

Autumn lecture: Ann Sotheran ‘Stammers and Harvey – Modern Glass Painters of York’

The speaker, BSMGP Fellow Ann Sotheran from York, had first trained and then worked with Harry Harvey and so this talk promised to give us a very close account of the lives of these two artists, both of whom had learned their craft before WWII, working then in the traditional early 20C style as passed down from the late Victorian–Edwardian period.

She began with the older artist, Harry Stammers, who was born in 1902 and had worked at first for Powell & Sons in London, where he became James Hogan’s foremost cartoonist. In 1943 he moved to Exeter, first working as a draughtsman in the firm of Wippell & Co., and then setting up on his own with the help of work from Christopher Webb. In 1947, Dean Milner-White of York persuaded him to relocate there, where he founded the ‘York school’ of contemporary glass painting.

Ann then looked in detail at the development of his style as a designer. His first windows at York are largely a continuation of his pre-war studio work in the classical style of Webb, though more stylized: for example those at West Rounton (1947) and St John Newland, Hull (1948), which has elements of baroque /rococco and delicate, finely painted faces using a ‘picking out’ technique. The figures are set against a clear glass background, which Stammers at first etched into patterns, but by 1949, at Nether Poppleton, he had abandoned this background technique, setting the figures upon thrones formed from architectural motifs. In this window, as in one a year later at Hovingham depicting St John’s vision, Stammers had visibly moved away from the classical drapery seen in earlier panels towards a more angular style.

In 1951, the year of the Festival of Britain, Stammers continued this trend towards a dramatic, stylized style with simplified, heavier graphical linework (now termed ‘Festival of Britain’ style), as well as bolder, novel colours – which can be seen in the windows at Kirkdale, his ‘Pilgrim’s progress’ at Lichfield and Hedon in Hull. There he used colours that simply ‘work well’ in a particular design, ignoring whether or not they are naturalistic – hence the use of blue for the skin!

By 1953 he had moved even further away from naturalism: at Lincoln Cathedral, the angels’ wings had been reduced to abstract forms, and at Seaton Ross a ‘wildly expressionistic’ (as described by Pevsner) Ascension window, with a black on a light-green Adam, Eve and snake against an architectural background. The central figure, in smoky mauve-violets, is surrounded by spiky low-flying angels. Some windows also featured modern details – such as Lancaster bombers (see below).

At this point Harry Harvey entered the story. The second Harry, younger than Stammers by 20 years, had met the latter in Devon, and in 1947 was invited to York to work as his assistant. Having started his painting career on the ‘edge bits’, by 1950 he was exhibiting panels, and at that time was elected a BSMGP Associate. A number of commissions followed whilst still working in Stammers studio; at this time his painting style was lightweight, but his backgrounds and colour bore a strong Stammers stamp. As well as architectural detail, Harvey made a feature of heraldry.

In 1956 Harvey left Stammers’ studio, with his blessing, to set up alone. Stammers continued to design over 150 windows in churches and cathedrals around the UK, varying their style from one to the next: between naturalistic light-painted figures (Adel, Leeds) to strong, simple, semi-abstract figures (Lincoln cathedral); from backgrounds full of architectural detail (Accrington 1956), through foliage (Glasgow cathedral, 1956) to ‘crazy-paving’ (St Olave’s, York 1957) and other abstract patterning. A St George and dragon (Masham 1958, [above right](#)) is divided horizontally, its gorgeous red etched dragon compared in style to the ‘Guernica’. Details of his windows often feature powerful graphics: at the base of the St Michael window (Lincoln) is an alternating pattern of Lancaster bombers, searchlights and exploding points of light; in an adjoining window is a motley arrangement of disembodied



heads float in a deep-blue sky ([above](#)); at the foot of the Virgin in St Mary Redcliffe (Bristol early 1960s), a white Eve stands by a Tree of abstract shapes, encircled by a green whirling snake. In windows for architect George Pace, which aimed to ‘marry the modern with the traditional’, there is heavy stonework and the windows become highly abstract – one at St Martin le Grand, York commemorating a fire is filled with enigmatic shapes denoting smoke and fire; one in Sheffield is like dalle-de-verre.

Meanwhile, Harry Harvey’s style also developed apace. In his 1958 Nativity window at Woodford, Northants the angel figures showed a strong Stammers influence. But by 1959, after returning from the Brussels Expo, his style had become paired-down, even minimalist. His use of background, like that of Stammers, varied considerably: a window at Feston, E Yorks (1963) featuring ‘the multitude’ resembled Hornby pottery; in Sheffield cathedral (1967) are flourishes of architecture detail, but in others (e.g Campsall nr Doncaster, 1966) the figures are surrounded by bright-coloured abstract patterns with no attempt at architecture. In the 1960s, like Stammers, he often worked for George Pace; a 1969 window at Weston, Lincs has a very limited colour palette. Like Stammers, he often used colour purely in terms of the design composition. A common colour in his compositions was viridian green (e.g. at Walkington (1965, [below](#)) and at Haxby – where at the sides he used new cathedral glass to fill a large area cheaply). Among among his favourite motifs were Yorkshire sheep and birds (he was a keen birdwatcher!). Others were demons and dragons, many in vivid flashed reds and yellows, and were often far more dramatically depicted than his angels.

Ann concluded that, whereas Stammers’ great strength was his powerful use of colour, and masterly sparing linework, Harvey’s was his painted faces – for example his Christ figures – calm, indomitable, and full of expression. When drawing figures, he liked to emphasize their movement (as he told Ann) – such as in the dancing blue devil at Westerdale, N Yorks (several windows feature blue-skinned devils), and figures treading grapes. All in all, I found it an extraordinary variety of style and technical virtuosity, and an inspiring talk, thank you Ann! Chris Wyard

