

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Exeter 29–31 August

Our annual autumn conference began some time after 10 am on Friday morning, 29 August at St Luke's Campus of the University of Exeter. I was at that precise point peering through the morning mist on Exmoor, trying to navigate my car round sundry sheep who refused to budge from their doze in the centre of road. With a gashed tyre, a 'kennel run' to deposit two small reluctant dogs, and an encounter with roadworks in the centre of Exeter, it was obviously going to be just 'one of those days'.



Detail, window by John Haywood FMGP, St Mary Steps, Exeter

But, some time later, and buoyed up by a hearty lunch, I could finally relax and enjoy the show. We began with a walk/ride to the city centre to view a window by John Haywood in the old part of the city at St Mary Steps. Obviously my gremlins were still in operation as I took a wrong turn at the traffic lights and ended up on an impromptu tour of the district's churches before finally catching up with the group. Next stop was the cathedral, and a most enlightening talk by Dr David Evans (co-author of *The Great East Window of Exeter Cathedral*) on the cathedral glazing. We were all fascinated by its history, particularly of the Great East window. From a distance this window, which displays a wealth of heraldry and an array of saints and patriarchs, appears a complex but singular piece of glazing. But as its story unfolded we came to realize the various nature of its components. First, the glass bought ready painted, and fitted by Master Walter the glazier at the turn of the 14th century, as there was no cathedral painting workshop. Then the Perpendicular windows fitted by Robert Lyen when the tracery in the top of the window rotted away. Most amusing was the tale of the heads removed in the Reformation 'to prevent further vandalism' which were later replaced again and again by various enthusiastic restorers. With the headless bodies and bodiless heads floating around, shields taken from the Chapter House and used to fill gaps, then later moved back again, medieval canopies from elsewhere inserted, and earlier insertions removed and repainted, we began to acquire a vivid sense of the dynamic history behind a window. The former West window, likewise, now filled the tea-house. I was particularly delighted to find a small dragon shield here by Peckitt, at low level, as I had been seeking examples of dragons as a theme related to a current project. (I bagged four on this trip, incidentally, both with and without lances – a fine catch!)



Exeter cathedral

On to Saturday, and our coach expedition around the lanes of Devon and into Torquay for refuelling. My thanks to the organizers for providing a fine and varied selection of early medieval / renaissance glass, examples of Arts & Crafts both early and late (Christopher and Veronica Whall, Burne-Jones, Morris and Webb) and 20th century commissions. Thank heavens for the previous evening's lecture by Peter Cormack, which fitted the wealth of Arts & Crafts material into context both historically and within the fabric of the church. I particularly enjoyed the fine wood carvings to be found in every corner, and the magnificent barrel vaulted ceilings – and started to acquire a distinct ache in the old neck after so much upward gazing!

Thank goodness then, also, for the substantial and delicious conference dinner and for the quiet morning's viewing of members' slides the next day, after much late night conversation. May next year's conference be half so much fun!

☞ Chris Wyard



Angel, Exeter cathedral

Exeter, by all accounts, one of the finest medieval cities in England before the war, was decimated by bombing, but still holds sufficient treasures to be a base for our foray into the West Country this year.

Our first port of call was the chapel of St Mary Steps (and boy, has she got a lot!), where John Haywood delved through the mists of time to 1964, giving a charming and very modest description of his beautiful East window. A fabulous palette of burnt orange, gold and lime green blended perfectly with the red soil and crumbly 'Heavitree' stone which faces the church and city walls. Next, on to the magnificent cathedral, with Dr David Evans giving a lively description of the great East window, whose various saints and angels appeared to have been dancing the Conga around the building for the last 600 years. Back to base then for a substantial repast (why do I never remember to wear elasticated trousers?), and an excellent lecture from our erudite leader and walking encyclopaedia, Peter Cormack, outlining treats in store and putting them into context. Bed. Late.



Dragon shield by Peckitt, formerly in Exeter cathedral West window



15th C window detail, St Michael's, Doddiscombsleigh



15th C window detail, St Michael's, Doddiscombsleigh

Up at cockcrow (well actually the cocks were still asleep) and onto the coaches where 'deepest darkest Devon' revealed her splendours as we sallied forth down (extremely) narrow lanes betwixt rolling fields and hedgerows. Through sunshine and showers we explored idyllic country churches, brilliantly illuminated by the cooling clear light of early autumn. Just the job for the crystalline Christopher Whall. Keen observers were treated to a spectacular flight of brightly feathered wedding guests at Berry Pomeroy whilst our coach drivers did an interesting pirouette with their attendant stretched limousines in the lane.

Dodging palm trees and holidaymakers we lunched in Torquay before making the strenuous climb (marks lost by those who used the lift in Debenhams), up the cliffs to St John the Evangelist. (Remind me to pack a hammer and chisel next time to attack that appalling ribbon pointing!) Generous helpings of Morris, Burne-Jones and Clayton & Bell were consumed, before proceeding to St Peter, Shaldon with its small but perfectly formed windows and monumental stone screen. Maybe this is what held the church up when poor Mr Sedding started sagging (or at least his arches did), shortly after the building was completed! Flagging but still not satiated and sustained by Bayliffs' apples and plums, on to St John the Baptist, Bishopsteignton, when Andrew Johnson told the story of his bright and illuminating 'creation window'.

Finally, and not to be defeated by a rebellious coach driver who started refusing fences, we made an impromptu stop at St Somebodies, Somewhere (sorry), which proved to be a little jewel box and well worth the prods required to lift the few less robust from their seats one last time.

Back home, an excellent conference dinner and an evening of quiet conversation in the bar with exchange of 'helpful household hints' and discussion of the relative merits of English and Argentinean glass – fascinating!

Sunday morning, time for farewells but not until almost a dozen brave souls faced 'death by peer group' in showing slides of their work – the whole point of conference – seeing, learning and sharing of experiences – great.

As always, enormous thanks is due to all those whose hard work made it happen – the 'three P's', Peter (Cormack), Pauline (English) and Pat (Bonvoison) who researched and planned the whole operation and finally the inimitable Sue whose gentle humour and poise in moments of tension ('but the bus won't fit down there') was a joy to see. Thank you all!

♥ Helen Robinson



Christopher Whall window 'Adoration of the Magi', St Mary's, Berry Pomeroy

What a stunning Conference, glad to be along. One thing which struck me, and indeed often does, is how trees thoughtlessly grow up outside windows, obscuring the wonderful graphics put there for us to appreciate and learn from. I wonder if anyone would be brave enough to suggest a little prudent pruning of our nation's churchyards?

♥ Clare Maryan Green



'Creation' window by Andrew Johnson AMGP, St John the Baptist, Bishopsteignton