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The West Window, Cirencester Church

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THE WEST WINDOW, CIRENCESTER CHURCH

by W. I. CROOME

Hon. Secretary, Gloucestershire Advisory Committee

THE splendid painted glass which, until August 1939, was to be seen in the great West window of Cirencester church is so well known to students, and has so often been the subject of discussion not only in these 'Transactions' but in many histories of Cirencester and its church, that it might well be thought that there was little further information to be gleaned about it. In fact, the removal of the glass in the late summer of 1939 for urgent repairs to the leading set on foot investigations which, though conducted under difficulties and pressure due to the outbreak of war, seem to have cleared up satisfactorily one point which had come to be regarded as permanently obscured—namely the positions occupied by the various fragments and figures arranged in this window, before they were collected there from different windows in the great church.

It will be recalled that the west window at Cirencester has five lights beneath the tracery, the central light being some four inches wider than those on either side of it. The tracery lights were filled with various shields of arms, the shields of the Trinity and the B.V. Mary, and with two small figures. Beneath, the ten figures were disposed across the lights in two tiers of five. In the top row appeared SS. John of Beverley, Ambrose, Gregory, Jerome and William; in the lower were SS. Sitha, Dorothy, Catharine, Margaret, and 'Johana'. Beneath each was a panel of kneeling donors. The figures in the side-lights were arranged beneath canopies, although the leaded outline showed that they had been arranged to fit

into cusped heads without canopies. In each row the space left above the heads of the figures and beneath the canopies had been filled with crude blue sheet glass, and since the figures were too narrow to fill these large lights, the space had been made up with borders of blue and orange blocks, unpainted. Across the centre of the window, beneath the upper row of kneeling donors, and above the lower canopies, was a band of fragments, composed of pieces of border, and jewelled crestings. In the centre light this was broken by the head of the Duke of York, which had been enclosed in a square frame composed of strips of cresting.

It was common knowledge that the glass was not in its original site ; that it had been placed where it was mainly between 1798 and 1800 under a bequest of money from Mrs Catherine Cripps ; and that much of it had been taken from the south side of the nave. A positive statement was made by the Rev. E. A. Fuller in his history¹ of the church that the two figures of S. William of York and S. John of Beverley came from the Garstang chantry in the east end of the south aisle, and this was repeated by other writers. It was also known that these two figures had been seen by Samuel Lysons in 1803 in the east window of the chancel, and that the small panel of the head of Richard, Duke of York, had come from the east window of the Trinity chapel.

When, in July 1939, the glass was found to be in danger from perished leading, the Church Authorities consulted the Diocesan Advisory Committee and entrusted the work of repair to Mr Geoffrey Webb. Immediately after examining the glass he raised the question as to what was to be done about the disfiguring backgrounds and borders of blue and orange glass, which had been inserted when the glass was first placed in this window to fill the gaps

¹ *Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Cirencester.* Bailey, 1882, pp. 98 and plan.

caused by fixing the panels into lights for which they were never designed. Mr Webb urged, as have so many others before him, that the exquisite colours of the 15th-century glass could never be adequately appreciated unless they were freed from the crude contrast with the modern insertions. He suggested as a minimum remedy that these insertions should be replaced by plain glass, sufficiently stippled to avoid glare ; but he pointed out that the need for any insertions only arose because the glass was not in the windows for which it was designed. He begged that an effort should be made to discover, if possible, to which lights in the church it had originally belonged, and, if this could be established satisfactorily, that the panels should be re-leaded for return to their proper sites. He invited the help of the Advisory Committee in this enquiry, and the Church Authorities agreed to await its result before taking a decision.

The results were happy beyond expectation, and of interest because they were obtained without the discovery of a single document or reference not already well-known, but simply by a fresh examination of evidence which had been all along available, but had hitherto been misunderstood, or strangely overlooked.

The first account of the ancient glass in the church which was consulted was that given by Sir Robert Atkyns.² He stated that ' there are still in Trinity Chapel excellent painted Glass. On the East Window are painted the Effigies of Peter, King of Castile, of Richard, Duke of York, of Thomas, Duke of Surry, of Richard, Earl of Salisbury, and of Sir John Jenevill, who lies buried in this Place '. Of this glass, in a later paragraph, he adds : ' The Figure of Richard, Duke of York, Earl of Cambridge, etc., in his Paternal coat-armour, near as large as Life stands neatly painted in an East window of the North

² *The Ancient and Present State of Glostershire, 1712*, page 345. (Second edition, 1768, p. 179.)

Isle, having in the Pomel of his Sword the Arms of Mortimer, Earl of March'. Of the remaining stained glass Atkyns says, 'There are still in Trinity Chapel the Remains of very fine painted Glass, and so likewise in most of the Windows of the Church, one Window on the right Side of the South Door is almost intire (*sic*), and is esteemed a valuable Curiosity: for it represents all the Orders in the Church of Rome from the Pope to the Mendicant'.

This reference established the original position of the Duke of York, already well known, but what of the only other window described by Atkyns? In 19th-century accounts of the glass are laments that so curious a window should have been destroyed, and such destruction seems to have been assumed, but was it a fact? Among the figures still existing in the west window were S. Gregory, wearing the papal Triple Crown; S. Jerome in a cardinal's robe; several bishops, and an abess. Is it not probable that these were the figures which Atkyns had interpreted as representing 'all the orders of the Church of Rome'? The next reference to the glass which could be discovered is in Rudder's *New History of Gloucestershire*, 1779,³ where the account is much more precise. He notes that all the glass of the Trinity chapel is by then missing or defaced, and that the head is all that he found of the figure of the Duke of York, still in the east window of the chapel. Of the rest of the church he relates that there are many remains of painted glass, but those on the south side are the best preserved. The great window on the right of the entrance is the most entire. He proceeds to give the arrangement of this window, and says that in the uppermost row are three ancient Fathers of the Church and also a Pope, standing in the following order:—(1) S. Augustine, (2) S. Jerome; (3) the Pope; (4) S. Ambrose. The names of the Fathers are written beneath each, and at the

³ pp. 360-1.

foot of each Father are figures kneeling with their names upon them, that at the foot of S. Augustine having a scroll inscribed ' Sc's Augustinus ora pro nobis '. Passing to the middle row, he writes that the order is (1) S. Catherine ; (2) S. Margaret ; (3) S. Dorothy, and (4) a female figure defaced ; beneath these figures also are figures of donors. In the bottom row he saw figures which were inscribed (1) ' Sc's Johes de Bev'laco ' ; (2) ' Will : Eberaco ' ⁴ ; (3) ' . . . s Osmund : de Sarr ' , with scrolls or passages of Scripture. In the small lights in the top of the tracery he saw shields of the Trinity and of the Virgin Mother, with other small figures.

This account, prefaced as it is by the same observation as that of Atkyns—that this window is the most entire of the church—suggests that the glass is identical with that seen there in 1712, but the scheme of the design, misinterpreted by Atkyns, is becoming apparent. In the top tier it portrayed the four Latin Fathers of the Church, of whom S. Gregory was one ; the middle row showed the four great Virgin Patronesses, the defaced figure probably having been S. Ursula ; while the lowest row contained four sainted Englishmen. One may guess that the missing figure was that of the popular S. Thomas of Canterbury whose images were destroyed by order of Henry VIII. Of this list of figures all but two—S. Augustine and S. Osmund of Salisbury—still survived in the west window, and though Augustine was then missing, his donor was still there, with his scroll labelled with the saint's name, and it seemed probable that eight out of the ten figures in the west window could safely be attributed originally to the great south window of the nave, and that they had been there both in 1712 and in 1779. At this stage, there came welcome corroboration from Mr Webb, who had been independently examining and cleaning the glass at his studio. He wrote to say that with much difficulty

⁴ Sic in Rudder, but ' Eboraco ' on the glass.

he had deciphered the inscriptions on the scrolls borne by the three Virgin Saints, and found that on these were three consecutive verses (12, 13, 14,) of Psalm 51, and that they were borne by SS. Catharine, Margaret, and Dorothy, in that order. This discovery not only confirmed the observation of Rudder, but proved that the figures seen by him were in the order intended by their maker; and the presumption was now strong that the figures were then still in the window for which they had been first designed. As a further test, Mr Webb removed from two of the figures the modern borders and additions, and cut a template of the outline of the 15th-century glass; this was sent to Cirencester, and found to fit exactly into the lights named by Rudder.

These discoveries indicated that eight of the figures (without canopies, but with a group of donors beneath each), the shields of the Trinity and the Blessed Virgin, and some small figures of angels, ought to be replaced in their original order in the great south window and its tracery lights. This left, of the west window glass, apart from obvious fragments, two female saints, eight canopies, and several shields of arms unaccounted for. The saints consisted first of a figure of S. Zita, unnamed but carrying her bunch of keys; and of a crowned abbess, named on a label beneath her as 'S'Ca JOHANA', which seemed meaningless.

Rudder's further reference to the glass in his time stated that in the window 'on the other side of the door' were figures of donors with their names written. Amongst these was the name 'Johana Whyt', round whose head was a scroll inscribed 'S'ca Bathildis, ora pro nobis', which saint was the principal figure in the window above. He adds that each other light had a large figure, and that in other windows on the same side were figures of canonized saints, 'but it would be too tedious to give every particular of them'. Now this S. Bathildis was an English girl, who was a slave in the house of a wealthy

Frenchman in the 7th century who proposed marriage to her on the death of his wife. In alarm at the suggestion she blacked her face and disappeared from notice, but after his death she came again into the open, and at the age of nineteen was seen, and married, by Clovis II of France, in 649. By him she had three sons, all kings of France, but she was widowed after six years, and spent the years until her son was old enough to rule in reducing slavery in France. On her son's accession, she retired to the morastery at Chelles, where she died in 680. There is no record that she became abbess there, and the figure in the glass would normally be assumed to be S. Etheldreda or S. Ethelburga, but the fact that there was a figure of S. Bathildis at Cirencester, taken with the representation of a queenly nun, again makes it attractive to hope that this may be the figure described by Rudder. A further clue was provided by Mr Webb, who reported that on examining the label, he found that the 'S'ca' was original, but that the word 'Johana' was in slightly smaller type, which corresponded exactly to the labels above the groups of donors. It will be recalled that the donor beneath S. Bathildis as seen by Rudder was Johana Whyt.

The next problem was presented by four of the eight canopies in the west window. It was clear from the fitting of the templates that the figures in the south window had had no canopies; it was equally plain that they could not have been intended for the west window itself, for the cusps into which they had been fitted were of entirely different shape. It was decided to proceed by the method of trial and error, and Mr Webb cut very accurate templates of each of the canopies, and after a most careful and exhaustive test it was found that these canopies fitted exactly the heads of certain lights in the windows on the north side of the Lady chapel, and there they are to be replaced. There were no other windows in the whole church to which they even approximated. The

canopies in question, dating from the mid 14th century, are distinguished for their careful drawing, and for each enshrining, on a blue background, an exquisite little figure of a crowned queen. Of the remaining glass, it was decided that three shields of arms supported by angels, namely those of the Duke of York, of Mortimer, Earl of March, and of Sir William Prelatt (co-founder of the Trinity chapel), should be restored, along with the head of the Duke, to that chapel. The four remaining canopies, work of about 1500, fitted the heads of four of the lights in the great west window, and seemed to be the sole surviving fragment of the original glazing there, and they were accordingly replaced, the remainder of the window being glazed with clear quarries. After much consideration it was decided to fill the bottom tier of the south window, by adding the figures of SS. Zita and (?) Bathildis to those of SS. William and John of Beverley. The window from which Rudder suggests they came, the other side of the porch, is not now available; they are exactly contemporary in date and style with the other figures and were designed for a south aspect; and they will have the advantage of preventing the two other lights from being spoiled by the glare of plain panels on either side. For this reason also the two vacant panels in the upper tiers will be filled with panels designed from the many shattered fragments of ancient glass which were incorporated in the west window, and which again will serve to avoid glare.

Of all this re-arrangement the War has only permitted the return of the panels of the Trinity chapel, and the four late canopies to the west window. All the rest has been carefully washed and re-leaded ready to be set in its original site. For the time it has been packed in cases and buried in a place of great safety, to await the day which will allow it once more to be enjoyed in its original beauty, at the height at which it was intended to be seen,

and freed from the discordant colours which for so long have marred its delicate scheme of colour.

Finally, attention may be drawn to the sadly swift rate at which the great treasure of ancient glass at Cirencester was dissipated during the 18th century. It is a reminder of how often that period was more destructive to medieval remains than the Reformation and Puritan times on which the blame is most usually thrown. Here we have evidence that in 1712 the painted glazing of the Trinity Chapel was almost complete; the east window, with its five historical figures of priceless value, quite complete; and with almost every other window in the great church showing some remains of medieval glass. By 1779, when Rudder first described the state of affairs, all that remained of the splendid glass of Trinity chapel was the head of the Duke of York; yet he can still talk of much remaining, and of the south windows, apart from that 'most intire' which he describes in detail, as containing many figures of canonized persons, with scrolls and passages of scripture, and small kneeling figures of donors. How did it all disappear, and where did it go? As to the cause, all that Rudder has to say is that much was lost from casual breakages and bungling workmen; but something more than the most careless of workmen seems needed to account for the complete destruction of five full-length figures fixed in a window some 15 feet above the floor. All the north windows of Trinity chapel retain intact the ancient glazing of the small tracery lights, which hold figures of winged seraphim; and this survival seems to rule out the likelihood of some catastrophe, such as a fire or a storm, as the cause of destruction in the main lights beneath.

Where did it go? There seems no written record, but it may be of interest to set down some information given to the writer of these notes by the present Earl Bathurst, of Cirencester Park. Lord Bathurst says that he was told that after one of the 'restorations' in the church,

there was a quantity of ancient stained glass with which the authorities did not know how to deal, as much was incomplete and damaged. This residue was packed away into a large box, and stored in the loft of a local builder, where it was entirely lost to mind, though at the time there was an intention that later it should be sorted with a view to using it in the church windows. Some forty years ago Lord Grantley purchased a house at Chesterton, with land running down to the Cirencester and Kemble railway line. In order to plant out this land, Lord Grantley desired to fill up and level a deep depression near the railway line, and gave orders to his builder for this to be done. The builder found difficulty in securing sufficient rubbish for his purpose, and in a search of his own premises came upon the forgotten case of glass. Nobody had ever shown any interest in it, and it had come to be regarded as useless lumber, so it was taken to the site and tipped into the depression, on which trees were afterwards planted. Whether it was tipped out of its case, or went down as it was, Lord Bathurst never heard ; and it is to be feared that by now the tree roots would make excavation impossible and useless. Such a tale is instructive in showing how easily treasures of art could at one time be lost, and perhaps the Secretary of an Advisory Committee, so often a criticized body, may at least point out that the system of which they form a link does make such action, and such losses, impossible at the present day.