

SHROPSHIRE-STAFFORDSHIRE GLASS

This year's conference between the 2nd and 5th of September. Two participants relate their experience of events . . .

Thursday

The fine weather was holding, the journey good, despite a one-hour deviation around various country roads and hamlets of Stafford to avoid gridlock on the M6. A warm welcome restored flagging spirits, so after a quick shower (sorry folks, but mine worked perfectly!) it was off to meet up with friends, old and new, and to find out just what was meant by 'hot and cold buffet'. We couldn't move too fast after that bread and butter pudding, but Martin Harrison's introduction to the following day's tour could not be missed. So it was off to the 'green' room for a talk and slides where Martin introduced us all to the work of Betton and Evans, the Shrewsbury glass painters, and William Goresuch Rowland's remarkable collection of Renaissance Continental glass. Would we, I wondered, be up to the challenge laid down by the speaker, to look anew at post-Reformation, 'artistic' glass and to reassess the painted product of 'this neglected period'? Only the morrow would tell.



Friday

We were up with the lark the next morning and, putting last night's nocturnal serenades (French, not Italian) behind us, we set off on the coaches for Shrewsbury. Some of us wondered if Sue had arranged a packed lunch as we followed a stylishly sign-written green van that announced in gold lettering: 'Ashworth's Products Ltd: Oils and Fats', but she assured us that this wasn't the case.

The emphasis of this first day was to be on 'artistic' (as opposed to 'archaeological') glass, a promise (or was it a threat?) that was delivered in full. I had never visited Shrewsbury but had been told that it was rather pretty. Bit of an understatement I would now say, but I knew we were in for a cracking day, as

did we all when we stepped off the coach for the first visit. There was something for everybody in this packed itinerary – the amalgam of visits providing some challenging painted images alongside more familiar/traditional treatments of the medium. Highlights of my day included every single visit. But, for the sake of brevity, to single out a few moments: Jane Gray's introduction to her Abbey window; coffee and roundels; the Jesse window and the Goresuch Rowland collection (both at St Mary's [examples top right – Cancer the crab; St Bernard excommunicates a horde of flies]); meeting up with Messrs Wright and Hayes (at St Julian's and St Alkmund's respectively); an organ recital in the light airiness of St Chad's (that pulpit!); the Eginton window (wow!); finally, dodging the wedding cars and encountering the Margaret Rope windows at Our Lady of Help ['St Cecilia' window detail above]. All of this was expertly introduced by our leaders – a perfect day, followed by several cups of tea, a fish supper, and an illuminating and fascinating lecture from Peter Cormack.

Saturday

Up with the lark's lazy brother this morning for a substantial breakfast – much needed for those of us travelling in the coach that introduced us to the world as 'the over-fifties nude bungee jumping club'.

Today's itinerary was full of promise – of ancient and more modern glass – and visits to view some of Staffordshire's and Derbyshire's finest. Once again, the promise was met with trumps. The shabby and uncared-for exterior of our first church at Trent Vale gave no indication of the dazzling virtuosity of the Forsyth window within. Some of us were inspired, and some less impressed, but none were indifferent. With the jewelled intensity of the East Window of St John's still jangling in our memory's eye, it was back on to the coach and off to the medieval church of St Edward the Confessor at Cheddleton. We were reliably informed that Cheddleton had once been renowned for its lunatic asylum, but no madness was manifest here. After the church cat had respectfully guided us into the interior, Peter pointed out the mix of styles manifest in the windows, which exhibited both Italianate and medieval influence. Down the hill again and off to Leek for coffee and an example of nineteenth-century ecclesiastical architecture at its best. Once again, Peter was keen to point out the juxtaposition of Italianate and medieval style, and opened our eyes to examples of both. After a deservedly lengthy stop, it was on to the coaches again and off to lunch. We did get lost, I found out later. But the trip through the lanes was lovely, with the warmest of warm welcomes awaiting us at Norbury Village Hall where the WI had prepared us a waist-threateningly delicious lunch of sandwiches and soup. Then off to hear about the restoration of the breathtaking grisaille windows at St Mary and St Barlock.

On to the final visit of the day then: St Oswald in Ashbourne, last but not least, described as the cathedral of the peaks. Having chased off two more weddings, we entered and at once realized why. Here, windows by Kempe, Warrington, Hardman, Burlison & Grylls – and by Christopher Whall – could be examined to the accompaniment of organ practice: a double or treble treat. At the Whall window [detail right], the sad story of the young sisters represented in it, who died in an accident with an oil lamp, added a further dimension, and having listened to the tale again at the sister's tomb we left in pensive mood.

The conference dinner did not drive the questions from our minds and thoughts raised over the weekend were aired during Sunday morning's discussion. What is the function of glass in a religious setting? Should it inspire, should it be truly awesome, should it aid contemplation? How much explanation is necessary if the window is to 'speak' to the viewer?

So thank you to the organizers for a warm-hearted, rewarding, thought-provoking and excellent conference. We look forward to next year.

Carrie Atkinson





*A layman's eye view:*

After a leisurely arrival, in glorious sunshine, on Thursday 2 September to a Hall of Residence on the Stafford Campus, we were treated to a delectable buffet in the Gallery followed by an erudite, lively and humorous talk by Martin Harrison.

The following day, as breakfast was unavailable until 8 am, it was a bit of scramble to get to the coach, which left at 9 am for Shrewsbury Abbey, but we managed of course! As one who first went, 10 years

ago, to Shrewsbury because of Brother Cadfael the descriptions by Jane Gray of her beautiful and evocative windows – St Winefride in 1992 and St Benedict in 1997 as a combined millennium project and memorial to Edith Pargeter (creator; as Ellis Peters; of Brother Cadfael) – have to be the highlight of the Conference. Children, we were told, particularly enjoy the St Winefride window; they love the detail of herbs and other small things. Other works that caught my eye were the Betton and Evans 1906 windows in the North Isle.

A return to the coach took us to St Mary's in Wyle Copp, known in the Middle Ages as 'the Street of the Glaziers', where there is a rich collection of medieval glass, some of it continental, collected by Rev William Gorsuch Roland, vicar from 1828 to 1851, and much of it reset by David Evans. The assembled experts felt that little of the glass (which has been moved several times) in the 14th century Jesse window was original but, for me, it was none the less impressive. The non-medieval glass located high in the clerestory is also most likeable. Martin Harrison quoted: 'Rightly the Churches Conservation Trust describes St Mary's as "their Cathedral"'. Members then dispersed for lunch, my time spent with a sandwich sitting quietly in St Alkmund's looking at the 18th-century window of the Virgin transmuting in the Figure of Faith, supported by chalice and crown ('be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life'), adapted from the Guido Reni painting [above]. The Colebrook Dale window settings – in the vestry, behind the organ and the Francis Eginton window are also rather special. Apparently the church warden asked Francis Eginton for a design and offered to pay him £200, but they liked it so much they actually paid him 210 guineas. The glass was installed in 1795. It is rare to find a painted window of this kind complete in situ. The Colebrook Dale window behind the organ is in a particularly frail mount, obviously distorted and vulnerable to storm damage – I took a photograph that shows this well.



After lunch we reassembled in St Julian's, an interfaith centre where we had the pleasure of seeing another, earlier, Jane Gray floral lunette window. The east window here is probably David Evans' last work and is after a Raphael design. Next we walked to the Roman Catholic Cathedral 'Our Lady of Help', to see the wonderful series of windows by Margaret Rope. This was followed, after a walk along the city walls, by St Chad's church, which is 'warm, round and cosy'. There is no doubt in my mind why it became the main church of the city of Shrewsbury.



Within was a window with a spectacular depth of brilliant colour in an 1842 Rubenesque deposition by David Evans and an absolutely delightful window illustrating 'suffer the little children'.

Now we returned to the coach; mine was always the coach driven by the driver with the 'Cat and the Hat' (!) for the journey back to the campus and a quiet time with the delights of Morris Venables' books (another highlight of this conference for me), followed by a gripping and erudite lecture from Peter Cormack on the Arts and Craft Movement in stained glass.

Saturday we were again off at 9 am to St John's, Stoke-on-Trent to see, among others, the Gordon Mitchell Forsyth East window in rather jolly purples, followed by St Edward the Confessor at Cheddleton, one of the most important churches in the country for William Morris windows – which positively sizzle. It was here that Peter Cormack brought the house down with his tales of Mrs Wardle's Sandwiches! We will all taste sandwiches very carefully from now on!! And an early Burne Jones. Next on a packed schedule was All Saints, Compton, Leek where many of us purchased pickled eggs and delicious homemade damson jam, as well as coffee, before admiring the stained glass panels surrounded by contemporary paintings by Letherby and John Platt's St Francis window. There was also the mystery of the Baby Jessie (still in utero?) in the bottom right-hand corner of the lovely John Platt window in the North Isle [detail of Miriam from 'Miriam, Esther and Ruth' window by Platt, below left].

Back to the coach for the journey to the tiny village of Norbury where the WI gave us a very welcome lunch before we viewed the church of St Mary and St Barlok, where we enjoyed the talk by Steve Clare on the early (1340) armorial and grisaille glass. Afterwards we enjoyed seeing Norbury Old Manor and its stained glass fragments [two examples above] before continuing to St Oswald's in Ashbourne where my most lasting memories are of the two high-quality memorials to children, one in marble and one in stained glass. Finally back to the campus at Stafford for more time with Morris Venables' books, a reception and the conference dinner.



Sunday morning breakfast was leisurely, followed by a presentation of members' slides, including Ruth Jacobsen and Jane Bayliss, with some of Bennachie (which I know well) and daffodils.

High praise to all concerned with the conference; especially to Sue Ashworth. A wonderful experience.

*Jenny Metcalf*