

The St William Window, York Minster

The medieval stained glass of York Minster constitutes the largest single collection in England. The wide range of iconographical content and artistic excellence gives it outstanding importance in the study of the medieval world. The next stage in Tom French's majestic treatment of York Minster's glass, covering the vast and brilliantly coloured St William Window, was published at the beginning of 2000 (see page 29).

York has only one saint – William Fitzherbert (archbishop 1143–54). His tomb in the nave and later shrines in the choir were conspicuous elements in the medieval Minster. His most important surviving monument, however, is the 78-foot high stained glass window in the choir, painted c.1414 and funded by the Yorkshire Ros barony. This illustrates, in ninety-five large panels, the ups and downs of his career, his death (allegedly by poisoning), and posthumous miracles – mostly occurring at his tomb or shrine.

One panel of this window is recorded in the following entry and illustration from the new catalogue.

16a Cripples Collect Healing Oil

The richly decorated tomb, two bays long, is set at an angle. Under the cinquefoil head of each bay and at the end project yellow spouts, from which gush holy oil. On the left, a man suffering from (?)dropsy supports himself with a stick. His left hand is positioned within the arcading of the tomb to catch the oil pouring from a spout. He has alopecia, and his robe is unfastened, showing his distended stomach and a line of circular marks from chest to waist. Under his robe he wears a low-slung belt with a purse. His swollen legs are bandaged and swathed with cords. Below his left hand a partially blind man inserts his head through the arcading. He clutches the plinth of the tomb and anoints his half-closed left eye with oil. In front, next to him, a bald-headed blind man with deformed legs leans forward, channelling the oil from the next spout onto his upturned face. On the right are two men. One, with stunted legs, clings to the end buttress and collects the oil from the end spout into a wooden bowl. The other puts a hand behind the buttress, trying to reach the oil. Blue background. Most of the garments are modern.

