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**STAINED GLASS AND THE  
VICTORIAN GOTHIC REVIVAL**

BY JIM CHESHIRE



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# Stained glass and the Victorian Gothic Revival

*Jim Cheshire*

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## Preface and acknowledgements

This study is an attempt to understand the phenomenal increase in the production and demand for stained glass between about 1835 and 1860, a book about both the history of stained glass and the workings of Victorian culture.

The scale of the Victorian stained-glass industry was unprecedented and since its decline in the late nineteenth century has not been equalled. From my perspective this makes the Victorian period the most important episode in the history of British glass-painting. Many people would disagree with this judgement but I think even the most ardent medievalist would concede that the current academic engagement with Victorian stained glass is inadequate.

Scholarship about Victorian stained glass was late appearing and the first forays took fairly predictable forms. A. C. Sewter's monumental study *The Stained Glass of William Morris and his Circle* was published in 1974–75 and while providing information about Morris, failed to shed much light on the wider phenomenon. Martin Harrison's pioneering study *Victorian Stained Glass*, published in 1980, did much to redress the balance and set up a solid framework for future study. Harrison concentrated mainly on 'those artists who were concerned to examine new ways of approaching stained glass' and so tended to select exceptional windows and artists for comment and analysis. While Harrison's work constituted a great advance for the field, his approach has tended to support the formation of a canon of great Victorian glass-painters, leading to the neglect of others. My approach is very different. I am attempting to understand the wider phenomenon – to ask why people became interested in stained glass, to examine how glass-painters set up their studios and to understand how they interacted with each other and their patrons. An approach such as this gains just as much from the study of relatively humble operations as it does from examination of larger and better-known studios.

A number of studies based on systematic stained-glass recording published since Harrison's have been a great help to me. Birkin Haward's comprehensive studies of Norfolk and Suffolk provide valuable 'reference' illustrations of the work of specific companies and further proof of the diversity of stained-glass production. Other surveys of this type have been published more recently, including Malcolm Seaborne's study of Flintshire and Leslie Smith's study of Carlisle. Stanley Shepherd's thorough study based on the archives of John

Hardman and Co. has been another great step forward – particularly useful to this book because he concentrates on the early Victorian period. This book is based on my own doctoral research, though I have substantially modified and developed my ideas since my thesis was submitted in 1998. My doctoral thesis was based on systematic recording of stained glass in the archdeacons'ries of Taunton and Exeter and three case studies of specific glass-painters, whose careers were well documented through either archival material or an extensive corpus of extant windows. This approach has allowed me to speculate on how the market for stained glass developed in a specific area and to examine how the careers of specific glass-painters fitted into that market.

To understand why so many windows were commissioned and made in the Victorian period we need to understand how buying a stained-glass window became a relatively ordinary thing to do. In order to examine this I have given considerable attention to those who wrote or spoke about stained glass in the formative years of the revival – those responsible for raising the status of stained glass. It is a major assumption of this study that this was a crucial element in the revival of stained glass. It is important to look at the production of stained glass as a cultural exchange: a negotiation in both financial and cultural terms that was profitable for both glass-painter and patron. We need to examine what both parties wanted to achieve by buying or making stained-glass windows. This type of analysis is only possible by looking at commissions in minute detail, by building up a picture of political and social alignments on a parochial level, and by examining the manipulations of power evident in documents such as vestry minutes.

In addition to my detailed case studies I have offered some analysis on some of the better-known studios. Much work remains to be done in this area and in a study of this size there was no point in attempting to comment on every studio – I hope the gaps will be followed up by further research. Another limitation of my research is the concentration on activity within and surrounding the Church of England at the expense of the Roman Catholic church and Nonconformist denominations. While I acknowledge this deficiency there is little doubt that the Church of England was the single most important institutional influence on the revival of stained glass.

My theoretical approach has been influenced by several well-known cultural theorists, particularly Pierre Bourdieu, various Marxian accounts of cultural history and the work of several 'New Historicist' writers. I have chosen not to include their particular theoretical vocabulary in the main body of this study, because this would be more likely to obscure than enlighten the text for many readers. Those interested in the details of my theoretical approach can refer to my doctoral thesis.

The history of Victorian stained glass allows an examination of many other areas of nineteenth-century cultural history. We can learn a lot about the aesthetics of the Gothic Revival, ecclesiology, the relationship between 'fine' and 'decorative' art, and the circulation of art history in the 1840s. In addition it

offers more tantalising glimpses into areas which need further attention. Does the ardent activity of the amateur glass-painter suggest unrecognised forms of religious practice? Did stained glass fundamentally expand the repertoire of the ecclesiastical architect? What was the relationship between photography and stained glass?

A key objective of this book is to provide both history and context for thousands of Victorian stained-glass windows that exist in churches across the country. While many interesting glass-painters have necessarily been omitted I hope my case studies will provide a point of reference for the research of future scholars.

There is little doubt about the level of interest in Victorian stained glass. I have spoken to hundreds of people who are eager to know more about the glass in their local church and this enthusiasm needs to be channelled into active conservation. Thousands of Victorian windows will need re-leading or conserving in the next fifty years. This is a labour-intensive and costly process and if sufficient funds are to be found people need to know about and understand what they are being asked to preserve.

A book that has its roots in a doctoral thesis has a long gestation and I have benefited from the help of many people during this process. In my field work I have been helped by many churchwardens, vicars, vergers, sacristans and other members of the laity and clergy in hundreds of churches across the country. Fellow stained-glass enthusiasts have been generous with their research, in particular Joy Daniels with her information on the Beer family and Pauline English with her research on John Toms. I have also exchanged valuable information with Malcolm Seaborne, Alan Brooks and Robert Sherlock. Morris Venables has been very generous in aiding my efforts to reproduce illustrations from Victorian books. Geoffrey Robinson gave me unlimited access to the Joseph Bell archive, which has been of enormous value. I also benefitted from a grant from the Marc Fitch Fund.

My family have been a constant source of encouragement. Annalisa, Aislinn and even Albert have been supportive and patient. My godfather, Roger Morris, has encouraged me as a fellow admirer of Victorian Gothic and at various times lent me essential books. My parents have supported me both materially and emotionally and helped me in more direct ways by reading drafts and improving illustrations.

When I started my doctoral research I was conscious of the privilege of having Chris Brooks as my supervisor. His enthusiasm, knowledge and erudition were unique and a source of inspiration to myself and his other doctoral students. His recent death has been a source of great sorrow to all who knew him well but his distinctive influence is perpetuated in this book as it will be in many more to come. This book is dedicated to his memory.



## Glossary

Abrade	To scratch away the coloured layer of a piece of flashed glass to reveal the clear pot metal beneath. In this way a change of colour can be achieved without the need for a lead line or the application of any enamel.
Antique glass	A special type of pot metal developed specifically for glass-painters, which became widely available in the late 1850s. Antique glass is thicker and has more texture than ordinary glass; thus the glass itself creates much of the visual interest.
Brown enamel	The standard enamel paint used by glass-painters to paint faces, drapery etc. In practice this 'brown' enamel is so dark that it appears black when used in thick lines.
Canopy	Glass painted to resemble an architectural canopy. Typical of Victorian work attempting to reproduce a medieval style.
Cartoon	A full-scale design for a window.
Diaper	A repeated pattern normally used as a background.
Enamel paint	A substance painted onto glass composed of a colouring agent (a metallic oxide), ground glass (a flux) and a medium (gum Arabic or lavender stick oil). When fired the ground glass fuses with the surface of the pot metal to form a permanent mark.
Enamel wash	A thin layer of enamel applied evenly across a piece of glass using a soft brush. Layers of wash were sometimes applied on top of each other.
Flashed glass	Pot metal composed of two layers of glass: a thin coloured layer and a thicker clear layer. Flashed glass is often red or 'ruby'. Flashed glass can be abraded to reveal the clear layer beneath.

Flux	A powdered compound composed mainly of glass that helps the enamel to fuse with the surface of the pot metal when fired.
Grisaille	Monochrome pattern glass.
Hard face painting	A face painting style that works predominantly by linear design, uses little perspective and requires little shading.
Highlight	A small area of glass free from enamel, normally where the enamel has been scratched out with a pointed stick or a needle.
Main light	A major opening in a window divided by tracery.
Mosaic window	A stained-glass window composed of a large number of small pieces of pot metal. A mosaic window typically relies on the linear design of the lead lines and a 'hard' painting style. In stylistic terms the opposite of a painterly window.
Painterly window	A stained-glass window that attempts to reproduce the effects of oil painting. Typically composed of a small number of relatively large pieces of glass. In stylistic terms the opposite of a mosaic window.
Pot metal	Glass that has been coloured while still molten, normally through the addition of a metallic oxide.
Quarry	A small pane of glass, often diamond shaped, painted with a simple motif.
Silver stain	A silver compound painted onto pot metal and then fired to produce a transparent yellow stain. The tone achieved can vary from pale yellow to deep orange, depending on the length and heat of the firing.
Smear shading	Shading achieved by the application of enamel paint onto the glass.
Soft face painting	Painting of glass that relies on perspective and subtle shading, in some cases imitating oil painting.
Stick work	Scratching out enamel with a pointed stick or a needle to produce areas free from enamel paint or highlights.
Stipple shading	Shading with a dotted appearance executed by dabbing a brush against enamel before it has dried.
Tracery light	A minor opening in a window divided by tracery, above the main lights.

## List of abbreviations

BWEAS	Bristol and West of England Architectural Society
CCS	Cambridge Camden Society, later the Ecclesiological Society
EDAS	Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society
SANHS	Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society
<i>TDEAS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society</i>



1 St Mary, Buckland St Mary, Somerset, interior looking east through chancel gates

## 1 ✧ Stained glass and Victorian culture

**I**N THE HANDS of a clergyman like John Edwin Lance, stained glass was more than just decoration. In his newly rebuilt church at Buckland St Mary in Somerset, he used stained glass to vary the quality of the light entering the building, and so change our experience of the interior. Richly painted windows surrounding the chancel and baptistry announce that here are the key liturgical areas, while the iconography of the windows saturates these places with dense theological meanings (Figure 1, Plate 1).

When Lance was appointed rector of Buckland St Mary in 1830, he arrived in a small rural parish with no dominant land-owning family.<sup>1</sup> Lance's impact on the parish was such that a local historian describes the year of his arrival as 'the year which was to change Buckland for ever'.<sup>2</sup> Lance built himself a large house, and set about becoming a paternalistic, conscientious and dominant clergyman. By 1863 the medieval parish church had been dismantled and rebuilt. It was still medieval in style but looked nothing like the original church. The rector was reported as having supplied £16,000 of the total cost, which amounted to £20,000.<sup>3</sup> A significant proportion of this budget had been lavished on the interior, in particular the stained glass.

The east window was made and designed by Michael O'Connor, probably helped by his son Arthur (Figure 1, Plate 2). O'Connor was a native of Dublin and started his career as a heraldic artist but, in common with other heraldic specialists in the early nineteenth century, altered the focus of his professional life and became a glass-painter.<sup>4</sup> By the 1850s O'Connor had a high reputation, and the glass at Buckland St Mary was just one of several large commissions he executed in the area.<sup>5</sup> In 1857, for a discerning patron of stained glass (which Lance certainly was) O'Connor was a fairly safe bet.

Thirty years earlier Lance would not have been able to glaze his church in this way. The 'antique' glass that the windows were made from was not in production, and the price of several large pictorial windows in the 1820s would have been prohibitive, even to Lance and his friends. Even if the budget had allowed, the windows would have taken a very long time to produce, as glass-painting ateliers were small-scale affairs in the early

nineteenth century. On top of all these problems, it is doubtful whether Regency glass-painters could have satisfied the sophisticated aesthetic and iconographical criteria that patrons like Lance demanded. Between 1830 and 1860 the demand for stained glass, and the glass-painting profession's capacity to produce stained glass, soared at an unprecedented rate. This book is about how and why this phenomenon occurred.

## Victorian religion and the Church of England

John Edwin Lance is an illustrious example of a new kind of Anglican parish priest. In one sense his activities can be understood as a response to external threats to the Church of England, and in another way they suggest a reaction to developments of a more secular nature.

The Church of England experienced mixed fortunes in the Victorian period. In one sense it was a great success: the number of worshippers, clergy and churches all increased above the rapid rate of population growth.<sup>6</sup> Added to this, the Anglican church's success contrasted with the fortunes of the great Dissenting movements of the previous century: after 1840 the growth of Dissent decreased and by the last decades of the century the numbers actually declined in relation to population growth. In spite of these encouraging trends the Church of England went through a profound shift of identity: it was forced to relinquish its claim to being *the* religion for British subjects and became merely one of the denominations that competed for the souls of the population.<sup>7</sup> This change in status was the result of several power struggles between the state and the church – battles about the extent of the state's intervention in church matters. Ultimately the church suffered several major setbacks and by the end of the century found itself deprived of many of its traditional roles. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Anglican church had the authority to legitimise key rites of passage such as baptism for both Anglicans and Nonconformists. The Civil Registration Act of 1837 meant that births could be legally registered with the state; this signalled an end to the Church of England's monopoly.<sup>8</sup> Another waning site of church power was the parish vestry. The vestry was once a surprisingly diverse and accessible site of political action but gradually became narrower in both its membership and the scope of the duties it performed.<sup>9</sup>

Legislation in the early nineteenth century had lifted the legal restrictions on Dissenters and Roman Catholics: the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed in 1828 and the Roman Catholic Relief Act was passed in 1829. These acts removed the restrictions placed upon the activities of Dissenters and Roman Catholics in public life. As a result the Church of England had to compete on more even terms with its rivals.

The Church of England had inherited some internal problems from the previous century. Financial malpractice was among the most serious. The root problem was that income originally intended for an incumbent had often become diverted to recipients almost totally unconnected to the parish. Frequently recipients of the parish income did not perform the parochial duties implied by this income. Instead a subordinate, normally described as a curate, was paid a proportion of this income to carry out the parish duties. This lack of clerical income in turn encouraged 'pluralists' – clergymen who received more than one parochial income – and so further decreased the proportion of incumbents who actually resided in the parish. In 1810 as many as 47 per cent of Anglican clergymen were non-resident.<sup>10</sup> In 1838 the Pluralities Act started to reverse this pattern, but because it imposed restrictions only on new appointments, it took up to twenty years to become fully effective.<sup>11</sup> The presence of a resident clergyman was crucial to the power of the Anglican church. The lack of a clergyman who was embedded in the day-to-day life of the parish encouraged the people to think of the Anglican church as an elitist institution unconcerned with the welfare of its members.

Some of this background is confirmed by the situation encountered by John Edwin Lance on his appearance in Buckland St Mary in 1830. On his arrival, there had not been a resident clergyman for fifty years; instead a certain Dr Palmer 'came over from Illminster and took five services every Sunday in different places'.<sup>12</sup> Buckland St Mary was a good place for Lance to attempt to reassert Anglican authority, for the Church of England was most effective in a parish where one or two sources of power acted in unison with the church. This typically meant an alliance between landowners, clergymen and civil authorities.<sup>13</sup> The 'closed parish' was perhaps the ultimate example of this relationship, where the major landowner was also the clergyman and the magistrate. In this situation, religious, civil and financial power were in the hands of one man and challenges from alternative religions stood little chance.

The closed parish was a social structure typical of preindustrial society and so by the mid-nineteenth century was being undermined by changes initiated by the industrial revolution. Although the population of rural parishes generally increased during the first half of the century, the second half witnessed a dramatic decline even against rapid national population growth. Buckland St Mary follows this pattern: the population rose from 565 in 1821 to 758 in 1851, only to decline to 474 by 1901.<sup>14</sup> Landowners and clergymen intent on reasserting the influence of the Anglican church often attempted to recreate a preindustrial social structure, a hierarchical but benevolent society where the poor showed deference to the rich but the rich respected and cared for the poor. At Buckland St Mary Lance went about transforming the village infrastructure with forceful benevolence. He

built a house, which signalled his commitment to residence; he rebuilt the church, a sign of his Christian commitment; and he built and endowed a school, which signalled that education too was under Anglican control. A hint of the nature of Lance's parochial presence emerges from an anecdote apparently remembered by Lance's family. Lance was a 'staunch Tory' and 'expected his parishioners to vote likewise', so when a report reached the rectory that a Liberal speaker was in the village he decided to investigate. When he arrived at the scene, he started to ride around the speaker's audience and by the time he had ridden around the gathering three times the audience had disappeared.<sup>15</sup>

### Victorian church-building

While Lance's activities were in many ways remarkable, projects similar to this had been attempted all over England by the 1860s. Lance was not the only wealthy Victorian prepared to fund ecclesiastical architecture and design; in fact most of the money that paid for nineteenth-century churches came from private sources. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the state intervened on behalf of the established church, and made two grants totalling £1.5 million in 1818 and 1824. The money was given to the newly formed Church Building Commission, whose brief was to provide accommodation in Anglican churches for the rapidly expanding population. This was the last direct aid that the state provided for church-building, but building continued at a remarkable pace: on average nearly one hundred Anglican churches were built or rebuilt every year in Victorian England.<sup>16</sup> This figure does not include restoration projects and so the number of churches that underwent refitting and redecoration is substantially higher. Church-building was clearly a major influence on the revival of stained glass but cannot explain it alone: it is of course quite possible (and much cheaper) to erect a church with plain glass. In order to understand why Victorian churches took the form they did, and why stained glass was considered necessary, we need to investigate several strands of Victorian medievalism.

### The Victorian Gothic Revival

Arguably gothic had been consciously used as an archaic style since 1600 but it gained a new seriousness, popularity and momentum as Victoria came to the throne.<sup>17</sup> To some writers, such as Thomas Carlyle, the medieval world was not so much pre-Reformation as precapitalist, and it offered a model for the idealised paternalistic social relations that capitalism had destroyed. Carlyle's *Past and Present* depicts Abbot Samson

presiding over the medieval monastic community at St Edmundsbury, where social inequality is mitigated by mutual respect between rich and poor. Other writers, notably Sir Walter Scott, had been popularising the medieval world in novels such as *Ivanhoe*, as well as promoting the more general idea of 'the Olden Time' which though not really gothic, still looked back to a precapitalist era with affection.<sup>18</sup>

Gothic was used quite broadly in the eighteenth century but was never a dominant style. It was a style that accumulated political meanings for both Whigs and Tories but for many it was attractive chiefly for its novelty value. The eighteenth-century gothic style was used predominantly for secular, privately owned buildings. Although gothic was occasionally used for ecclesiastical buildings it was generally associated too closely with Roman Catholicism to be used for Anglican churches.<sup>19</sup>

The late eighteenth century witnessed a more systematic and scholarly approach to Britain's gothic heritage. Partly due to restrictions placed upon European travel during the Revolutionary Wars, antiquarians started to piece together the history of the English Gothic style, and many of their taxonomies are still with us today. Measured drawings of gothic buildings were published and restorations of Britain's gothic cathedrals began to be evaluated in terms of antiquarian authenticity.<sup>20</sup> So by the 1830s the gothic style had acquired considerable momentum, and just before Victoria came to the throne it became decidedly more serious.

A. W. N. Pugin's architectural theories provided the foundation for promoting Gothic as a moral – and not just aesthetic – category.<sup>21</sup> He published two crucial interventions in the gothic debate: *Contrasts, or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste. Accompanied by Appropriate Text*, and *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*.<sup>22</sup> The crucial distinction made in *Contrasts* was that gothic was a Christian style and that styles derived from Classical sources were Pagan, and *True Principles* develops this predominantly historicist approach into a more specifically architectural argument.

Two concepts introduced in Pugin's publications proved particularly influential for the history of Victorian design: his ideas about symbolism and the idea of revealed construction. In *Contrasts* Pugin stated that it is in gothic (or 'Pointed') architecture alone that 'we find the faith of Christianity embodied, and its practices illustrated'.<sup>23</sup> More specifically the 'three great doctrines' of Christianity – redemption through Crucifixion, the Trinity and the Resurrection – are the basis of gothic architecture. These doctrines are embodied and illustrated in the cruciform plan of churches, the triangular grouping of structures and ornament, and the 'vertical principle' of the strong upward thrust of gothic. The words 'embodied' and 'illustrated' are important here, for a true Christian