

John Thornton

Some call it England's Sistine Chapel. Had it been done in paint, instead of glass, it might well be considered a rival to Michelangelo's masterpiece in Rome. But stained glass has always stood the wrong side of that pointless dividing line between fine and applied art, and seen primarily as a craft.

Let's have none of that. The great east window in York Minster is one of the triumphant achievements of the Middle Ages, 1,690 square feet of stained glass, recounting the story of the world from Creation to Apocalypse.

Yet, like much of England's greatest achievements in glass, it was a Midland production. Just as the Crystal Palace came out of Smethwick, so York's great window was born in Coventry.

It was in 1405 that John Thornton of Coventry was commissioned to glaze the east end of the Lady Chapel in York Minster. Given that York was one of the pre-eminent centres for stained glass, it might seem strange that the Dean looked so far south for a man to take on the work. But the then Archbishop of York and the man who was paying for the work - Walter Skirlaw - were both former bishops of Coventry. In all likelihood, it was one or both of the clerics who recommended Thornton.

A copy of Thornton's contract for the window survives, specifying that he was to draw all the cartoons, and paint a large number of the individual panels. Clearly the Minster was not willing to be palmed off with mere "workshop work". For all this Thornton was paid a total of £56, and contracted to complete the job inside three years. For doing so, Thornton received a £10 bonus, and proudly put the date of completion - 1408 - at the very apex of the window.

Doubtless Thornton had behind him a team of glaziers, hired locally or brought with him from Coventry, but the painting on the glass would primarily have been his. It was Thornton's task too to turn the commissioner's concept - highly theological and precise - into a work of art. And this he self-evidently did.

For his work at York alone, John Thornton could be listed among the greatest of all English medieval artist-craftsmen. But the work in York Minster was only one of a number of works associated with him. There is the so-called "Pricke of Conscience" window in All Saints' church, also in York, which depicts the last fifteen days of the world, uniquely based on a medieval English poem.

Closer to home, Thornton's characteristic style can be seen the chancel of Great Malvern Priory, at Thurcaston in Leicestershire, and at a number of locations in his home town, notably the Guildhall and Haigh Chapel in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral.

So what is this recognisable "Thornton style" ? While much medieval glass is

dominated by reds and blues, John Thornton had a penchant for yellow as his base colour. In addition, the painting in Thornton's faces had greater realism (and meticulously drawn hair) than his rivals. The typical Thornton face (and there are hundreds of them in the glass at York and Malvern) is sensitive, with down-turned eyes, an unusually small mouth and a rather prominent nose. You can see them all over Coventry too.

What Thornton was pioneering in his glass was the European style - new to England - known as International Gothic. The men from York were buying cutting edge art, and, of course, good glass can't be made without a cutting edge.

John Thornton's work, then, is not hard to identify. But like another Warwickshire man, born a couple of centuries later, it is not easy to create any kind of coherent biography for him. We know that there was a John of Coventry, who worked as a glazier for Edward III at Westminster and Windsor in the mid-14th Century. Perhaps this was our John's father, and Thornton learnt his craft from him

He may be (or be related to) the John de Thornton, who had a tenement in Coventry in 1371. By 1411, however, he was living (and presumably working) in St John's Bridges, now known as the Burges. A plaque in that street (showing the York east window) marks the spot where Thornton's workshop would once have stood.

One could imagine (though again without any proof) that Thornton had a house on the Burges, with his workshop at the back.

But that commission, successfully completed in 1408, was not the end of Thornton's connection with the city of York. No doubt he took on a house and workshop whilst he was working on the Minster, and he continued to rent a property there as well as in Coventry. He was made a freeman of York in 1410, and he is recorded as still holding property in the city in 1433. If all these scattered references are to the same John Thornton, then he must have been unusually long-lived for a man of the 15th Century.

One of the reasons, perhaps, that the art of glass-making is overshadowed by that of the painters and the sculptors, is the fact that we hardly ever know their names. They are, in most cases, the anonymous decorators of the Middle Ages. John Thornton of Coventry is different, a celebrity, if you like, and one of the best paid, and most in-demand artists of Medieval England.