this part of the country, a sculpture that welcomes you to a place of beauty of activity, more so than County Hall anyway."

Rebecca would welcome the chance to be considered for creating such a symbol, "just as I'm sure many artists would be in East Anglia and further afield, but I think a very important part of this process must involve the community of Norwich and its surrounding areas. Of course, you'd never please everyone, but you can jolly well try."

Having met Rebecca at St Elizabeth's Church in Cadege Road, it looks like she has already started earning her wings. The girl should go far.