

# GORDON HOLDSWORTH: *rural retreat* FOR A CRAFT REVIVALIST

For almost 60 years, Gordon Holdsworth created paintings, etchings, sculptures, jewellery and metalwork in the crafts revival style from his rural retreat in southwest Western Australia. Today he is best known from the war memorials and church commissions that are preserved in situ, but many of Holdsworth's portable artworks must remain in private hands, probably unrecognised.



## DOROTHY ERICKSON

Of Gordon Holdsworth it may well be said, as of Sir Christopher Wren, 'If you would see his monument look around you.' It is impossible to travel far among the churches of Western Australia without coming across numerous works of his art.

The subject of this obituary was Hubert Augustus Gordon Holdsworth, who lived from 1901 until 1965 at *Caplow* homestead in rural Hester Siding near Bridgetown, 270 km south of Perth, in Western Australia. From here he orchestrated a successful 60-year career as a painter, etcher and metalsmith.

Holdsworth, like his friends the Lintons, painted in oils and watercolour, drew in pastels and sculpted in metal, wood and stone. To these skills he added wrought iron, etching and design of war memorials. He exhibited in Perth, London and the eastern states and made commissions for places as far apart as Darwin and Albany. His metalwork passed national selection, making him the only Australian craftsman represented in the Fine Arts Hall of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley,

1  
Gordon Holdsworth,  
*self portrait*

London in 1924<sup>1</sup> His metalwork graces many Anglican churches, chapels and cathedrals in Western Australia and constitutes a remarkable body of work in the Craft Revivalist tradition.

Judith O'Callaghan in *Treasures from Australian Churches* described his work as exhibiting:

... a highly individual approach. ... The hand beaten surfaces, predominant use of a non-precious metal, cabouchon stones and enamel work are all basic Arts and Crafts elements yet their combination, particularly that of the repoussé silver panels over copper, defies categorization.<sup>2</sup>

Gordon Holdsworth (c 1886-1965) was born in Middlesex, England; to Charles Edward Hall Holdsworth and Ellen Louise, née Bostock. Both were from old Yorkshire families connected for generations with the Anglican church. This heritage had considerable bearing on Holdsworth's occupation as a metalsmith who made objects in silver, brass and iron for an array of Anglican churches and chapels in Western Australia.

Details of Gordon's education are sketchy but included music and art in England and Australia. The family arrived in Western Australia in 1900 and settled at Hester Siding near Bridgetown where they became timber millers. The family was unusual and particularly formal. Gordon, although a dashing young bachelor, never married. Artist John Feeney who met him in 1961 wrote 'He was then an old man but quite extraordinary, ... He was relatively well known as a painter and was a complete artistic personality of a vanishing era. ... his work whilst not being particularly modern was of a rare excellence'<sup>3</sup>

Holdsworth joined the Western Australian Society of Arts in 1904 and began a career as painter, etcher, sculptor and metalsmith. Tradition has it that he had tuition in metalsmithing from James W. R. Linton before he opened an art school in Bridgetown in 1911. The families were certainly friends but Holdsworth soon made larger works than Linton. Much of his technique can be sourced to treasured books such as Henry Wilson's seminal work and magazines that he eagerly devoured in his rural retreat or to the metalworkers in the Perth factories who also



**2**  
Photograph of  
Gordon Holdsworth  
c 1916



**3**  
Gordon Holdsworth,  
*The Old Studio W.A.*,  
an etching of his  
studio set amongst  
the trees

taught Linton. His earliest known commission was from parliamentarian Sir James Lee Steere - a metre-high brass lectern for St Paul's, Bridgetown in 1910-11.

In 1913 he made an intricate and unusual Metropolitan Processional Cross for Bishop C.O.L. Riley, first Anglican Archbishop of Western Australia. This cross is carried by the Archbishop's chaplain and used at all diocesan functions when he appears as archbishop. The cross, made in 1913-4, was one of the most remarkable made in Australia, possibly anywhere, at this time.

Holdsworth, perhaps in consultation with the donors, gave considerable thought to the symbolism of the piece. The four arms of the cross are applied with silver panels intricately embossed with entwined fruiting vines. The vine was, and is, one of the most vivid symbols used to express the relationship of God to his people. For Holdsworth and his commissioners, the 'protected vineyard' symbolised by the use of vine leaves was the Anglican Church in Western Australia in which God's children could flourish, tended by the Archbishop as the Vicar of God.

The splayed shape of the copper cross gives the impression of a cross within a circle. The circle, as the monogram of God and symbol of eternity, is thus cleverly incorporated into the design. In contrast, the square is the emblem of the earth and earthly existence. This has also been subtly incorporated into the outline of the four stylised fruiting-vines placed at the intersection of the cross. At the intersection of the arms, an encrusted enamel of St George is set in a circular boss within a

crown of thorns. The encrusted enamel technique gives a particular luminosity to the image in blue, yellow, mauve and green. The fruiting vine appears again in an openwork band of repoussé silver set at the widest portion of the copper knop. Four cabochon stones of deep-blue lapis lazuli are set in this band. Silver fleur-de-lys have been applied to the copper stem and reverse of the cross.

How to make the fleur-de-lys and openwork bands were helpfully described in Henry Wilson's text. As this technically difficult piece was made early in Holdsworth's career he may have needed all the help he could get. That it did succeed in part explains why Linton, an Anglican of higher public profile, did not receive as many commissions from the Anglican church. In succeeding years Holdsworth made 'furniture' for very many churches. The most notable, usually in brass, silver and copper, are in St Paul's, Bridgetown; St George's Cathedral, Perth; St George's College, Crawley; Perth College, Mt Lawley; St Boniface Cathedral, Bunbury; and St Mary's, Busselton.<sup>4</sup>



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4  
Gordon Holdsworth, *Metropolitan processional cross* made for the Archbishop of Perth, silver, copper, email-en-ronde-bosse, lapis lazuli, 1913–14, 1905 mm high. Photograph courtesy Rev Brett Guthrie

5  
Archbishop C. O. L. Riley preceded by the Metropolitan cross, in a procession to dedicate All Saints' Church, Collie



6 Holdsworth exhibited paintings in the Royal Albert Hall, London in 1912 and silver and copper artifacts in WA and NSW. From 1919 Holdsworth exhibited regularly with the WA and SA Societies of Arts and the NSW Society of Arts and Crafts. A hexagonal copper box with enamel-fruited quandong trees was purchased for the Art Gallery of NSW in 1920 having been mentioned in *The Bulletin* as 'a casket that might have been Pandora's'.<sup>5</sup> The Gallery has declined to return it to its original shining state, insisting that the patination it has acquired over time may have been intended. No oxidized patination on copper has been seen in any of his other work.

When war broke out in 1914, Holdsworth closed the school and returned to his 'Studio of Arts and Artistic Crafts' and started to work for his first solo exhibition. This was held in 1916, in conjunction with a watercolour painter Miss Alice E. Adair, at Mrs Zarbel's Booklovers' Library in Hay Street, Perth.<sup>6</sup> It met with considerable success. At midnight after the opening he could contain himself no longer and wrote proudly to his mother:

Hanged if I did not get most of the prais [sic] and got commissions and sold to the tune of £10 - and may still do something more as Mrs Z has asked me to continue showing until Saturday instead of one day as I find she intended...

People swarmed round all afternoon until I was nearly smothered, Mrs Lain [sic] Poole, Ladies Stone, & James, Mrs Trethowan, Hamersley, Learmonth, etcetera etcetera about 200 in all. Mrs Z provided lots of cakes, ices, etcetera of the best. I was sorry to see the old casket set with jasper go but still £5/5/- was not a bad price, Mrs Learmonth took it. A Miss Tobias was not satisfied with a set of 6 teaspoons but asked for a set of a dozen to be maid [sic] at my earliest convenience.<sup>7</sup>

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9 Gordon Holdsworth, *tobacco jar or cigarette box*, beaten copper, repoussé and set with agate, 80 x 90 mm. This is similar to the work supplied to the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW in Sydney. Private collection, photograph D. Erickson

6 Gordon Holdsworth, *photograph*, the altar in St Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Bunbury, 1928. The altar, presented in memory of Mrs Anne Wright Adams, wife of the incumbent archdeacon, features large repoussé bas-reliefs panels of beaten copper. In the left panel Christ is flanked by St Paul resting with his sword and in the right by St Boniface, the patron saint of the diocese, in bishop's cope and mitre, carrying his pastoral staff. The altar has since been removed to a side chapel at St Boniface Cathedral and altered to accommodate new church practices. Courtesy Bridgetown Tourist Bureau

7 Gordon Holdsworth, *photograph*, central panel of the Bunbury altar before installation, c 1928. Christ, as high priest in Eucharistic vestments, holds the host in his right hand and the communion cup in his left. Courtesy Bridgetown Tourist Bureau

8 Gordon Holdsworth, *lectern* for St Michael and All Saints, Perth College, brass and enamel, 1929, ht 1270 mm. The lectern was donated in memory of Sister Vera, the first principal. The knob is set with blue-dyed quartz encircled by twisted wire and groups of circular bosses. These button-like bosses are deployed again at the junction of the arms of the book-rest with the stem. Arches are used, this time to strengthen and conceal the junction. The roses are symbolic of the order of Anglican nuns. Photographs D. Elford, courtesy WA Museum



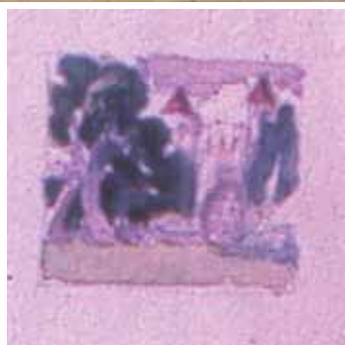
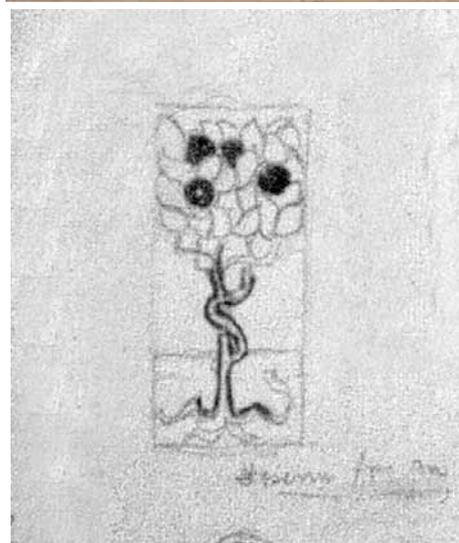
The 'old casket' exhibited may be the 1909 one based on a study of a red gum. It demonstrates his absorption of Wilson's admonition:

In your studies be as minute as you please, you cannot be too painstaking; put in everything you see. But when you translate these studies into work, learn to leave out. The artist is known as much by what he omits as by what he puts in his work.<sup>8</sup>

This design illustrates the subtlety of the English influence on his early work. This box, with its organic design drawn from native flora, is very much in the 'romantic' Alexander Fisher spirit yet it is no pale imitation. Fisher's articles and books were available in Western Australia and several of his pieces were in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The casket could hold its own with many Fisher caskets. The legs of Holdsworth's box, transformed into tree trunks firmly planted on the ground, branch and spread to gently embrace the circular form of the casket. Oval cabochons - presumably of the red jasper he used, reminiscent of the vivid colour of the flower - are placed centrally within the canopies of leaves. The most obvious difference, when compared to Fisher or much contemporary English metalwork, is the less crowded design.

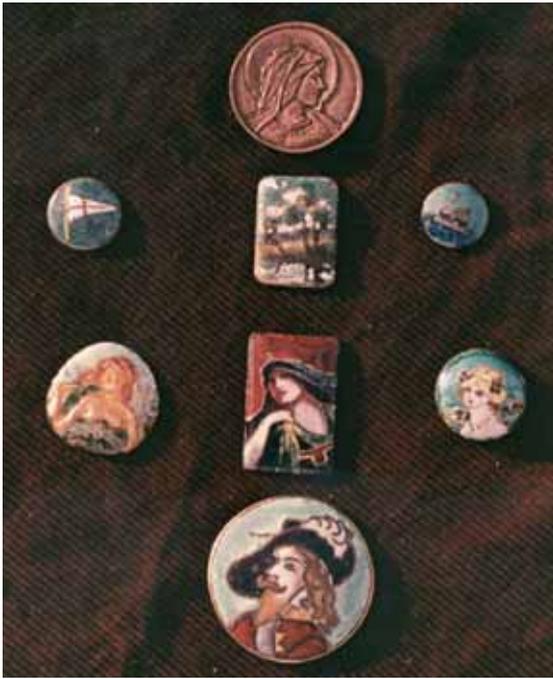


**10**  
Gordon Holdsworth, *bracelet*, silver and enamel, c 1916, originally purchased from Mrs Zarbel at the Book Lover's Library by WA's Engineer-in-Chief, Mr Rolland, for his wife and passed to his daughter, Norma, who gave it to the Western Australian Museum. Holdsworth adopted and adapted English teacher Henry Wilson's instructions for making flexible bracelets to create this piece. Photograph Douglas Elford, courtesy WA Museum



**11**  
Gordon Holdsworth, *Red gum*, 1909, sketch for a jewel casket based on a redgum tree. This may be the 'old casket' purchased by Mrs Learmonth at his first exhibition in 1916. Family collection

**12**  
Gordon Holdsworth, watercolour sketches for enamel plaques from his sketchbooks. Photo D. Erickson



In 1922-3 in Perth he exhibited 40 pieces of metalwork with his paintings. This included a trophy cup in silver and enamel and his mermaid pendant intricately worked in gold, enamel and oxidised silver with bezel-set carnelian. In this delicate but retardé piece, an enamelled medallion of a girl's face framed in clouds of red-gold hair was worked in the difficult technique of email-en-ronde-bosse. The stylised floral frame to the medallion was further developed as a series of motifs, repeated to form a necklet from which the larger medallion is suspended. Lovely as the piece is, it reflects the time warp of Holdsworth's family surroundings and possibly of those who purchased his work. His courtly 19th-century behaviour was at variance with his love of speed and fast cars and the dashing image he liked to convey.

Holdsworth was at the height of his career when he exhibited at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London. He was one of two

**16**

Gordon Holdsworth, *Trophy Cup*, silver-plated brass, 1920. A fairly traditional chalice-shaped cup was used for the basic form, and embellished with discreet ornamentation: two bands of twisted wire, one on the largest circumference of the swelling knop, the other at the junction of the stem and domed foot. The rimmed, domed base rests on four circular cushion-feet that often feature in his work. Photograph by Gordon Holdsworth, collection Bridgetown Tennis Club



**13**

Gordon Holdsworth, *Limoges plaques* for use in boxes and jewellery. Another item of Wilson advice — this time on pictorial enamels: 'the whole picture should be small enough to set as a jewel' was observed in these pieces. Gordon Holdsworth photograph courtesy Bridgetown Tourist Bureau

**14**

Gordon Holdsworth, *brooch*, Limoges enamel, c 1950. The enamel scene of gum trees is set in a repoussé silver frame. Private collection, photograph D. Erickson

**15**

Gordon Holdsworth, *Mermaid necklace and pendant*, 1922, silver, gold and enamel; pendant ht 75 mm. This appears to be catalogue number 128 in the Society of Arts annual exhibition of 1922-3, priced at ten guineas and described as 'Pendant, Mermaid Enamel, Gold and silver'. A variation on a Wilson exercise, the necklace was well received at the time but apparently did not sell for it was acquired from Holdsworth much later. It was stolen from a private collection in 2002. Photograph D. Erickson

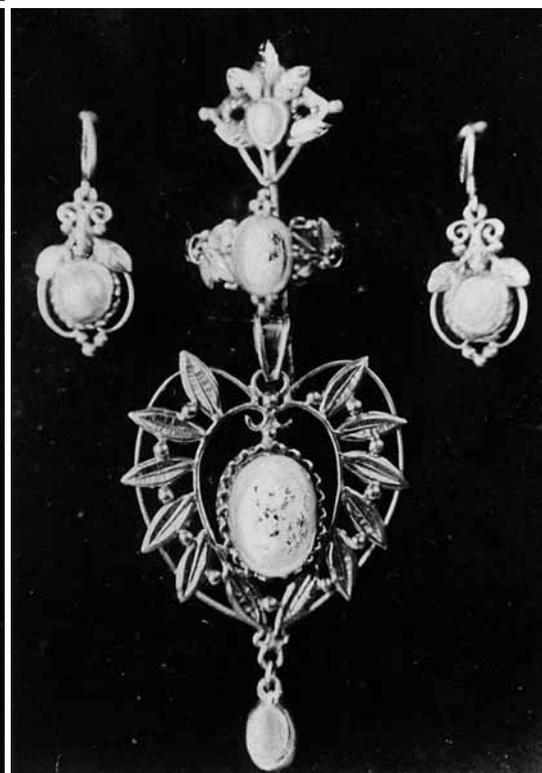
17  
Gordon Holdsworth,  
*lectern*, brass and  
enamel, exhibited at the  
British Empire  
Exhibition, Wembley,  
1924, now in St Paul's  
Anglican Church,  
Bridgetown. The  
repoussé brass figures  
are skilfully handled. A  
rondel to the right of  
each saint's head  
contains his insignia in  
a blue and white  
enamelled boss. The  
niches terminate in a  
rim evoking the delicate  
gothic-crown of Queen  
Marguerite. H 1400 mm,  
photo courtesy  
Bridgetown  
Tourist Bureau



18  
Gordon Holdsworth's  
photograph of a jewel,  
c 1924, made of silver  
with Limoges enamel.  
The slightly domed  
shield-shaped brooch has  
been embellished with a  
repoussé cluster of fruit  
and leaves set below a  
delicate pictorial enamel  
of the head and  
shoulders of a young  
girl. The shield-shape  
was finished with  
twisted-wire edges  
giving the appearance of  
a thick braid from which  
hung four 'bells'



19  
Gordon Holdsworth's  
photographs of finished  
work show an earring  
and pendant set  
featuring cabochon  
stones set in silver.  
Photos by Gordon  
Holdsworth, courtesy  
Bridgetown Tourist  
Bureau. Location of  
jewellery unknown



Australians selected to show craft work in the Fine Arts Palace and the only metalsmith. The exhibited lectern is one of his finest works. Like a number of his pieces it incorporates a domed base. It is a crisply executed technical tour-de-force, fabricated from brass using the techniques of repoussé and enamelling.

The brass book-rest is supported by four arms, three of which are in the form of a fruiting vine enamelled with bunches of purple grapes, rising from a cylindrical stem mounted on the domed, castellated base supported by four cylindrical, tower feet. Around the stem is a drum-shaped knob supporting four gothic niches each containing skilfully handled figures of a male saint, two of whom are the apostles Peter and Paul. These are embossed in the same sure manner of the panels he applied to the altar of Bunbury Pro-cathedral in 1928.

Despite suffering severe burns in a fire which destroyed his home in 1953, he continued working until shortly before his death in his 80th year in Bridgetown on 3 August 1965. He remained very much a man of the late 19th-

century, touched with a dash of 1920s hedonism. In mid-life, the dashing bachelor drove around the country creating quite a romantic picture, silk scarf flying, a lady by his side, off for a 'painting' excursion. Although some of his considerable output was pedestrian, most was excellent. Before World War I, James Walter Robert Linton overshadowed him but in the inter-war period he was very much to the fore nationally. By the time the mineral boom of the 1960s was in place, he was too old to take advantage of it, remaining a shadowy figure in Bridgetown. A new craft revival gathered momentum, little aware of his existence and his fund of knowledge - from which it could have profited. Even at the end, his works compared favourably with anything being made in art circles in the State. He had worked for almost 60 years as a Craft Revival artist par-excellence.

His work attests to the fact that it is not necessary to be in a large metropolitan centre to achieve proficiency. More than that, in his rural retreat he made work of 'rare excellence', which was exhibited nationally and internationally to considerable acclaim. He is an example of the individuality that can be achieved separated from too close a contact with the dominant forces of the major centres. His work however also shows the interaction that can occur from stimulation by one's peers and that a school, albeit small, of Western Australia was probably in force. His very considerable work for the church remains his memorial. Like Linton, he had cultivated the image of 'the artist' and is remembered with esteem.

**References**

D. Erickson, *Aspects of Stylistic and Social Influence on the Practice of Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia 1829-1965*, PhD Thesis, University of WA, Perth 1992  
 W. Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*, Sydney 1934  
 J. O'Callaghan, *Treasures from Australian Churches*, Melbourne 1985  
 A. Schofield & K. Fahy, *Australian Jewellery: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*, Sydney 1990

**Collections represented**

Art Gallery of NSW; WA Museum; Hall Collection, Perth; Royal Perth Hospital; Parliament of Western Australia; Town of Bridgetown, WWI War Memorial; Town of Greenbushes, WWI War Memorial; Town of Balingup, WWI and WWII War Memorial; Royal Perth Yacht Club; Royal Perth Golf Club; Bridgetown Tennis Club; Bridgetown Golf Club; Victoria Park Bowling Club; Hollywood Bowling Club.



**20**  
 Gordon Holdsworth, *Greenbushes War Memorial* designed and executed in 1920 with beaten bronze panels set into white marble. Photo D. Erickson

**21**  
 Gordon Holdsworth, *brooch*, 1964, silver and turquoise enamel, 5.0 x 5.0 x 0.7 cm. The swirling movement created by the repetition of the fern leaves gives the piece the unexpected energy of perpetual motion, something he no doubt learnt from pictorial composition. Private collection, Perth

#### Ecclesiastical commissions

##### St Paul's Anglican Church, Bridgetown

- brass lectern, 'The Turtle', in memory of Sir James Lee Steere made c 1911
- jarrah pulpit designed by Holdsworth commissioned by the Allnutt Family (used to have brass railings) - carving assisted by Clair Layman, a student of his
- brass sanctuary lamp (c 1911).
- altar cross and pair of candlesticks (1912) given by C.M. Laurie in memory of Reverend Purnell
- font top, copper, baptismal ewer, brass (Lance Hester 1916)
- lectern (1922) exhibited British Empire Exhibition, 1924
- memorial tablet (Scott 1941)
- brass collection plate (Lewis Edward Walker 1945)
- wrought-iron gates to churchyard (Aland) glass and silver cruets (Ernest Abbots 1947) paschal candle stand (Bentley, died 1948)
- Honour-board insignia in brass and copper c 1919

##### St Boniface Cathedral, Bunbury

###### (previously St Paul's)

- crozier (pastoral staff) in memory of Bishop Goldsmith (1918)
- WWI memorial processional cross (c 1919)
- altar cross in chapel of St David and St Paul (Mitchell c 1928)
- altar in chapel of St David and St Paul (Mrs Adams c 1926-1928), re-table and tabernacle (1928)
- ciborium (Mary Ann Spencer "NAN" 1846-1943)
- aumbrey (Clarice Gwendolyn Gibson 1964)
- font ewer (1955)

##### The Little Church of Saint Patrick, Rathmines

- lectern once in St Paul's

##### St George's Cathedral, Perth

- Metropolitan Cross for Archbishop Riley (1913-4)
- memorial processional cross in memory of Sir James and Lady Lee Steere (1923, 1930 or 1956, conflicting dates have been given by officials)

##### St George's College Chapel, Crawley

- altar cross, brass, silver and enamel (c 1935)
- altar candles, brass, silver, enamel
- chalice and paten, silver Georgian style (c 1933)
- paten on foot, silver (c 1933)

##### Perth College, Chapel of St Michael and All the Angels, Mt Lawley

- brass lectern (in memory of Sister Vera 1927)
- chalice and paten, silver (from the clergy 1927)
- altar, re-table and tabernacle (1927)
- font (from the old girls 1928)
- baptismal spoon of pearl-shell and silver

##### St Mary's, Busselton

- lectern brass (c 1913-1920)

##### St Saviour's, Boyup Brook

- silver cruet set, chalice, paten

##### Christ Church Anglican Church, Mandurah

- silver ciborium (to the memory of Charles Gillman, 1963)

##### St John's Anglican Church, Fremantle

- chancel screen, 1928 in honour of Annie and Zoe Gemperle Moore

##### St John's Anglican Church, Albany

- Chancel screen in wrought-iron, embossed brass plaque dedicated to WWI veterans

##### St John's Anglican Church, Pinjarra

- silver chalice and paten (Greatorex 1918, son of Rector, killed Villiers Bretonneux, France)

##### St Andrew's Anglican Church, Katanning

- lectern brass (7 Jan. 1920, Egerton-Warburton), table lectern

##### St David's Anglican Church,

###### Brunswick Junction

- jarrah table desk

##### All Saints Anglican Church, Collic

- pulpit design, electric chandeliers

##### St George's Anglican Church, Wagin

- silver ciborium Norah Abbott (1965 last thing he made)

##### St Matthew's Anglican Church, Guilford

- war memorial (1920) and door hinges

##### Anglican Church of the

###### Annunciation, Broome

- copper chalice and collection plate, war memorial tablet (1919)

##### St Barnabas, Greenbushes

- font

##### St Alban's, North Perth

- font bowl 1930s (replaced), altar cross and candlesticks, missing

##### St Mary's Anglican Church, South Perth

- Chalice

This is a shortened excerpt from Dorothy Erickson's latest book *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History* to be published by UWA Press in April 2010.

Dr Dorothy Erickson is well-known for her historical research into the pioneering craftspeople of her home state of Western Australia, as well as an internationally renowned contemporary jeweller.

#### NOTES

1 William Moore, *The Story of Australian Art*. vol 2, pp. 102-3

2 Judith O'Callaghan, *Treasures from Australian Churches*, NGV, Melbourne, 1985, p. 15

3 Letter to Robed *Social Influence on the Practice of Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia 1829-1965*, PhD Thesis, University of WA, 1992

5 20 Oct 1920 p 28

6 Frances Zarbel was a prominent woman journalist who wrote under the names of Franciska and Mirabel. She had her own newspaper *F. Z. Review* early in the century. The Booklovers Library that exhibited prints, paintings and metalwork became Franciska Bookshop later owned by Phyllis Devoretsky, sister-in-law of Rose Skinner

7 16 Nov. 1916 Holdsworth family papers

8 Wilson, *Jewellery and Silverwork*,