

CONSERVATION OF THE EAST WINDOW OF THE CHANTRY CHAPEL OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST IN 'GOD'S HOUSE AT EWELME', OXFORDSHIRE

When you decide to make your pilgrimage to Ewelme, please take our advice. Don't go directly to the church; approach by the lower lane and there you will see perched on the grassy slope the red-brick Grammar School, in use uninterrupted since its foundation in 1437. Up the garden path alongside is a door in the wall. Go in to the cosy almshouse courtyard, where peace is palpable. Yet here still live beneficiaries of Alice, first Duchess of Suffolk and her husband who was in charge of King Henry VI's brickworks and the construction of Eton College as well as this complex (which once included their great manor house across the lane, destroyed in the 17th century) employing the latest technology and building material from the continent: handmade brick. Go across the courtyard up a steep flight of worn stone steps with a weathered oak door at the top. Push this open and catch your breath. You are in 'God's House at Ewelme', as the Foundation is called, which provides the title of a most informative book by John Goodall (Ashgate Publishing 2001), an extension of his doctoral thesis. As well as a detailed account of the benefactors and the buildings they established, he describes the daily lives of the almsmen whose bounden duty was to pray several times a day for their souls in the chantry next door.

The tower, early 14th century, survives from the earlier church rebuilt in the early 15th century and the chantry chapel, almshouses and school added by 1448–50 when its statutes were issued. This chapel (figure above) attracts visitors from all over the world because its two ancient tombs belonging to Alice's father Thomas Chaucer and his wife and the Duchess, the poet's grand-daughter, are superb examples of their kind. Hers is particularly remarkable as her effigy lies in a rich robe of the period, but underneath, below ornate carving of angels can be glimpsed her cadaver, a grim *memento mori*. What a survivor she was in a turbulent period: after the murder of her husband on shipboard as he returned from France in 1450 – his political rivals accused him of weakening English control in France, and having an eye on the throne for their son – she continued as benefactress until her death 25 years later. The chantry decoration is distinguished by its devotion to the Holy Name 'IHS' painted on the walls and in the stained glass tracery.

In the four-light east window of this chapel are the remains, assembled and glazed in the early 19th century, of the stained glass commission originally decorating the chantry windows – now a conglomeration of illustrious family heraldry blazoned in shields and roundels; cherubim echoing the carved wooden angels in the roof, an East Anglian feature introduced by the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk; St Mark and his emblem the lion, suggesting the existence of the four evangelists in the original scheme; jumbled fragments of architectural niches in which the main subjects were set; and numerous quarry backgrounds with their painted motifs



including some unique ones (do tell us if you have come across any other examples) depicting the medicinal herb Dog's Mercury (photo below left, from our Condition Report). Among all these are a considerable number of earlier subjects, in particular Archangel Gabriel of the Annunciation and the heads of St Peter and St Paul, in the sturdy early-14th-century style of Merton College, Oxford.

Paul and I have visited Ewelme on various occasions over the long period we have lived in Oxford – it is off the road to Henley, a picturesque village with now-restored watercress beds – and have always admired this window, because even in its incoherent state and suffering from various types of corrosion

medieval glass is subject to, rendering the subjects difficult to appreciate, this mass of fragments offers tantalizing clues to the beautiful overall scheme the Duke and Duchess commissioned. The glass painting of which Paul has been such a devoted exponent throughout his life is of exceptional quality, showing a refinement of trace line and subtlety of shading typical of what is called 'The Thomas Glazier School' spanning roughly 50 years of Thomas Glazier at New College and Winchester College through to the Antechapel of All Souls College, exemplars of the style seen in the Lily-crowned Virgin and Child and two Prioresses now in the east window of Merton College with an estimated date within the first two decades of the 15th century.

Then, two years ago we were commissioned through Chapel Studio by the Ewelme Trust (never shut down, even by Henry VIII and continuing its charitable work today unabated) to write a detailed Condition Report on this window; and they subsequently had the faith in us to award the tender to our colleagues in the Conservation Team of Chapel Studio, Elise Learner, Rachel Helleur and Laura Pes who have been working slowly and painstakingly using all informed methods allowable by the Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi and the Institute of Conservation (Director Robert Holloway, Consultant and Specialist Glass Painter Paul San Casciani and Elise Learner are all Accredited Conservator-Restorers of ICON) to remove this harmful corrosion as far as is safely possible and restore much of the legibility. The disfiguring repair leads are allowed to be removed and kiln-formed backing plates made to support the mended pieces. The Conservation Team has managed to retrieve the beauty of Ewelme's Virgin wearing a Lily Crown (figures below). We can now see the assured defining line of the distinctive crown, face and the delicate delineation of hairlines, eyebrows, eyes and mouth. Chemical decay known as 'browning' in the core of the glass does not allow further improvement.

Our Report also details a rare subject: a Yale heraldic antelope with horns, tusks and spotted fur, collared and chained. These fantastic creatures are supporters of William de la Pole the Duke of Suffolk's coat-of-arms. The 'after' photo (p.7 left) shows a detail of



(left) Yale roundel: 14th-century quarries depicting Dog's Mercury (©PSC);

(above) Virgin wearing Lily Crown (i) before conservation; (ii) after conservation (©Chapel Studio).

(left) Yale Heraldic antelope 'after'; (right) fragment depicting rich medieval female costume, after conservation. (images © Chapel Studio)



the roundel finished and waiting to be re-glazed. Its traced outline is strong but elegant, the fur on the legs and the ear carried out with finesse. Cross-hatching with a very fine brush is seen outlining the grass, a shading technique of all main subjects in the Chantry Chapel commission fragments.

Every tiny piece of glass in this window is suffering corrosion: there are various kinds in varying degrees, requiring informed decisions and meticulous, time-consuming treatment but the Conservation Team have the knowledge, experience and devoted patience to carry it out. We were deeply gratified that a visit by some members of the Ewelme Trust gave us all the opportunity to show what is being done, slowly but surely. Conservation procedures reveal intriguing details, even two pieces showing an ornate robe decorated with an ermine-tail border and plaited cords just like the attire the Duchess wears on her tomb (photo above right) -- is this a fragment of the donor figure or the Virgin dressed in ermine bordered robes, as revealed in photographs of the ceiling of the cadaver compartment (illustrated in *Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches* by Roger Rosewell, Boydell Press, 2008)?

This window is scheduled to be back in position in the New Year, isothermally glazed in line with current best practice to remove it from further deleterious effects of weathering and condensation -- refer to www.chapelstudio.co.uk for the latest images and news of its reinstatement.

Paula San Casciani of Paul San Casciani Stained Glass Consultants, Oxford. (Images reproduced by kind permission of the Ewelme Trust.)

LETTERS

CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS GLASS COURSES CLOSURE -- HELP! Now that Central Saint Martins has become part of the University of the Arts (London), the ideological rationale for a practical taught course such as ours no longer exists. Furthermore, the move to Kings Cross planned for 2012 has meant a reduction in space for all departments. We have consequently been informed that there is no room for our 'messy' activity on the new site. Instead, glass will be linked with Ceramics in some as yet undefined way.

However, the enthusiasm and success of our students leads us to feel that there is indeed a need for a continuous one or two year course in glass in the London area. We have considered various options and come to the conclusion that the most exciting context for this venture is undoubtedly the new 'Arts and Crafts Hub' currently in process of development.

To create new independent workshop courses will be an immense undertaking and we need your help. As practising artists, craftsmen, historians and enthusiasts, BSMGP members are uniquely positioned to offer advice. We need to know what you think needs teaching and what you think is needed to keep glass alive in the 21st century along with suggestions as to how we might evolve and whom we might involve in this venture.

Please can you contact me as soon as possible by writing to 106 Willoughby House, Barbican, EC2Y 8BL or by emailing caroline.swash@btinternet.com. Of course all communications will be treated with strictest confidence. *Caroline Swash ATD FMGP*

Dear Chris,

The recent celebration of Lawrence Lee's 100th birthday reminded Keith Hill and me of a panel Lawrence Lee made for a Penshurst man nearly 20 years ago. I thought BSMGP members might like to hear about the story, as told to me by John Flower (the son in the story), who has allowed me to tell it:

On a January afternoon in 1991, a strong south-westerly gale was blowing in Penshurst when there was a terrible crash. An elderly lady living in The Yews had gone to have her usual rest on the bed after lunch when the front door bell rang. She went downstairs and called through the door that the wind was so strong that she dare not open it because she would never get it closed again; would whoever was there go round to the back door? She herself went back through the hall and kitchen to the back door to see what the caller wanted. Nobody came, so after a little while she moved back to the hall to call out again. It was then that there was the tremendous crash: a chimney stack at one end of the house had given way in the wind and fallen straight through the roof, onto the bed from which she had just got up, and its weight had taken the whole thing down almost through the bedroom floor. Bed and chimney stack now hung down in the kitchen she had just left! The large three-flue stack and twenty-seven courses of bricks had fallen as one large block weighing, it was later estimated, three and a half tons! Her son was working in London, and came home as quickly as he could, but it still took some time. He found his mother unharmed and, in fact, quite unfazed.

As the days went by the son decided that he wanted to mark the incident in some way and contacted Lawrence Lee, a fellow resident of Penshurst, to ask him to make a commemorative stained glass panel. However do you design a panel to commemorate an incident like that? As you can see from Keith Hill's photograph, Lawrence Lee made a panel showing a very attractive Saint Barbara (the patron saint of sappers and those in danger of sudden death by explosions) standing in front of The Yews with the corner of her cloak just shielding the roof where the chimney had crashed down. Note that her tower is also in the picture. The panel is exquisite and the story behind it makes it even more special.

Yours, Peter Batts



LIBRARY NOTES

As your Hon. Librarian, I try to ensure that we maintain a collection of the most useful books on the art and history of glass-painting. Our collection is all the more valuable for being housed within the much larger collection of the Society of Antiquaries of London, at Burlington House, Piccadilly, and I should like to encourage more people to make use of this amazing resource. It is right next door to the Royal Academy galleries, and a visit to the two makes an excellent combination. The reading room is on the first floor, with hundred of books accessible on open shelves, and many more that are reached by going upstairs to a balcony area. Lots more volumes are shelved in a series of basement rooms; our own books are down there, in a group of shelves numbered around the 386-mark.

Geoffrey Lane

**Contributions for the next newsletter
to Chris Wyard by 10 February**