

Fig 1 East Window at Matlock, St Giles – designed and made by Lawrence Lee

Memorial Stained Glass in Derbyshire Churches

Advice and Suggestions

1. Commemorating the Past for the Present and the Future

The tradition of memorial windows in our churches is a long and honourable one. It is right that we should commemorate those whose lives we recall with gratitude and affection, those who have contributed to the life of the larger community, whether national or local, and former members of our congregations.

2. Deciding on New Work

Before commissioning a new window, however, it is important to think carefully. Like a well designed memorial tablet or inscription but on a larger scale, a window can enrich a church with a work of art which, even more than a memorial tablet, can act as a source of teaching and inspiration to future generations. Unfortunately, on the other hand, a poor window can cheapen an interior and, precisely because of its function as a memorial, can be difficult to remove at a later date when its weaknesses have become all too apparent to those who do not share the initial emotional impulse prompting its creation.

3. Replacing an Existing Window

A memorial window will usually replace an existing plain glass window or one with the obscure or tinted glass so beloved of our Victorian predecessors who were anxious lest the attention of congregations should stray during services. The replacement of obscure or tinted glass by good stained glass - or even clear glass, perhaps enriched with a text and memorial inscription - cannot but enhance an interior (see Fig 2). If an existing window, however, contains good early clear glass of historic value and beautiful in its own right, it should not, of course, be re-glazed with modern glass. The DAC will be able to advise on the value of existing glass. Where a particular window should be retained it will usually be possible to find an alternative site for the desired new glass.

Fig 2 Memorial window in south wall of nave at Scarcliffe, St Leonard – designed by David Pilkington



4. The Quality of Light

People are sometimes afraid that stained glass will reduce light levels and 'make the church dark'. But it is the quality of light in an interior which is all-important. A relatively dimly-lit church illuminated by glowing, jewel-like, stained glass will lift the spirit much more than a building adequately-lit by the sombre dullness of obscure, or the usual kind of tinted, glass. Few churches, even when well-lit by natural light, fail to supplement this by electric lighting at all times when the building is in use. Glass newly-introduced into a church should, of course, harmonise with the existing windows, not by attempting a pastiche of earlier styles but in avoiding harsh clashes in colour and the intensity of light.

5. The Subject of a Window

The memorial significance of a new window will often be uppermost in the minds of donors. Personal, even private, references are frequently requested, and handled discreetly and appropriately, can be legitimate. However, the DAC has sometimes found that such references can assume an all-controlling importance. To introduce into a church a display of family piety or grief with little relevance to the wider community of the present day and with none for future generations is akin to trade in patronage. Sometimes there has been cause to fear the progressive degeneracy of a church from a sacred space where God is worshipped, the holy mysteries celebrated, and the Christian community instructed, fed and inspired, to a domesticated, secular meeting place.

6. The Responsibility of the DAC

In judging designs for new memorial windows the DAC will look for evidence that the completed work will enhance a church with a work of art, recognisably of this age, but likely to be appreciated by future generations and at all times serving a liturgical function by contributing visually to the offering of worship in ritual, words and music. A church window should lift up the mind of those who see it to the glory of God, to the truths of the Christian religion, the saving events of the gospel, or to the examples and prayers of the saints. That said, the Committee will not try to impose a uniformity of style and will welcome adventurous work of good quality. But it is a matter of record that parishes and donors commonly look for readily-understood pictures with figurative drawing (see Fig 3) a first rate instance of its kind, rather than for formalized or abstract patterns - (see Fig 4). These latter can be acceptable. Colour and pattern in themselves, in the context of worship, can celebrate the divine beauty which surpasses human understanding. The parallel here would be with music, aural shapes and patterns which, though not representational, touch human hearts and minds more directly than the rational distinctions of verbal argument or scientific explanation. 'There is neither speech nor language,' as the Psalmist tells us, 'but their voices are heard among them'. Visual art also can communicate the divine music.



Fig 3 East Window at Maesmynis near Brecon in Mid-Wales designed by Harry Harvey

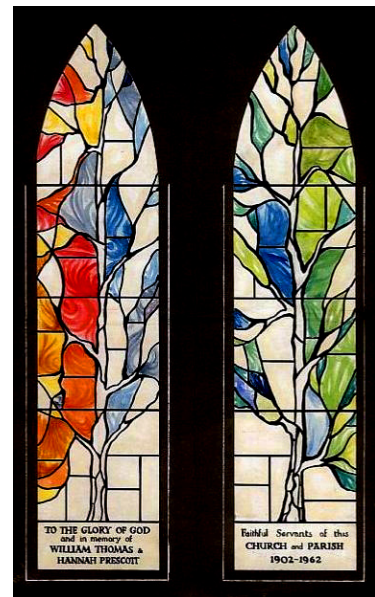


Fig 4 Cartoon of Memorial Window at Buxworth, St James – designed by Enid Bandey

7. Public and Private Art - The Responsibility of Donors

Those who intend to give a new window should, therefore, ask themselves at the start whether what is being put forward will have significant spiritual meaning to the wider community of the present day and for the future. Has sentimentality been avoided? Difficult as it may be, donors should try to detach themselves a little from the emotional resonance of a project. A brief which will enable an artist to achieve an objectively worthwhile design of lasting significance to Christians in general may still incorporate the small personal detail which the donors specially value and reconcile the aims of public and private art. To discuss a project with the DAC at the outset, before ideas have hardened, will always help donors to formulate a brief enabling an artist to produce a design more likely to win acceptance when a faculty petition is submitted.

8. Inscriptions

Memorial inscriptions should, if at all possible, be included in the window itself and not require an additional memorial plaque. The texts of inscriptions should always be submitted to the DAC for approval before an artist is asked to design lettering in any form. The language of epitaphs should be restrained, should use adjectives sparingly and avoid unduly inflated expressions. A simple form of words consisting of one or two complete sentences should briefly convey all the required information. A text from scripture or the Prayer Book, though not obligatory, will, however, additionally help to justify the place of a memorial tablet in a sacred building. Such a text should be selected for its especial relevance to the person or occasion commemorated. A further point

to be noted is that phrases such as, 'In loving memory of...', lack the dignity and vigour required in a memorial in church. Instead, a memorial text may begin with 'Remember', 'Remember before God' or words inviting the reader's prayers. The DAC can suggest the names of skilled letterers in glass, wood or stone.

9. Another Possibility

New windows enable donors to express their personal ideals and wishes but occasionally older glass, rescued from a redundant or demolished building, has been given in memory of an individual or family. From time to time, small panels of medieval glass and larger Victorian windows become available and can be adapted for memorial purposes. In this way historic material may be preserved in a new role as a treasured memorial for the enjoyment of succeeding generations. Many churches already possess ancient glass, some of which is in more or less urgent need of expensive conservation. Rather than give a new window, donors may care to consider contributing to the cost of the repair and protection of such glass as a memorial gift which could be no less valuable than new work. In such circumstances the memorial gift could be independently recorded on a well-designed and lettered tablet.



Fig 5 Medieval Stained Glass Fragments in upper trefoil of plain glass north aisle window at Matlock, St Giles

10. Public Memorials

Much of the foregoing advice relates especially to the commemoration of private individuals but the same principles will apply to the marking of more public events and occasions. The recording of matters of merely temporary or current interest would be inappropriate but, where an event deserves to be remembered by future generations, a memorial stained glass window should offer Christian teaching prompted by the occasion or, at least, have a clear Christian perspective. Partisan or politically controversial responses should, in this context, of course, always be avoided.

Points to remember:

- The DAC welcomes proposals for worthwhile new stained glass in churches which should enhance good existing, clear or stained glass.
 - Consult the DAC adviser before formulating a brief or choosing an artist.
 - New stained glass should be appropriate for its setting, should have lasting Christian meaning and avoid sentimentality.
 - Private and personal references may be included but should not form the main motif of a design or be unduly prominent.
 - The text of memorial inscriptions should be agreed with the DAC and be included in the window itself.
 - The re-use of earlier glass from various sources or a contribution to the conservation of existing glass may make a commendable memorial gift.
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