

# THE SURVIVAL OF STAINED GLASS IN SEFTON, LANCASHIRE

*The two most recent catalogues in the British Academy's series 'Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi' ('Corpus of Medieval Window glass') cover the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire. Their author, Dr Penny Hebgin-Barnes, explains how glazing with traditional religious themes survived the Reformation in north-west England.*

REMAINS OF 16th-century stained glass in St Helen's church, Sefton (Lancashire), show that traditional Catholicism was flourishing in north-west England during the 1540s, after Henry VIII had instituted the English Reformation. This glazing derives from several documented windows, and provides an excellent example of popular religion in the mid-Tudor period – and incidentally of the preconceptions of 19th-century historians.

## The Molyneux family and Sefton church

The church was the centre of a thriving local community whose most important members were the Molyneux family of Sefton. They were lords of the manor and patrons of the church, whose rector was usually a Molyneux cadet. Most of the present church was built during the incumbencies of James (1489–1509), Edward (1509–1536) and Anthony Molyneux (1536–1557). Anthony rebuilt the chancel and the lay patrons the nave, so it was truly a family concern. Brasses commemorating two successive heads of the family, Sir William Molyneux (d. 1548) and his son Sir Richard (d. 1568), and Sir William's aunt Margaret Bulkeley remain in the church.

In retrospect the mid-16th century was a time of great upheaval, with Henry VIII's major religious changes followed by the violent iconoclasm of Edward VI's reign (1547–53), which had such a destructive effect on churches. But the Molyneux family demonstrated that this was not anticipated at the time. They continued to rebuild, adorn and glaze their church throughout Henry VIII's last years. Inscriptions record that the chancel was built and glazed c.1535–45, and the windows of the south aisle glazed in the 1540s. In 1542 Sir William glazed the east window of the south aisle. When Margaret Bulkeley died in 1528 she left money for a chantry from which the wooden screens survive. In this small private chapel the priest Robert Parkinson said masses for her, and in 1543 he glazed its window with a loquacious inscription requesting prayers for her soul, recording her benefaction and his own part in implementing it.

Only four years later Edward VI's government abolished chantries and plundered their valuables and the bequests that funded them. Prayers for the dead were

forbidden and laws were even passed ordering the defacing of inscriptions that requested them, although Robert Parkinson's has survived. Religious images were destroyed and church screens torn down, but Sefton retains much of its beautifully carved 16th-century woodwork, including many screens and a varied collection of carved bench ends, many bearing religious motifs including the emblems of Christ's Passion.

## The surviving 16th-century glass

The present east window of the chancel was glazed in 1870, necessitating the removal of its remaining 16th-century glass, but the writings of later visitors and the surviving fragments in other south windows strongly suggest that it contained scenes from the life of the Virgin, while the south window of the chancel contained scenes from the life of Christ including the supper at Emmaus. This is consistent with the emphasis placed on Christ and the Virgin in religious art at this time.

The remaining glass of the north and south windows of the chancel dates from the 1540s. Some canopy tops are late Gothic in style, but with Renaissance elements confidently integrated, which is typical of the period. There are also scrolls bearing phrases from the Psalms 'Benedictus dominus die quotidie' and 'Deus adiutor noster in eternum'.

The east window of south chapel is glazed in memory of a Molyneux killed in the First World War. Most of its remaining original glazing was removed to accommodate the new glass, but the inscription dated 1542 which asks for prayers for the good estate of Sir William Molyneux (d. 1548) remains along the bottom of the lights; the 20th-century glass includes an inscription drawing attention to this, demonstrating the family's continued interest in their ancestral connection with the church.

Most of the remaining 16th-century stained glass has been assembled in the easternmost south window of the south aisle. It includes figures of the Virgin Mary and St Elizabeth from a Visitation scene (Figure 1), two



Figure 1. *St Elizabeth*. Photo: copyright English Heritage, taken 2002, CVMA inv. no. 008469.



Figure 2. *Trinity*. Photo: copyright English Heritage, taken 2002, CVMA inv. no. 008467.

fragmentary examples of the Trinity with God the Father holding the crucified Christ and the descending dove (Figure 2), two bearded heads (Figure 3) and a variety of quarries and architectural pieces. Intriguingly, fragments showing a nimbed mitre with a cross staff and a hand holding a sword which apparently belong together are likely to derive from a scene of the martyrdom of Henry VIII's *bête noire* St Thomas Becket, whose cult was banned in 1538. Three roundels depicting Evangelist symbols (lion, ox and eagle) remain in other windows. The glass-painting is of high quality, in a style influenced by the Netherlandish glaziers who monopolised important commissions in England during the first half of the 16th century, but it was probably produced by a strong regional workshop which had absorbed these influences. The most similar surviving



Figure 3. *Head of saint, fragments and 20th-century inscription*. Photo: copyright English Heritage, taken 2002, CVMA inv. no. 008465.



Figure 4. *Quarry depicting Judas*. Photo: copyright English Heritage, taken 2002, CVMA inv. no. 008478.

glazing is found in a fine window of 1533 depicting a Jesse Tree at Llanrhaeadr (North Wales).

Some of the quarries, which are more crudely executed than the main figures, depict emblems of Christ's Passion – including St Peter's scimitar with the severed ear on its blade, the head of Judas portrayed as an evil hook-nosed Jew (Figure 4), the cockerel on a pillar, and the hammer, nails and pliers. Such images, like their counterparts carved on the bench ends, are typical of contemporary popular devotion which emphasised Christ's sufferings.

### Catholic piety

How did so much religiously-themed glass and woodwork survive at Sefton? Orders for destruction came from the government in faraway London, but the north-west remained a stronghold of traditional Catholicism throughout the 16th century and beyond. The Molyneux family were not likely to destroy what they had only just installed and their continuing association with Sefton protected their church.

One other question is why the collection of 16th-century figures and fragments is accompanied by a 20th-century inscription stating that the Virgin and St Elizabeth came from the east window which formerly bore a Latin inscription commemorating Sir Richard Molyneux dated 1441. This information was obviously taken from *Sefton: A Descriptive and Historical Account*, published in 1893 by the antiquarians Carøe and Gordon. In other respects their account was accurate, but there is no evidence for any inscription of 1441, a date which makes no sense since the church was rebuilt in the 16th-century and St Elizabeth's gown and turban are unmistakably Tudor in style. Moreover, earlier writers had recorded inscriptions in glass

from the 1540s naming various members of the Molyneux family, but none mentioned Sir Richard (d. c.1454), who was head of the family in 1441. Unless Carøe and Gordon made uncharacteristically careless errors in both name and date, the only plausible explanation is that they tweaked the evidence to imply that the glass was produced in the 15th century, which fitted the received wisdom that religious subject matter could not have been produced in the 1540s after the Reformation had supposedly abolished it. This was based on long-established Protestant assumptions that the Reformation was readily received and implemented throughout England. But as historians such as Christopher Haigh and Eamonn Duffy have shown in recent decades, this was not true of north-west England, where popular Catholic piety was alive and well during the mid-Tudor period – as is amply demonstrated in Sefton church.

*Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* (CVMA) is an international research project dedicated to recording medieval stained glass. The work of the British CVMA committee ([www.cvma.ac.uk](http://www.cvma.ac.uk)) receives support as a British Academy Research Project, and its volumes are published by the British Academy. The British CVMA also publishes an online magazine on stained glass, *Vidimus* ([www.vidimus.org](http://www.vidimus.org)).

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