

# FAMILY AND FAITH

## STAINED GLASS WINDOWS IN MEDIEVAL PARISH CHURCHES

John Hunt

The parish church was at the centre of spiritual, social and political life in the communities of medieval England. In the western midlands the rare fragments of stained glass that remain provide fascinating glimpses of the inter-relationships of church, patrons and donors.



Thirteenth-century glass survives at the Church of the Nativity of Our Lady, Madley, Herefordshire.  
Detail from *The Adoration of the Magi*.

One of the few contracts to have survived that records arrangements for the commissioning of a stained glass window is from 1405 between the Dean and Chapter of York Minster and John Thornton of Coventry. Not only is a new east window commissioned, but the contract requires that Thornton himself should paint the main figures. Thornton's consummate skills reflect a legacy rooted in the work of glass manufacturers and glass painters working across the west midlands region for over a century.

Excavations have demonstrated that glass was being manufactured on Cannock Chase by the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, while fourteenth-century taxation records name some of the artisans associated with this industry. The requirements of the region's churches must have ensured steady employment for local workshops. Examples remain in the Worcester area from the early fourteenth century associated with the accomplished windows depicting the Virgin and Child at Warndon and Fladbury. Specific projects also brought men from elsewhere to work in the region, such as the mid-fifteenth-century Beauchamp Chapel in Warwick, the painted glass for which was commissioned from John Prudde of Westminster, a glazier to the king.

Although there are some outstanding survivals of medieval glass in the greater churches of the region, such as Great Malvern and Tewkesbury, both formerly priory churches, the focus here is on parish churches, where even fragmentary remains offer glimpses of medieval life and culture in the western midlands.

While coloured glass was certainly in use in some Anglo-Saxon churches, not until the twelfth century may a corpus of material be seen *in situ* in England, although survivals in parish churches are few before the fourteenth century.

An exception is Dalbury in Derbyshire, where a panel depicting St Michael the Archangel dates to the twelfth, or perhaps the late eleventh, century. The figure shows St Michael praying in the 'orans' position, an early form of Christian prayer, reinforcing the probable early date. 'Orantes' figures may be found in early twelfth-century sculpture in Hereford Cathedral, although their use can also be instanced much later, as in the early fourteenth-century 'Ormesby Psalter'.

## Stained Glass and the Religious Experience

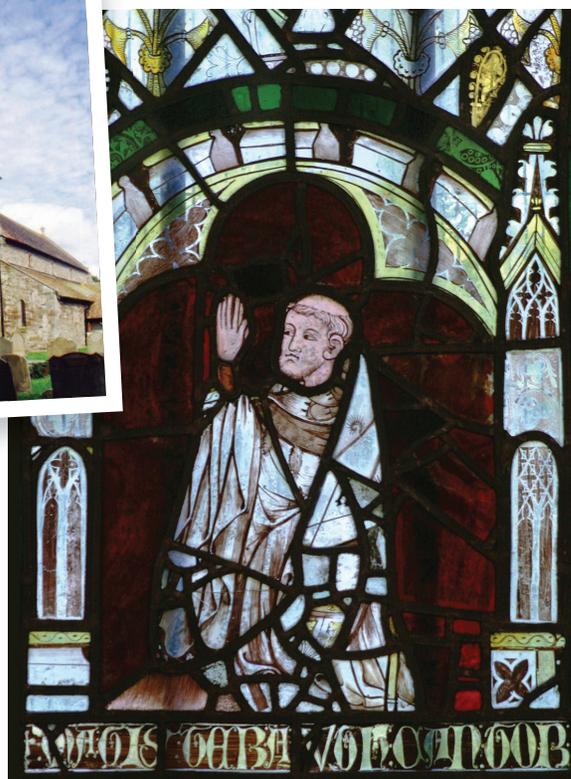
Stained glass windows were undoubtedly intended to beautify and enhance buildings, but they were also intended to inspire and intensify the religious experience. Christian art revealed something of the world that was to come, the 'Heavenly Jerusalem', and encouraged devotion among the faithful; there was an appreciation of the contribution made by the qualities of light itself, as well as through the actual subjects depicted.

This thesis was eloquently argued in the twelfth century by Abbot Suger of St Denis and echoed in a treatise on art and craftsmanship by the monk Theophilus, who commented that through a combination of artistic mediums, viewers are shown 'something of the likeness of the paradise of God... thus you have caused them to praise God the Creator in this creation and to proclaim him marvellous in his works.'

Viewers were not passive bystanders who simply observed the art placed before them. They were expected to internalise and interpret what they saw, bringing a reality to the scenes that were viewed; we have a kind



The Church of St Michael and All Angels at Eaton Bishop, Herefordshire.



Patronage represented in a fourteenth-century window at St Michael and All Angels, Eaton Bishop, Herefordshire. The figure is thought to be Adam de Monmouth.

of equation which placed the viewer on one side, and the scene on the other, the sum of which was reality within the viewer's mind.

Thus stained glass was a visual medium that might interplay with other schemes such as sculpture and wall paintings, or act independently, to illustrate and teach as well as to accompany and enhance the liturgy and worship. In the twelfth century, and into the thirteenth, the norm was for individual narrative panels, generally figure panels set within deep borders. At Madley in Herefordshire, fine thirteenth-century glass survives in the east window; scenes including an *Adoration of the Magi* presumably hint at what was once a much more extensive scheme.

## Techniques and Decoration

It is from the fourteenth century and later that stained glass in parish churches becomes more plentiful, coinciding with changes that had been gathering pace during the previous century in architecture and in the production and decoration of windows.

Lighter church interiors were called for, architecturally and visibly. Narrow lancet windows of earlier styles gave way to larger traceried windows and the glassmakers and glass painters adapted to these new demands. The key innovation of the thirteenth century was the development of the *grisaille* window, composed largely of white glass, generally painted with foliage designs, and led into a geometric pattern, enabling

both the introduction of more light, and access to cheaper glass.

The combination of *grisaille* glass and coloured subject medallions, or figures, had an important effect on style; the painted design became more linear and refined, increasingly naturalistic and delicate, followed in turn by a trend towards greater softness, fine modelling and realism. By the early fourteenth century 'band windows' had emerged, as at Checkley in Staffordshire. These windows were organised in horizontal bands, with ribbons of colour, incorporating narrative panels, alternating with *grisaille* or lighter glass. Architectural canopies framing figures and scenes were popular, like those over the apostles, Moses, the Crucifixion and various other figures at Checkley.

The early fourteenth century also brought added versatility to the glass painters' palette, with red-browns, yellows and leafy-green colours predominating, but particularly with the development of a technique using a silver compound to produce yellow stain that might range from a deep orange to a delicate silvery tone. The impacts of these developments are to be seen in most parish churches containing fourteenth- and fifteenth-century glass.

## Religious Representations

Among the subjects depicted on fourteenth-century windows, Crucifixion scenes were important, and one of the finest windows in England with this at the heart of its composition is the east window at Eaton Bishop church in Herefordshire, where it is accompanied by figures of a bishop, St Michael weighing souls, Virgin and Child, the Archangel Gabriel and a possible head of Christ.

Episodes relating to Christ were generally derived from Biblical accounts, but there were also apocryphal sources that gave artists inspiration, such as those relating to the life of the Virgin Mary. Devotion to the Virgin was particularly strong in this period, and this was reflected in the popularity of the *Tree of Jesse*, honouring mother and son through the depiction of Christ's ancestors. The western midlands has a large number of such survivals, among them the fragments of a Jesse window at Madley; fragments surviving at Merevale and Mancetter originated from the Cistercian monastery of Merevale rather than representing *in situ* material from a medieval parish church.

The 'Lives of the Saints' were a popular subject, including English royal saints (Edward the Confessor features at Ludlow, for example), sometimes representing local cults, devotions and church dedications, as at Credenhill in Herefordshire where Thomas à Becket is paired with St Thomas Cantelupe, the



Detail of a kneeling knight at St Peter, St Paul and St Thomas, Birtsmorton, Worcestershire. A late fourteenth-, early fifteenth-century window.



The Church of St Peter, St Paul and St Thomas at Birtsmorton, Worcestershire.

former bishop of Hereford canonised in 1320.

Angels were another popular theme, sometimes swinging censers, as at Dilwyn in Herefordshire.

Of particular note in the western midlands is the depiction of

angel musicians, as at Wixford in Warwickshire, in the first half of the fifteenth century. They are epitomised however in the tracery of the east window in the Beauchamp Chapel, attached to the Collegiate Church of St Mary, a church which fell under the patronage of the Beauchamp earls of Warwick.

The range of material available to the artist was diverse, including the grotesque, monstrous and marginal, as in the other arts, together with observations of daily life and decorative motifs taken from the natural world (for instance, oak and maple at Bredon in Worcestershire).

## Patrons and Donors

The Beauchamp Chapel, or a window like that at Eaton Bishop, illustrates another important theme and influence on fourteenth-century glass in parish churches; the role and interests of patrons and donors. Although patronage was not limited to any one social group, and its scale varied considerably, in the case of parish churches it tended to be dominated by families of the gentry and the aristocracy, including bishops and priests, who might sometimes act collaboratively, but were often acting as principal patrons in accordance with the interests of their family.

Many churches celebrated and commemorated the manorial lords and their offspring, the church becoming one of the means by which gentry culture was displayed, and through which family pride was articulated. Local churches might be transformed into family *mausolea*, sometimes emphasised by family chapels and chantries, asserting permanence and association between family and place. At Whichford (Warwickshire), for instance, a south chapel was added around 1330 for the Mohun family whose associations with the church were also announced through heraldic devices in the fourteenth-century glass of the chancel.

A family and its associations in the temporal world might be projected in various ways, as too were demonstrations of piety and devotion, and the hoped-for associations with the world of the Saints. A growing sense of self-awareness amongst these families by the mid-thirteenth century required some form of expression as their importance in the affairs of local society steadily grew. In the 'theatre' of the church, knightly desire for display might call upon recumbent effigies, and a little later on brasses, and the application of heraldic designs to floor tiles, and more importantly, to window glass, together with images of the benefactors.

Among the finest donor images are those in the east window at Eaton Bishop where a series of five kneeling figures run along the bottom of the window, look up, observe and integrate with the scenes above. In the middle is a white tonsured figure wearing the academic hood of a Doctor of Civil Law, with the inscription 'Cantor'. This may be Adam de Monmouth, a canon of Hereford, who became Cantor in Exeter in 1328 and has been suggested as the commissioner of the window.

The glass at Birtsmorton in Worcestershire is more fragmentary but sufficient to demonstrate that there was originally a fine figural group in the east window showing the Ruyhale donor, in armour, and his family, dating to around 1390-1400. The remains at Ansley in north Warwickshire are more sketchy and fragments in the chancel window may well be associated with the late medieval Culpeper lords. It is possible to speculate that they could have been pictorially engaged with a figure of the Virgin and Child.

### Visual Commemoration and the 'Cult of the Family'

The wider adoption of armorial bearings by the late thirteenth century encouraged heraldic display in painted glass as a popular way of promoting family. It was versatile, capable of associating a family with a church, as in the case of the de Frenes lords of Moccas in Herefordshire, whose heraldic tracery lights now overlook a tomb; in some cases it might signal collaborative patronage, while in others it was a means of announcing regional authority or claiming membership of influential networks.

This is admirably illustrated by the de Somery barons of Dudley, whose arms appeared in at least a dozen churches around Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire, as in the fourteenth-century glass in the chancel of Enville church in Staffordshire. The Beauchamps did likewise in their 'country'.

Antiquarian accounts can often be vital to reconstructing lost schemes, as Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire* reveals in Warwickshire churches like Ansley, Newton, Barford and Wolvey. Without Stebbing Shaw's *History and Antiquities of Staffordshire* the scheme at Bushbury near Wolverhampton would have been lost to us. It combined heraldic display in the east window and elsewhere together with figures of Henry de Bushbury and his wife in the Lady Chapel, and in a chancel window the figure of a priest, quite probably Hugh de Bushbury, rector of the church and brother of the lord of the manor, kneeling before Our Lady and Child, to whom the church was dedicated.

The sophistication of such schemes can be readily appreciated in Norbury in Derbyshire, where the Fitzherbert lords of the manor combined stained glass, tombs and effigies to stunning effect. By the mid-fourteenth century the chancel was already dominated by an impressive heraldic display in eight windows that presumably recalled the affiliations of the family. From the mid-fifteenth century further commissions introduced windows with family portrait groups flanking heraldic shields and associating them with female saints, among them the Virgin, and with male saints that included John the Baptist and St Barlok; the church was dedicated to St Mary and St Barlok. Few can rival

Norbury for its emphasis on the 'cult of family' where alongside the provision made in family wills for commemorative prayers to the benefit of their souls, there was also a visual commemoration in the church that served both temporal and spiritual needs.

### Legacy and Revival

The western midlands demonstrates a fine legacy of medieval stained glass in the region's parish churches. Appropriately, the region witnessed a revival of the art by John Hardman of Birmingham, and W E Chance in the mid-nineteenth century, as other articles in this issue of *History West Midlands* reveal. ●

#### Also in this issue:

Hardman & Co: Pugin's Glasspainters – page 38.

Chance Brothers: Lighting the World – page 27.

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#### Further Reading

Sarah Crewe, *Stained Glass in England c.1180-1540* (HMSO, 1987).

John Hunt, *Lordship and the Landscape. A documentary and archaeological study of the Honor of Dudley c.1066-1322*, BAR British Series 264, Oxford 1997. See Chapter Eleven.

Kelcey Wilson-Lee, 'Representations of Piety and Dynasty: Late Medieval Stained Glass and Sepulchral Monuments at Norbury, Derbyshire', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, 131, 2011.

#### Websites:

Vidimus. Online magazine devoted to medieval stained glass, via [www.vidimus.org](http://www.vidimus.org)

Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, medieval stained glass in Great Britain, via [www.cvma.ac.uk](http://www.cvma.ac.uk)

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