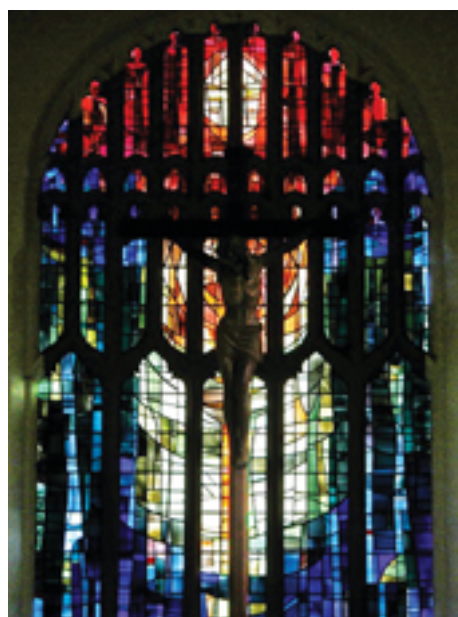


# Review:

## Discussion Day 2022 'Creativity and Best Practice'

Friday 14 October

Thanks to the generosity of the Worshipful Company of Glaziers, our Society was given a very special space in which to hold the 2022 Discussion Day. Besides the acoustically sympathetic room, with its well-arranged interior, we were welcomed with starter refreshments, tea, coffee and biscuits in the adjacent Library with its carefully chosen and very well displayed stained glass panels, one of which Alf Fisher immediately recognised as the work of one of his former students.



Church of the Transfiguration, Kempston, Bedford. Design for Whitefriars Studios c. 1972

After a brisk introduction from Vice-Chair Rachel Mulligan, we settled down to listen to Alfred Fisher MBE, a huge supporter of the Society, Hon Secretary in the early 1980s, and Chairman for yonks, renowned artist in glass and founder of Chapel Studios in Hertfordshire, who gave us a fascinatingly detailed description of the changes witnessed during his lifetime, recalling those early days when ninety percent of the commissions were from churches. Nowadays, people want coloured glass in their homes. He reminded us that high standards remain essential in every part of the work, adding that he intended to pass on a few 'updated tips' which we might find useful.

First, he reminded us of the great age and durability of the glass-making tradition, telling us that stained glass in 'Laon Cathedral' amongst many others, had survived more than 500 years with just a bit of reglazing and he illustrated



Adam and Eve. Detail from engraved screen, St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, Bedford.

this with a panel in its original lead from 800 years ago! Alf then moved on to remind us of the power of coloured glass to 'do atmosphere', asking us to think of Coventry and Liverpool Cathedrals, of the London Hospital Library and to not forget the sheer power of 'dalle de verre'! He also enjoined us to keep remembering and enjoying different ways of working in glass and he described the experience of working with the great Hungarian Artist, Eryvn Bossanyi, helping him with several commissions including the magnificent transept window at Canterbury Cathedral.

After so many years working for Whitefriars, Alf was keen to have his own studio and in 1973 found a redundant Methodist Church in nearby Kings Langley, where he and fellow craftsman Peter Archer set up a thriving business, combining research and conservation with the creation of new work. Here he and his studio team created a wonderfully wide range of windows, from those in churches suffering from the 'glare' caused by clear glass, to small domestic panels. He also made a series of convent windows and a grand City commission for Carpenters Hall, where the stained glass window was needed to act as protection from the violence of the IRA. Alf recalled using a bronze semi-opaque glass to blend with the rich wooden panelling of the interior.

He ended his talk with some splendidly simple bits of advice: 'Sometimes you just have to tailor your designs to the available funds and design with simplicity'. He also told us to 'Look at other people's work, and above all: enjoy painting and don't be afraid of heraldry, you can always bring it up to date!' Finally, he instructed us to 'Re-use old glass imaginatively and keep making windows that you can enjoy creating! Don't forget to teach the next generation!'

Our second morning speaker, Helen Robinson, was already well known to many of us, having been a Council member from 2004 to 2016. During this time, she organized and arranged the annual Discussion Day programme as well as the sequence of lectures held at the Art Workers Guild. On this occasion, she gave us some insight into some of her own stained glass work.



H. Robinson panel

Initially she had trained as a nurse at St Bartholomew's and then worked at Guy's Hospital before getting married and moving to Hertfordshire. She took up glass as a second career and over twenty years attended numerous short courses including a year at Central School of Art, enabling her to run her own studio restoring old and creating new windows. During this period, she found that repairing old windows, matching colours, paint styles and density, were a steep but immensely instructive way of learning.

An important influence for her at this time was the artist Alan Younger, whom she met through her father while he was working on the wonderful East window of Westminster Abbey. She was privileged to spend just one day watching him work – an experience which she says taught her more than any other – seeing how he handled glass, observing his subtle method of 'playing with the painted surface' and 'flirting with silver stain ... making pin pricks of gold'. Deprived of the opportunity to work long term in an established studio, Helen relied heavily on BSMGP lectures and especially their conferences, which gave her the opportunity to see glass close-up and in expert company, and she showed examples of those which had directly influenced her work by Morris and Co, in Jesus College, Cambridge, Harry Clarke in the Honan Chapel, Dublin and the staggeringly beautiful windows of Douglas Strachan in Forfar near Dundee. This led to a discussion about the increasing difficulty of obtaining good quality glass and the importance of building up a stock to work from.

As the daughter of an architect (Donald Buttress), she had spent much of her childhood around old buildings, an influence that has remained with her ever since. For her, in most cases, a window should be primarily subservient

H. Robinson: Sketch design 'The Annunciation'



to its architectural context and not just a vehicle for self-expression. She gets immense satisfaction from seeing a window which sits comfortably in a building rather than jumping up and down shouting 'Yippee, look at me!!!'

In 2016, Helen moved to an old Vicarage in Shropshire with her husband, elderly parents, tools and lots of glass. Here she built a studio and began working on new commissions, her most recent being three splendid stained glass panels for 'The Parlour' in the Apothecaries' Hall, Blackfriars.

After a break for lunch at the ancient local Borough Market's canteens and coffee houses, we met at the Southwark Cathedral's 'Gary Weston' Library to hear Ben Finn describe the magisterial stained glass work that he had created in celebration of its foundation. Ben's way with that difficult material 'paint on glass' was especially admired. Here the colours, in line and tone, lie so easily upon the glass despite the complexity of the subjects depicted. This is a profound, sacred, personal and very unusual work of art with history, religion and power all woven together, apart and across one another within and around the presence of the eternal river, the Thames, flowing through time. To stand still in front of or sit for a while in its presence is an enlivening experience, especially for a painter. Here the handling of our most difficult medium has been made to look easy, to our great enjoyment.

On returning to our seats in the Glaziers Hall, Ben gave us a rounded

B. Finn: Southwark Cathedral (detail)



A. Taylor: St Dominic College



view of his work and was especially helpful in his exposition of the most comfortable way of dealing with orders for stained glass windows. He touched on his time at the Central School of Art, where the atmosphere was 'Fine Art' based. Amal Ghosh was in charge, with Helen Maurer and I as part-time assistants. The exhibition space at the nearby Cochrane Gallery undoubtedly encouraged a very active and positive approach to stained glass. So it was that Finn finished and exhibited interesting and visionary works at that time, before moving on family life, and his own home in Essex, with a redundant church, St Peter's, Wickham Bishops to work in. Here he found that he had plenty of work to do.

'Stay in the same place', he suggested to the audience 'and trust local trade glaziers who are 'a rich source of work'. Unabashed to be a craftsman himself, he first assisted the Goddard and Gibbs trained artist (Zoe Angle) in repair work and was pleased to find that memorial windows found him. He advised the audience to try to be orderly about money, observing that his programme consisted of stage payments of 'design fee' first, then 15-20% of the total cost paid in advance. Judging the cost was always a difficult dance, he said, and the creative side is always a struggle, he Ben gave us several useful suggestions. These included 'Letting the drawing lead the glass', 'Keep the vignettes for the story', 'Get drawing and lead line to work together', 'Keep a time sheet' and 'Share ideas with the congregation'.

The final speaker was Andrew Taylor, not only a painter and a stained glass artist but, in a 'previous life', he had been a scene painter for some 9 years. The formative experience in this field had helped him conceive the plans and make the design for the 'Ark' system needed to exhibit the members' (30cm squared) stained glass panels for the Centenary Exhibition, the brainchild of the late Caroline Benyon. He showed us his neat, measured drawings and explained his approach to the project, always keeping in mind the need to fold up and contain the 'Ark' for transportation to the different sites in England and Wales booked for the tour.

At the last minute the plan had to be changed and the construction itself was made of wood and fitted together at the

Holy Well Glass studio, run by Steve Clare, the Society's Chair. Here the team had the space and equipment to sort out the method for building the stand sections (15 images per side, which allowed for 30 panels per stand). The structure had to be sturdy enough to withstand moving to ten very different venues with all the inherent transport difficulties likely to be experienced on such occasions. Building the stands was a great spontaneous team effort over a long weekend, cathartically bringing so many people - working together - after the shock of Caroline's sudden death.

A. Taylor: Choir presentation panel



Andrew went on to briefly describe his early development from the challenges of scenery painting to the excitement of adding stained glass to his arsenal of skills. After attending art college in Wales, learning the craft at the City Lit and working part time at Chapel Studios for a year, under Alf Fisher's guidance, he assisted Alf with cartooning and learned much from watching and discussing aspects of painting with Peter Archer. He described the experience as wonderful and cathartic and knows that it greatly helped launch his stained glass career.

His most recent new windows after the Covid Lockdown include the 'Five Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary' for the St Dominic 6th Form College, Harrow which were installed in June this year (above). Another of Andrew's great joys is painting, especially landscape painting, which he finds immensely refreshing, as did so many distinguished stained glass artists, among them Evie Hone and Matisse, who understood so well that 'it's the art that leads the craft'.

**Summaries of lectures, collated by Caroline Swash**