

Event Review: Discussion Day 6 May

I always come back from a conference or lecture feeling invigorated and today was no exception. London is such a beautiful city and just getting out for the day is a treat. Looking at windows and hearing our Fellows talking about their work made it very special. Today we visited three sites, and had four Fellows of the Society to enlighten us on the creative process as well as the build-up to each commission.

The morning started with Caroline Swash, talking about her new book on *Stained Glass Walks in London*, almost, but not quite, hot off the press. I missed that bit as my train was delayed. Sorry Caroline! Douglas Hogg, Jo Nuttgens, and finally Caroline and Tony Benyon gave illustrated talks at the Art Workers' Guild in the morning, and after lunch we wandered down to see the windows. I always write notes and sketch (see below and overleaf) as it helps me remember and improve my own practice. These are my personal reflections on the day, which I hope some members will find useful.



My sketch of Douglas's window (detail)

The window by Douglas Hogg at the Queen's Chapel of the Savoy (above) was made for the Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Four artists were shortlisted to produce a design. The client was Her Majesty. 'The trust of the client is the most important element of a commission', he told us. It allows him to take risks and keep his integrity. Douglas began with an image of the queen riding a horse that she had changed herself to include a corgi. Having beautifully etched and painted the image on a glass sample, Douglas then smashed it before reassembling the fragments. The act of subversion broke up the surface in a randomized way that Douglas embraced. He enjoys experimenting and pushing the boundaries of stained glass. He drew images of Justice and Honor from nearby statues, then painted and stained them on subtly different pieces of coloured glass that were cut counter to the drawing. But instead of leading them together he laminated them onto a backing sheet to avoid heavy leadlines in that area. Douglas commissioned Heaps to make extra-wide-heart lead for the job.

His fascination with how a window looks from inside and outside, both in daylight and at night, contributed to the design. Small pieces of dichroic glass were incorporated into the central panels to look like a petals falling, and this glass was also used to highlight the crown: it reflects light as well as transmitting it, and is visible when the rest of the window is dark. Lenses, representing pearls, and bevelled glass, echoing diamonds, were used to give the window sparkle. Even over-cooked silver stain, which takes on an iridescence, was used to make the outside more interesting (I groan when I open the kiln and see my stain is like that). Large sheets of non-reflective glass from Germany were used to protect the windows from the elements. Although expensive, this glass allows the light to reflect off the leaded window behind and helps it to be read from the outside.

As much thought went into the lettering. An old-fashioned typewritten speech was suggested, and the queen's signature faithfully copied. The date of 1952 in a traditional typeface was juxtaposed with a digital 2012. Douglas had to go to an interview in London to present his design, during which it was pointed out

that he'd put the wrong dates in. He had to make some hasty adjustments in the hotel before the design was resubmitted and accepted.

Once Douglas was in his studio overlooking the Cheviot Hills, working on the glass, he said he relaxed and enjoyed it. He loves working on the glass, and looking at the window that came across. He made the widows single-handedly and it took a year. Normally, after the window is dedicated, he won't revisit it for five years to allow him to see it objectively. He seemed justifiably pleased with how it sat in the chapel amongst the other windows, glowing warmly and sparkling, without killing its neighbours.

Jo Nuttgens had made a series of 11 windows at Kings College Chapel over 10 years ago (below). In the morning he talked about his relationship with his father, Ed Nuttgens, also a stained glass artist, and how he had been brought up in a devoutly Catholic household. After studying at Central and the Royal College of Art, Jo reacted against the Church, his father and stained glass. Then in 1978 he worked for Patrick Reyntiens, and made a small window designed by John Piper in memory of John Betjeman. Working in the German tradition of using opals, surface texture and abstract designs, Jo re-engaged with stained glass, but it was only during his mother's final illness that the priest persuaded him to make some figurative windows for the local church. The windows illustrated dramatic scenes from the bible, imagining real people's reactions to the strange, sometimes humorous, events. The windows for Kings College were done in a similar style. They took nine months to make and, despite being ill at the time, Jo stuck to a very tight timetable.



Walking into the chapel I was struck by the startling contrast between the bright windows and the ornately painted, dark interior. At the time of the commission the walls were white, but they are now restored to their original colouring. The lead-lines in the glass were immediately obvious on the figures, including separating the hair from the head. The clothes were richly patterned and textured and Jo said he used a comb when painting. I like to see an interior where all the windows are by one artist – it gives the feeling of unity and the vision of the artist comes across strongly, as it did here. (cont on p. 4)

Contributions for the next newsletter to
Chris Wyard by 1 August



In the morning Tony and Caroline Benyon showed slides from their windows at Edenbridge and St Albans, which were made in a 'mosaic' style similar to one we saw at the Temple church in the afternoon (above). Caroline designs the windows and cuts the glass whilst Tony does most of the painting. They are both passionate about the raw glass and it 'leads' them. The windows include many small pieces of cullet that they inherited. The glass is painted with line and very little tone, as that allows the glass to sparkle. Various thicknesses of lead are used to emphasize passages of colour or design. Light pours through tracery so those panels need to be painted more heavily. 'Light is like water and finds its way through the smallest chink', Tony told us. Blues and rubies behave differently, the reds showing up in the day and the blues shining as the light dims. They need to be broken up with soft tones to stop them looking murky. Purples and mulberries work well. Blue goes a long way – a window with a third of blue glass will look like a blue window.

When making a window much time is spent getting it on and off the easel. The Benyons use a reducing glass to enable them to see it from a distance (available from London Graphics for about £20 and an essential tool, according to Caroline). The length of time taken to make the exquisitely detailed 'mosaic' style window



My sketch of Caroline's window (detail)



makes it a 'never again' job. Luckily, though, they did have another crack at it for the window high up in the Temple church. An elderly man who used to be a chorister there during the war commissioned the window. The choir was nicknamed the 'Young Lions' because they sang on during the blitz. The sting in the tail was that they had to wait for the commissioner to die before the commission could be paid for!

To see the small, predominantly blue window without binoculars we had to climb a stone spiral staircase and lean through a narrow opening. No chance to sketch this one, unfortunately. I had more luck drawing the Charter Window down below that the Benyons made in 2008. The three lights sat well with earlier windows made by Carl Edwards, Caroline's father. Apparently the commissioners were unaware of the family connection when they gave the job to Caroline. She was able to use some of the last jar of Heaton's Strong Silver Stain that she has ordered at the beginning of her career mistakenly buying 2kg instead of 2lbs. For me, even 2oz would be extravagant, but worth it if I could find a stain that fired well at high temperatures.

It was a full day with lots to digest. My thanks go to all the speakers for sharing their work, and to the organizers for putting on such an affordable and interesting day.

Rachel Mulligan