

Review: August Walk & Talk at Ashdown Park Hotel, Sussex

For enthusiasts of the work of Harry Clarke, his sequence of windows created for the Nuns of the 'Order of Notre Dame' in Ashdown Park (1924-6) have always been a source of fascination and desire. As an enclosed order visiting was impossible. However, in 1971 the 'United States International University' took over the building, dividing the Chapel so that the windows became the wall of a spacious upstairs dining room above a suite of class and conference rooms. This suited Barclays Bank when it took over the buildings as a Management Training Centre in 1974. During that period it was possible to see the windows. Some of us were able to do this, but never for long enough to really appreciate their range and splendour.

This year Andrew Taylor, Rachel Mulligan and I decided to 'go for it' and spend a good solid block of time really looking at these amazing works by the great Harry Clarke in his prime. We knew that these were windows of intense colour, powerful spirituality, idiosyncratic imagery and passionate attention to detail. Rachel and Andrew did the background investigation and the website team did the publicity while I met the facilities team at the Hotel. A visit from 2 to 6 pm was arranged, with a cream tea at 4 pm. It worked wonderfully. Tony Benyon brought a cartoon and glass samples and spoke of the Glass House where Harry had worked with Karl Parsons.

Tony Benyon with Herbert Hendrie cartoon



(photo ©Simon Knight)

Rachel talked about recording glass in sketchbook form while I tried to place the works in the context of Harry's short, turbulent and vastly productive life. We all looked and looked for a wonderful long unhurried time. It was an amazing experience, since we were close enough to the glass to examine Harry's work in detail and appreciate his wild imagination, skilful use of the most delicious glass colour and fundamental clarity of intention.

For anyone who feels they've missed out and desires to see these windows, here's what to do. Book a tea, mid-week at the Hotel and just drop in. If there's no 'event' they will be very pleased to see you.

Caroline Swash

(photo ©Simon Knight)



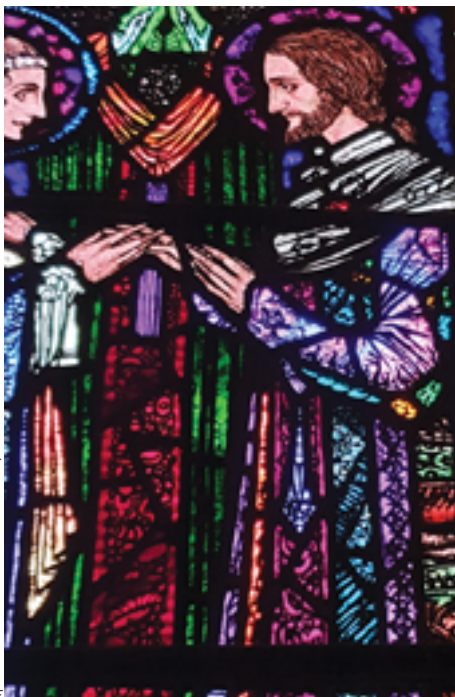
The visit to Ashdown Park

Ashdown Park itself started life as a home for a private family, subsequently becoming a convalescent hospital for Belgian Soldiers, a home to the Order of the Sisters of Notre Dame (who built the converted chapel and extensions to the property), a university, a training centre, before becoming part of the Elite Hotels group who purchased the property in 1993.

The chapel itself of course is best known to those interested in stained glass for its array of windows by the artist Harry Clarke. There are also other works by John Hayward, perhaps minor in his canon but very interesting none the less, as well as others by Geoffrey Webb in the Lady Chapel.

The event was hosted by Tony Benyon and Caroline. Apart from its obvious focus, much pleasure was gained from Tony's stimulating talk about the background to the glass in relation to the stained-glass scene in general at that time. Such was his lucidity, knowledge and passion about the subject, you felt as though you had just left the Glass

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House at Fulham only a few moments before, knowing the subjects as friends, and talking excitedly of Harry Clarke's windows as a live commission.

Caroline Swash also added to the fountain of knowledge in her own inimitable way, with Caroline Benyon also supplying further insights. Therein perhaps is the delight and value of such events, certainly to me anyway, the pleasure and privilege of being able to access all this information directly from those who have first-hand experience and knowledge of it.

Simon Knight

'The Adoration of the Magi' (detail)

(photo ©Michael Vincent)



(photo ©Michael Vincent)

