

Stained Glass Archives
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Researching stained glass in Wales has often necessitated archival work and helped me appreciate what records can tell us about the stories behind stained glass windows. These visits to the archives have sometimes been to find more about windows that I have discovered and recorded, including the basic information about windows that is not always immediately apparent, such as their date and maker, but also have also revealed stories relevant to the choice of subject matter or studio, or revealed controversies behind certain commissions. In other cases, usually while looking for something else, I have found information in archives that has encouraged me to go and visit and record particular windows.

The archives that I have used fall into two main categories – those of stained glass artists or studios, and those relevant to dioceses or individual parishes, and in these cases the information found with the faculty correspondence is most useful. Diocesan archives afford the possibility of finding out information on a large number of churches in one repository, whereas parish archives are often more spread out and cannot always be located. Some are at local record offices, and many are not. In some cases parish archives are still kept at the relevant places of worship, and can be hard to track down.

Archives relevant to a number of major and minor stained glass studios survive at local, regional and national archives. The archives of James Powell & Sons at the V&A Art & Design Archive and the records of John Hardman & Co at Birmingham Archives are well-known examples but are also vast and finding specific information about a particular commission is rarely easy. Some, such as the archives of Celtic Studios at West Glamorgan Archive Services, are well catalogued to help with research on an individual window. In the case of Celtic Studios, their cartoons and some designs were acquired by a different institution (the National Library of Wales), and cartoons and designs of John Hardman & Co. are found at other locations in Birmingham. Not far away, at Sandwell Archives in Smethwick, a handful of cartoons by Samuel Evans survive, but no other documentation, and while order books, letter books, wages books, diaries and design books by Camm & Co. can be found, there are no cartoons by the firm.

A third avenue is useful for researching stained glass, which is the private or family papers of those who commissioned windows, but these can be hard to track down, and even if they can be found, useful information about a commission is not always found. I have mainly researched windows in churches, which are easier in many ways because of the information that was sometimes included in the faculty documentation. Where, for example, is the best place to find information about stained glass commissioned for town halls, public houses, hospitals or libraries? Even if references to stained glass can be found in these archives, unfortunately it is often only a passing reference. Notes in the minutes of a meeting might refer to the installation of a window, but neglect to mention anything at all about its design or manufacture. The paucity of detailed information on the vast majority of stained glass has rendered so much information lost to us, and having looked for information about many windows

and found only scraps of information about them, if any, isn't an encouragement to do this kind of work often.

The history of medieval stained glass, or at least its afterlife, is a long one that includes centuries of change. Often medieval window glass has been moved and reset, often after damage or decay, gathered together as fragments in abstract panels, or augmented with plain or painted glass. Stained glass of different centuries has been gathered together in single panels or windows and confounded art historians who have dated fifteenth-century glass as of the sixteenth century because of its juxtaposition with glass painted with enamel colour. Stained glass studios sometimes skilfully 'hide' small fragments of medieval stained amongst largely new compositions, which are sometimes so attuned to the old work that it is hard to tell which glass is modern. When these Victorian or twentieth-century windows have also needed to be repaired or conserved, further layers of adjustment and change have taken place, and our preference for minimal intervention is relatively new and suits our own era. By contrast, two hundred years ago restoration could have consisted of a copy of old glass, with the medieval fabric stored, sold, lost or deliberately destroyed.

Similarly, post-medieval stained glass has also had to be repaired or repainted. I remember being confused by the sight of a war memorial attributed to Clayton & Bell in the Pevsner, when confronted with a window manifestly not by them. Closer inspection revealed a few angels in the upper lights and details reminiscent of the firm, but much of it was very inferior work replacing glass that had evidently suffered seriously in some way. The window invites the same questions that might be asked of nineteenth century refashionings of medieval fabric. Which parts are original? What happened to the other bits? Are some of the newer pieces of glass copies of older work that has not now survived?

There are many windows, particularly those containing medieval glass, for which a detailed conservation record would be immeasurably valuable. In most cases, a drawing or photograph of the window prior to nineteenth- or early twentieth-century restoration is exceptionally rare, and some antiquarian descriptions of windows from the first half of the nineteenth century name saints for which barely a trace now remains, but whose hand may be one of a number that survive in a panel of fragments. Such documentation has of course been undertaken assiduously in recent decades, and conservation proposals and reports are perhaps more familiar to the majority of stained glass studios than commissions for new artworks. They vary in length and quality, and may contain photographs, diagrams, the rationale behind certain decisions, and even detailed scientific analysis where time and budget has allowed.

This documentation is of course dispersed, in parish, local and studio archives, and hopefully in several copies, paper and digital. But where will it be in fifty years time? Would a standard format or guidelines improve the quality of such documentation? Now that most of our information – text and image – is digital, it can easily be replicated in different locations and in different forms. Is there a role for an institution to assume a role in collating such information or copies of it, or could an online portal provide access such information, now or in the future? How should it be organised and catalogued to enable it to be found? The presence of documentation is the crucial starting point, but if it cannot be found it may as well not exist!