

REVIEWS

Sherborne Abbey, Sunday 30 May

Seventeen of us turned up to join John Hayward at Sherborne Abbey on 30 May. Gathering under the Great West window, we began in the South aisle by looking at the old glass in the priory. Of interest were fragments of 15th-century glass in the St Katherine Chapel, and in the South transept a Pugin-designed window of 1850, made by John Hardman & Co., with 96 figures of prophets, saints and martyrs holding banners with the Latin words 'Te Deum Laudatum'. (This window suffers from paint loss, a common problem of the time caused by the addition of borax to the glass paint to enable lower firing temperatures.) Further on we saw, high in the Clerestory, 72 fine lights of Clayton & Bell figures. Then there were some Christopher Webb windows in the East Lady Chapel, with scenes of the Annunciation, Nativity, and Madonna and Child and some historical figures in the side walls.

Eventually, with much anticipation, we returned to the Great West window – the Incarnation – the main reason for our visit. It was designed and painted by John himself and installed by a firm in 1997, but only after a long battle to remove the very dilapidated Victorian window of Old Testament figures, reputedly a Pugin design and suffering from much paint loss. John related a brief history of the struggle the parish underwent to get Faculty clearance for the window: the drawn-out procedure led to a Consistory court hearing because of an action brought by the Victorian Society and finally an appeal was heard at the Court of Archers, all of which took about 5 years. Having received the go-ahead, John took 2 years to cut and paint all the glass for the 27 lights and extensive tracery – a remarkable feat of workmanship and endurance.

John combines several themes in the window. The green background to the design shows it is also a tree, a living and growing organism against which the figures and symbols sit. In the idea of the Incarnation the tree sprouts and blossoms anew



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above the figures, linking the Old and New Testaments. Mary and the Christ Child are at the centre. John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, the three kings and three shepherds are shown. At the top, God the father is represented by the Sun. John said that the pillars of the abbey reminded him of an avenue of trees and the fanlight ceiling was like spreading branches; the window at the end becomes part of this intricate splendour bringing welcome colour to the eye.

To add interest, John brought with him a cut-line of one lancet, a test panel and a life-sized painted copy of the head of the Madonna (on glass), which he entrusted us to pass amongst the group. These pieces helped us to appreciate the painting and understand his working methods. John by-passes the cartoon stage and works from his cutline. His images, painted directly on to the glass, are quite stylized; though his formative years were in the fifties and sixties, his style has kept pace with the decades and feels pertinent to 'now'. The faces of the figures might be regarded as austere but on closer acquaintance one sees more. The head of Mary has inscrutability, a gentle gaze with depth, and mystery in the large eyes, yet without a trace of sentimentality. The paintwork is successful on the large scale and yet looking closely one sees areas of intricate involvement, combined with techniques of etching and silver stain, giving a feeling it that it has all evolved quite naturally. There is much work on the glass surface but it is unfussy and a direct means to an end. To sum up, it is a window very much in the great tradition of the medium, yet it feels very much 'of our time'.



To end the tour, we looked at the latest glass addition to the abbey: a three-light Millennium window also designed by John, with rich heraldry and scenes of abbey history on a much smaller scale; again it is well designed, beautifully painted and crafted.

Time, as ever, was too short and whilst the discussion was still most interesting we realized the afternoon was over and John had to dash away, leaving us to disperse without a communal cup of tea, the Sherborne tea rooms having already closed.

