

Corpus of Medieval Stained Glass

Stained glass is a major form of medieval art, and provides the most immediately attractive aspect of many monuments. The Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi project is publishing a series of comprehensive, fully illustrated catalogues of medieval window glass. Professor C.M. Kauffmann FBA, the Chairman of the Academy's CVMA Committee traces the progress of the British project from its earliest days.

CVMA is an international project under the auspices of the Union Académique Internationale.

In October 1954, when the British Academy was approached by Hans Hahnloser, Professor of Art History at Berne, about the foundation of an international body to catalogue all the medieval stained glass that had survived the war, Mortimer Wheeler (Secretary of the Academy) wrote briefly to Christopher Woodforde, chaplain at New College and a stained glass specialist: 'We are anxious to find out whether the scheme is (a) respectable, and (b) reasonably practicable.' Woodforde's reply was unequivocal: 'Of course, one's first and lasting reaction to a plan which requires the publication of 70 or more volumes on a subject of such restricted interest as medieval stained glass is that it will sooner or later break down through lack of money or interest.' He concluded: 'In short, I believe that the project is respectable, but hardly practicable.'

Forty-six years later, it is good to be able to confront Woodforde's ghost with the news that the British Committee of the CVMA has just hosted an international conference at Bristol on the theme of *Stained Glass: secular patronage and piety in the later Middle Ages*, attended by a hundred delegates from a dozen countries and, further, that five catalogues have been published in the last seven years. Fortunately, at the time, Woodforde's pessimism was countered by the enthusiasm of Roger Mynors and Francis Wormald. Mynors wrote to G.N. Clarke, President of the Academy, in November 1955: 'The UK ought to participate and I can see no body besides the Academy who can organise it ...'

The Academy's Fellows in Art History gave the project full support and the British Committee of the CVMA was established under the Academy's auspices in June 1956 with Wormald in the chair. Thanks to Walter Oakeshott's advocacy, the Pilgrim Trust offered a grant towards the preparation of a pilot scheme in the form of a volume of the Corpus covering the counties of Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire. However, the principal author, Christopher Woodforde, was translated to the Deanery of Wells in 1959 and consequently left the stained glass scene.

In a report of 1962, Francis Wormald was forced to admit that 'This scheme languished chiefly for the reason that there was nobody suitable and available to carry out the work.' He went on to explain that unlike most continental countries, the great mass of medieval glass in England is found in a fragmentary state in parish churches while large collections in a single building are relatively rare. 'The process of collecting the material is therefore bound to be long and must quite certainly be regarded as a whole time job if it is to be done within a reasonable time.'

Wormald's appeal bore fruit when the Pilgrim Trust funded Peter Newton for two years to work on the pilot volume, but Newton's subsequent commitments meant that the resultant catalogue was limited to the county of Oxfordshire and only appeared in 1979. Nevertheless his teaching post at York meant that, for the first time, the subject was taught at university level by an experienced specialist.

Meanwhile the Academy was providing funds to build up a photographic archive and in 1966 an agreement was established with the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) where the archive was to be housed and preserved. The archive has proved to be of central importance for research on stained glass, but published catalogues were slow in coming. There were no funds to pay authors and yet it became clear – as Wormald had indicated in 1962 – that the exacting guidelines laid down by the International Committee, including restoration diagrams and other scholarly apparatus were more realistically geared to full-time contributors. To break this impasse, the British Committee decided in 1990 to introduce a new publication of changed format, the *Summary Catalogue*. Somewhat in line with new CVMA publications in France and the US, these Summary Catalogues aim to provide a basic publication at a high level of scholarship and fully illustrated but without the very detailed treatment envisaged for the original CVMA volumes. The rate of publication since 1993 has vindicated this approach, while full volumes, including restoration diagrams, will be retained where authors believe they are essential.

This discussion of restoration diagrams may sound arcane, but it cannot be avoided in the stained glass field. A visitor admiring the glass in a church or cathedral may be totally unaware that hardly a single window is where it was and, within it, nothing is as it seems. The fragility of the material and the frequent campaigns of rebuilding, not to mention the depredations of iconoclasts and the unchecked enthusiasm of restorers, has meant that the subject presents many of the problems more usually encountered by archaeologists. Glass moved from damaged windows in an aisle or clerestory may be reassembled in a more or less jumbled form in the east window or lady chapel. Very often, indeed, the result resembles an unfinished jigsaw puzzle or a water colour by Paul Klee, as the example from the lady chapel at Wells can serve to demonstrate (Figure 1). To unravel their history inevitably entails time consuming work in archives and with antiquarian authors, as well as on site.

It is estimated that at least a quarter of the 8,000 surviving medieval parish churches in this country contain stained glass and without catalogues of one sort or another the bulk of this vast material will remain totally unknown. Broader questions relating to stained glass, such as changes in the social class of patrons and in workshop practice, links with architecture and with the liturgy, not to mention more usual concerns with religious iconography, hagiography and heraldry, cannot be discussed in an informed way until the basic material is adequately described.

There remains the much debated question of electronic publication versus the printed catalogue. Our current programme of digitising the photographic archive has demonstrated the advantages of wider accessibility, but without the time-consuming work of the cataloguer, this will remain undigested material. The amount of work involved in piecing together the history and meaning of these windows is the same whether publication is electronic or in book form. The most positive recent development is the growth of the subject in universities. The key appointment was that of Richard Marks to a chair of stained glass studies in York, while David O'Connor in Manchester and Paul Crossley and Tim Ayers in London have also shown how fruitful it can be to integrate stained glass into the mainstream of medieval studies.

Figure 1: Fragments of medieval stained glass, c.1300–1305, Lady Chapel, Wells Cathedral, Somerset.

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The first five Summary Catalogues have recorded the glass of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire, have studied North European roundels in Britain, and have continued the publication of the immense amount of glass in York Minster. Further information is available at www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/cat/cvma.html

The St William Window, York Minster

The medieval stained glass of York Minster constitutes the largest single collection in England. The wide range of iconographical content and artistic excellence gives it outstanding importance in the study of the medieval world. The next stage in Tom French's majestic treatment of York Minster's glass, covering the vast and brilliantly coloured St William Window, was published at the beginning of 2000 (see page 29).

York has only one saint – William Fitzherbert (archbishop 1143–54). His tomb in the nave and later shrines in the choir were conspicuous elements in the medieval Minster. His most important surviving monument, however, is the 78-foot high stained glass window in the choir, painted c.1414 and funded by the Yorkshire Ros barony. This illustrates, in ninety-five large panels, the ups and downs of his career, his death (allegedly by poisoning), and posthumous miracles – mostly occurring at his tomb or shrine.

One panel of this window is recorded in the following entry and illustration from the new catalogue.

16a Cripples Collect Healing Oil

The richly decorated tomb, two bays long, is set at an angle. Under the cinquefoil head of each bay and at the end project yellow spouts, from which gush holy oil. On the left, a man suffering from (?)dropsy supports himself with a stick. His left hand is positioned within the arcading of the tomb to catch the oil pouring from a spout. He has alopecia, and his robe is unfastened, showing his distended stomach and a line of circular marks from chest to waist. Under his robe he wears a low-slung belt with a purse. His swollen legs are bandaged and swathed with cords. Below his left hand a partially blind man inserts his head through the arcading. He clutches the plinth of the tomb and anoints his half-closed left eye with oil. In front, next to him, a bald-headed blind man with deformed legs leans forward, channelling the oil from the next spout onto his upturned face. On the right are two men. One, with stunted legs, clings to the end buttress and collects the oil from the end spout into a wooden bowl. The other puts a hand behind the buttress, trying to reach the oil. Blue background. Most of the garments are modern.

