

## Coventry Glass

Last week I was exploring the world of John Thornton, arguably the greatest stained glass artist in medieval England. From his workshop in the Burges in Coventry, Thornton produced exceptional glass, fit to grace the east windows of York Minster and Great Malvern Priory, as well as a host of lesser churches.

It's clear that Coventry was not only one of the richest cities in England, it was also an epicentre of medieval craftsmanship. The three great churches that dominated the skyline of the city - Holy Trinity, St Michael's and the Priory Cathedral - were treasure-houses of it. The work of Thornton's studio, and no doubt of others too, would once have been there in abundance. A vast library of coloured light.

But we all know what happened to Coventry one November night in 1940. The fire-storm that erupted in the nave of St Michael's was enough to melt brass; the windows would not have stood a chance. Yet it may come as a surprise that much of Coventry's ancient glass does survive, and its story is almost as dramatic as the events of that fateful wartime night.

Once the war with Germany began, it was self-evident that the industrial cities of the Midlands would be attracting the attention of the Luftwaffe, and its great churches, if not actual targets, would be part of the collateral damage. At Birmingham the great Burne-Jones windows were removed from St Philip's and St Martin's for safe-keeping. The glass in the Bull Ring would certainly not have survived without. Similar precautions were undertaken at Coventry.

The church of St Michael - which became the city's cathedral in 1918 - had once boasted some of the best medieval glass in the country, courtesy of its rich wool merchants (who paid for it) and thriving glass workshops (which made it). The church had long been associated with the Trinity Guild, whose members were among the wealthiest and most powerful in the city.

But along came the Reformation, and the people of Coventry embraced it with more enthusiasm than most. Down came the Priory Cathedral, and out went much of the ancient glass, much of which depicted the now outlawed saints and ceremonies of Catholic days.

What medieval glass survived that onslaught was collected up by a later generation and installed in "mosaic" windows - jigsaws of unmatched pieces - in the apse and clerestory of the church. It was this that was removed in 1939.

In all, 39 crates of medieval glass were packed off to the rectory at Hampton Lucy - a few miles from Stratford-on-Avon - to await the end of hostilities. And here the story takes an unexpected twist.

When the war was over, the glass did not find its way back to Coventry.

Perhaps the city was too busy re-inventing itself (and knocking down plenty of other medieval buildings) to worry about its former glories. So the glass sat in its crates at Hampton Lucy, until the house was sold in 1957. Only then did it return whence it came.

By then a new cathedral was arising in Coventry, and there was much discussion of what to do with the medieval glass. Firstly, the crates were sent off to a workshop in Norwich in 1965, where a few choice items were cherry-picked, leaded and installed in the Haigh chapel in the south aisle of the now ruined St Michael's.

Twenty-five years later - in 1980 - the crates were rummaged through again, and six angels extracted for display in St Michael's hall - now a museum - in the basement of the new cathedral.

A decade later, and more fragments were re-assembled, this time paid for by the Coventry-based company of Axa Equity & Law. Not surprisingly, then, these new panels had pride of place, not in the cathedral, but in the company's own offices. Only when Axa was taken over in 2002 were they returned from the "Chapel of Insurance" to the Chapel of Industry over the Chapter House.

But all was not yet over. In 2003 it was discovered (somewhat embarrassingly) that not all the crates had come back from Norwich in the first place, and many fine pieces were still there. On top of that, more panels sent out of Coventry in 1939 also turned up. Was no one keeping a record of all this ?

All of which means that lucky old Coventry has a remarkable collection of medieval glass, much of which is now in purpose-built storage in the cathedral. There are, I'm told, 127 trays of the stuff, plus 40 of the mosaic panels removed back in 1939. When you think how treasured a single piece of medieval glass is in most churches, and Coventry has several thousand of them !

Some examples of the surviving glass were recently on display at the Sir John Soane Museum in London, to showcase the work of the World Monuments Fund, which is paying towards the restoration. It was worth the entrance money on its own.

As to the long-term future of the collection, all this appears to be in the lap of the gods. In spite of its global importance, I've been unable to find out exactly how and where and when it will be displayed. I live in hope to see a museum of Coventry's medieval treasures, but I'm not holding my breath.