

ELIZABETH THE SECOND

[THE RESTORATION OF THE BAPTISTRY WINDOWS]

[Govan Old Parish Church]

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When I first visited Govan Old my heart sank as I caught the first glimpse of the Baptistry windows. They were dark and dirty, with odd bits of distorted lead and shards of glass poking out at unusual angles, pieces of board and card covering holes and little piles of broken glass sitting on the window sills. Because the openings had been bricked up no light was coming through the remaining fragments and so there was little indication of colour or quality.

But as I clambered about the sills taking details and measurements I gradually realised that some areas were not too severely damaged and also that among the fragments were gems of very fine glass painting, delicate detailing with exquisite brushwork. So I left feeling quite hopeful that after careful conservation five of the windows could be reinstated with backlighting. These five tell the story of Christ's Incarnation, and from left to right they depict Simeon with a small scene of the Presentation in the Temple, Mary and Child with the Nativity below, Gabriel with the Annunciation, John the Baptist with the naming of John below, Zacharias and a scene with the Angel. The sixth window had contained a figure of Elizabeth but so little remained that we only knew this from written evidence - too little of the glass remained to indicate anything other than an ornate canopy and a red curtain to match the areas behind John.

So we set to work on the five. Things seemed to go backwards at first, when we discovered that during the original boarding up of the windows, boards had been quite literally nailed to the stained glass and the nails were still embedded in the panels.

At the workshop the old deformed leads were carefully and the glass laid out so we could evaluate what we had. Fragments were bonded together to recreate original pieces, and missing pieces were replicated wherever repeat patterns or mirror images enabled us to deduce exactly what was missing. Lettering was carefully drawn up to complete partial inscriptions and where we had insufficient evidence, glass was lightly shaded to make the infill less conspicuous. And then Tom Davidson Kelly came

to see progress and he suggested that if we could make the five damaged windows look this good then maybe the sixth could be restored also . . . ? [The pressure was very gentle !]

But we were sure. So little of the Elizabeth window remained that it seemed unethical to recreate so much. Then along came Sally Rush (art historian and stained glass enthusiast), who showed us photographs of other work by the same artists, Shrigley & Hunt of Lancaster. In St George's Church in Stockport are figures of Simeon and Mary which were clearly made from the same drawings as the Govan windows, along with a third figure of St Anna. Also, after completing our "jigsaw" of other windows from the assembled fragments we had some pieces left over, which could only have come from the St Elizabeth window and among them was a hand. A hand identical to the hand in the Stockport window of St Anna. Now we knew that as suspected Shrigley & Hunt had indeed used their Stockport St Anna cartoon two years later when they created the Govan St Elizabeth.

Tom now increased the pressure and we were soon persuaded to continue our detective work in order to restore St Elizabeth, using Sally's slides of the Stockport window and the selection of fragments from Govan - which turned out to include a few pieces of drapery, to give us our colour scheme, much of the inscription and a shoulder. Two fragments of the halo and another of the veil confirmed that the faces were in fact taken from the same drawing but that Elizabeth had a golden halo unlike Anna's blue one.

So eventually the series of six windows was complete and the Baptistry again is a whole and peaceful environment.

Those who remember the derelict state of this stained glass only a couple of years ago are always amazed at the difference. Hopefully soon the dereliction in the vicinity of Govan Old will also be restored to a whole and peaceful environment, and maybe one day it will be safe to remove the bricks from behind these windows and allow sunlight to show us their full glory.