

London City walk with Caroline Swash

The City walk went ahead on the due date, 17 July, with the scheduled itinerary but sadly without John Hayward to lead us. John had planned a talk with Tony Tucker, a member and speaker for 'The Friends of the City Churches' and it was agreed the BSMGP would join forces on the day, as this would facilitate entry into some of the buildings.

Caroline Swash had very kindly agreed to stand in and lead the day in place of John, and with the sun shining benevolently we started at St Lawrence Church adjacent the Guildhall. Tony Tucker introduced himself and spoke briefly about the history of the building which was Wren designed and rebuilt after its near destruction during the Blitz in 1940. The baton was handed to Caroline who gave a good account of Webb and his style of work, in context with his contemporaries and influences. Each window contains very finely painted figures with clear glass surround letting in plenty of light, the style well suits the Wren style reconstruction. As we were leaving the church we saw a delightfully drawn window commemorating the builders and craftsmen who reconstructed the church after the war (photo below right). Along its base was a row of quarries, depicting small cameo paintings of a number of the city churches.

Our collective interest was aroused and we walked the short distance to St Mary le Bow. There we saw a powerful set of windows (1961) by John Hayward, his first major commission, and 'the work of a young, enthusiastic man' he once told me. I find I am astonished at John's boldness in his use of the material and paint and his intuitive understanding of the way light works through glass and lead, creating surprisingly mature works for an artist of his age (he was then 32 years old). The windows are heavily painted and leaded, jewel like, particularly the window of Mary on the left side of the Chancel (photo right); she holds miniature 'Mary le Bow' Church, painted on pink glass, and the surround to the figure is a tour de force of architectural detail showing the steeples of historic London. Often you can't tell where paint ends and lead begins. It is a lot to take in. The face of Mary has a look of tender care as she cradles the church and watches over the City. In the West wall are two huge heraldic windows and two roundels, again intensely leaded and painted. John also designed much of the interior furnishing of the church, including the great organ case. There is more of his work to be seen in the Crypt but that was not on the day's schedule.

We next went to St Vedas, to see three east-facing windows by Brian Thomas, a celebration of his 'Baroque' experience, which underlies much of his work. Caroline Swash had known Brian personally and so was able to fill us in with humorous anecdotes on his character. The glass is colourful and the painting is rich, textural and strongly contrasting with little mid-tone, and exciting in its freedom. Peter Archer once commented that he loved painting for Brian (presumably at Whitefriars) as Brian would encourage him to loosen up to get into his more dramatic painterly style ... a refreshing change, I'm sure, from the prevailing post-Victorian manner of tightly controlled painting.

Then on to St Michael Paternoster Royal, to see windows by John Hayward again. Installed in 1968 several years after Mary Le Bow, they have an immediate impact and are stunning and powerful works. Colour and light blazes out and the lead and painted lines are full of energy and movement. Devices such as strong vertical and diagonal lines mark John's work and help to create these effects. The theme of the three windows is about Good and Evil: a Madonna and serpent-stabbing Christ-child, St Michael defeating the Archangel, Adam and Eve with a fearful snake. In the south wall here is a window commemorating Dick Whittington. The design shows Whittington against a backdrop of green glass, alluding to his countryside roots, and above him is an area rectangular pieces of busily painted architectural imagery, mostly in white tinted glass but with lots of stain, evoking the dense buildings of the City of London. These windows are full of exuberance, fiery energy, and convey some feeling of the artist's personal joy in the act of creating, and his love of the medium.

(below) John Hayward 1961: St Mary le Bow detail of Mary window;

(bottom) Christopher Webb detail: St Lawrence Church next to the Guildhall



Finally we arrived at St Mary Aldermary where we looked at works designed by Martin Travers but executed and finished by Lawrence Lee when Travers died. There are many interesting things going on in the windows and Travers was quite prolific and had considerable influence on developing trends. John Hayward cited Travers as someone who had influenced his own work. To conclude the event, Friends of City Churches had organized refreshments, a light lunch was served with wine and coffee, and there was time to mingle and discuss things we'd seen that day. Caroline and Tony offered their books on London Glass and City churches respectively, at discount prices. Our thanks go to Tony who initially conceived and planned the event with John Hayward, and also to Caroline who came in to rescue the day, and share her extensive knowledge of London glass with us.

Andrew Taylor

