

The stained glass of Merton College, Oxford

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The British Academy's sumptuous two-part catalogue of *The Medieval Stained Glass of Merton College, Oxford* was launched at a reception in the college on 19 April 2013. It is the latest in the British Academy's *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* (Catalogue of Medieval Window Glass) series. Further information can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/

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Glass treasures

The medium of stained glass works with transmitted light and colour to create its effects. As William Morris, the father of the arts and crafts movement, recognised, and specifically in relation to the glass of Merton College which he knew well, stained glass is also an essentially monumental and architectonic art. It is integral to Gothic architecture, illuminating its spaces in different ways. It has the power to display monumental and brightly illuminated images in specific places – to create messages and meanings, and to write – literally and figuratively – on the building itself, defining the spaces that it encloses. Such potential can give stained glass a particular importance in buildings that make as much play with their windows as Merton chapel.

There has been no doubt for a long time that the stained glass of Merton College is of exceptional interest. Already in the 19th century, both Morris and the architect George Edmund Street had recognised that the chapel contained one of the best-preserved schemes of stained glass to survive from early 14th-century England. It is rivalled only by the nave of York Minster. Of the college's stained glass, this is undoubtedly the greatest treasure, but it is only part of an exceptional inheritance. There are also remains in or from the library, the hall, the warden's lodgings and even the rooms of fellows, all with chapters in this book. The glass from the medieval library, for example, is a survival of international importance, integral again to the building, as one of the earliest of a new kind of library room in the later middle ages. This is the earliest glass to survive in the windows of any English library or, as far as I know, on the continent. Imagine the disadvantages of a library without glass! And here as elsewhere, the windows contained messages about the institution, including repeated images of the *agnus dei*, John the Baptist's acclamation of Christ, relating to the special role of John the Baptist as patron saint of the college (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A window in Merton College's library. The motif in the circular boss bears the inscription 'Ecce agnus dei' – 'Behold, the lamb of God'. Photo: English Heritage NMR.



Detection

The primary purpose of the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* series is to make the surviving inheritance of medieval stained glass accessible: in the worst case, to record it against destruction; but also to make it available for study. It is a difficult medium to understand, because of how it is made. Constructed of many small pieces of glass held together with lead, the medium is inherently fragile. Glass may be broken and lead loses its tensile strength. Over many centuries, pieces or panels may be moved, and whole windows may be dismembered and recycled

Figure 2. From the former east window in Merton College's chapel, now in the north transept. *The Crucifixion*, by William Price of London, 1702. Photo: C. Parkinson.

elsewhere. So stained glass study is first a painstaking process of detection. A careful assessment needs to be made of the history of any given panel, in relation to the surviving material.

Merton's stained glass is very extensive and has had an unusually complicated restoration history. It has long been known that Samuel Caldwell of Canterbury Cathedral, the restorer who worked on the chapel and library in the 1930s, set out to deceive the viewer. He wanted to make the glass look coherent and original. I knew about that before I started, but I quickly discovered that there had been another restoration in the mid-19th century, on similar principles. My job was to untangle these interventions, and so to establish what we are looking at today, by inspecting every piece of glass, where necessary from



scaffolding. The findings are presented in the catalogue, which contains over 200 illustrations, with related diagrams.

Chronology

To make its task completable, the British Academy's *Corpus Vitrearum* sets a chronological cut-off date of 1540, approximately at the Reformation, but it allows the inclusion of later glass in a less detailed way, if the author so chooses. I had to decide, therefore, whether to include this later glass, or not. At Oxford, this question is particularly pressing, because the commissioning of glass painting never really stopped in the university. In the 17th century, many colleges were filling up their chapel windows with painted glass, as part of the high church aim to promote the beauty of holiness in worship, supported in the first half of the century by Archbishop Laud. At Merton, the great east window was inserted as late as 1702, by a London glass painter called William Price. It was very much in the same tradition of high church Anglican worship, however, revived after the restoration of Charles II in 1660. Indeed, it was paid for by Alexander Fisher who, as subwarden, had witnessed the destruction of the old window in 1651.

In many ways, Fisher's new window completed a medieval scheme that had otherwise survived intact into the 17th century. As historians and art historians have realised, this later glass painting is interesting, both for the study of imagery in contemporary worship and for the revival of monumental painting in 17th- and 18th-century England. In my opinion, the college made the right decision, therefore, to redisplay the Price window in the north transept (previously in store at the Stained Glass Museum at Ely Cathedral) as part of the Millennium celebrations (Figure 2); it is the only surviving picture window by the founder of the most important family of glass painters in southern England during the whole of the 18th century. For the present project, it seemed arbitrary to cut across the extraordinary continuities, like this, that are such a part of the college's history. The book therefore includes short entries for all of the stained glass in the college.

Archives

While the surviving glass itself has been a central, magnificent and challenging object for study, another major opportunity was presented by the richness of the college archives, as a source of a different kind. Several colleges at Oxford and Cambridge have both extensive surviving glass and surviving accounts that relate to it, but nowhere are they so early. Roger Highfield has published the 13th-century account rolls that record the construction of the chapel between 1288-89 and 1296-97. Less attention has been given to the unpublished accounts for the following decade and a half, which record the furnishing of the building with altars, statues, a screen, benches and sets of vestments and service books. So, if the building was nearly finished by 1296-97, it was apparently not brought into use for some time. There is documentary evidence for the construction of wood chapels, hitherto

unexplained, to serve college and parish, in the meanwhile. The previous parish church on the site had presumably been demolished. Yet again the study of stained glass needs to go hand in hand with the history of the buildings that contain it.

For the craft of the glass painter, too, the accounts are exceptionally rewarding. The glazing of the new choir is recorded in the first decade of the 14th century. The entries include a delivery of glass specifically for the new chapel in 1305-1306, brought from Thame, in Oxfordshire. Then between November 1310 and May 1311, there were deliveries by cart of a further twenty-five loads of glass; in such quantities, and in the context of other activity at the time, this must also have been for the chapel. No recipient is named for the payments, but in 1307 and 1310 other payments, some quite large, were made to a glazier called William de Thame. The recorded delivery of glass from the town of Thame itself suggests that he was actually based there. So it is highly likely that the deliveries in 1310-11 were from this business. If so, William is one of the two earliest named glaziers in England whose work survives. The other is the Master Walter whose name appears in the fabric accounts for Exeter Cathedral in the first decade in the 14th century. So the Merton accounts have probably brought to light the maker of the stained glass in the choir of the chapel.

Happily, it has been possible to put further flesh on these bones. On the one hand, a whole group of stained glass in the Thames Valley is related to the choir glazing stylistically, so it was probably made by the same people. On the other hand, by good fortune, William seems to feature in other archival sources. In the first decades of the 14th century, a glazier of this name appears in the archive of charters for medieval Thame that survives at Rousham Park (Oxfordshire), and in the tax rolls of royal government. These suggest that Thame was a centre for glass painting in the first half of the 14th century. By 1327, there are no less than 5 people called 'Glasiere' in a tax roll for that year, and a Robert de Thame is later found working at the Palace of Westminster, in 1351. So this is a remarkably well documented case of a local glazing workshop; but why Thame? Oxford was a much bigger town by 1300. I can't answer that question with certainty, but Thame was well networked in a variety of ways. It was a regional hub, a medium-sized town owned by the bishop of Lincoln, and the seat of one of the richest prebends in Lincoln Cathedral. It was on a good road and river system. I also suspect that the glaziers were working closely with nearby quarries, like the one at Wheatley. We know from the Merton accounts that Wheatley supplied most of the stone for the chapel. So here again, the relationship between stained glass and architecture may have been important.

Community

Beyond the craft itself, the book also sets out to explore ways in which this kind of evidence has wider applications. In particular, how were stained glass and architecture shaped by the demands of this particular institutional context, to construct in turn the physical environment for



Figure 3. From a window in Merton College's chapel. An Apostle, probably St Matthias. Photo: English Heritage NMR.

the community of Merton College down the centuries? How did the college go about developing a variety of identities for itself in the stained glass of places for worshipping, studying, eating, sleeping and engagement with the outside world? The general introduction sets out to explore these issues, from the 14th to the 19th century. As an example, let me take the chapel again. The glass here shows clearly how a university college, now so familiar but then so new, engaged with the kinds of imagery that were being developed by other social groups and ecclesiastical institutions in the 14th century.

Merton can claim to be the model for the graduate college in the English late medieval university, in its statutes, self-government and lavish endowments. The founder's statutes of 1264 and 1274 established new standards that were quickly copied. Its buildings set new standards, too. The church that was begun in 1288-89 was

planned on an unparalleled scale. The windows of the choir were, and still are, its most exceptional feature architecturally. The glass that filled them expressed in various ways the character and ambition of Walter Merton's foundation. The chapel was where its members gathered for worship and celebrated their place within the Christian body, on earth and in heaven. In the east window, appear the arms of England and of the de Clares, earls of Gloucester, royal benefactors and overlords respectively of the founder's lands in Surrey. Making use of the art of heraldry, the identifying code for the highest order of society, these shields marked the place of the college within the kingdom of England.

In the central lights of the 14 side windows, overlooking the stalls for the community and the sanctuary, there are 14 standing figures of Apostles and Evangelists – so a full set, as two evangelists were also apostles (Figure 3).

Gathered around Christ, and often shown ruling with him in heaven, the Apostles were represented in contemporary churches of many kinds; they were the first Christian community, the model for monastic convents and for the new orders of the friars in the 13th century. In the present context, they are highly appropriate to a new kind of scholarly community, preparing for service in royal government or the institutional church.

The windows also celebrate the success of a Merton education. Praying before the apostles are 24 scholars, in caps and academic gowns of various colours, each one associated with the name of Master Henry Mansfield: 'Magister Henricus de Mamesfeld me fecit' (Figure 4). In extent, this is a truly remarkable commemoration, apparently representing a single individual. There is no equivalent in contemporary English or continental stained glass. It has been observed rightly that the closest comparison is with royal monuments, in the multiple images of Queen Eleanor of Castile (d. 1290) on the Eleanor Crosses and on her tombs, established by her husband Edward I, just a few years earlier. Mansfield was a fellow of the college by 1288-89, graduating later as a master of arts and a doctor of theology. At the time when the glass was made, in 1310-11, he had left the college and was chancellor of the University of Oxford, so his career was flourishing. In just a few years, he would be elected dean of Lincoln Cathedral. On a long view, this alumnus is the first of countless examples in the stained glass of educational institutions around the world.

Research and collaboration

The Corpus Vitrearum series is intended to encourage further study. This volume makes the stained glass at Merton available for the first time to art historians and historians, suggesting new approaches to the art and architecture of the late medieval university. There are opportunities here for future research. Many colleges in Oxford and Cambridge contain large collections of stained glass, but only those of King's College, Cambridge and now Merton have yet been analysed and published.

Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi is one of 50 major infrastructural British Academy Research Projects. It is also part of an international intellectual community founded in the

aftermath of the Second World War to publish all medieval stained glass.¹ The international Corpus meets every two years, with meetings of an associated conservation community in each alternate year – so this is an active network. For the Merton volume, I would not have been able to work out the history of the remarkable post-medieval German glass in the library without the advice of German colleagues. Many other individuals and bodies have contributed, including English Heritage, which photographed all of the windows at the beginning of the project. These are available to all, in colour, on the AHRC-funded Corpus Vitrearum website (www.cvma.ac.uk).

Figure 4. From a window in Merton College's chapel. A kneeling scholar; over his head, the inscription on the scroll reads 'Magister Henricus de Mamesfe[l]d me fecit'. Photo: English Heritage NMR.



¹ The international Corpus Vitrearum project operates under the auspices of the Union Académique Internationale. For more information, go to <http://cvi.cvma-freiburg.de/>