The East Window
of Low Ham Church

Low Ham church has no saintly dedication and due to its situation it is known locally as ‘the Church in the Field’. On entering the church, the east window appears as a colourful focal point in a rather austere gothic interior.

The east window as it is today

Close examination of the window reveals interesting details of its history, whilst also inviting a number of intriguing questions. Why is the architectural style not Gothic? Why is the window quality so poor, with much of the colour simply being painted. What is the meaning of the Latin inscription on the cross and why is there a face at the base of the cross? Why is the bottom of the three main window lights filled with miscellaneous pieces of painted glass, and what is the significance of the two fragments of Latin inscription in the bottom left hand corner of the window?

Architecture

The church was built in about 1620, as a private chapel for Sir Edward Hext, Lord of the Manor of Low Ham. The architecture generally follows a Gothic style, albeit of rather odd proportions, and includes a traditional Somerset Perpendicular tower. However, the windows are anomalous, demonstrating the influence of other architectural styles. This is especially notable in the east window, with its elaborate circular stellar tracery in a hollowed almost semi-circular arched recess.

The window tracery

The church was built very late in the Gothic period when Renaissance architecture, originating in Italy, had already become the prevailing style in Europe. The Renaissance also introduced the profession of architect, schooled in the art and science of building, who worked out a detailed design on paper before transmitting the drawings as instructions to the builder.

England at this time still preserved the medieval practice of constructing buildings under the supervision of a master craftsman, either a master mason or a carpenter. Generally described as the 'head workman' or 'architect mason' he was in fact the architect, also responsible for supervising all aspects of the building work, sometimes participating in the work himself. After laying out the building plan on the ground, the design of a building was developed during the building process under the detailed instruction of the architect mason, who sometimes provided drawings as a visual aid to support his verbal instructions.

William Arnold, a popular local architect mason who was active at this time, is known for his essentially traditional architecture. He also introduced classical features with mannerist details derived from his knowledge of contemporary architectural publications from the Low Countries. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Arnold may have had a hand in the design of Hext's church.

Stained glass

Evidence of the production of stained glass dates back to the Ancient Roman Empire. By the seventh century, stained glass was being used in the windows of religious buildings in England. The later advent of Gothic architecture, with its focus on height and light, created large stained glass windows. Stained glass is glass that has been uniformly coloured by adding metallic oxide powders or finely divided metals to the molten glass during its manufacture. Cobalt produces deep blue, iron green, and copper or gold red or violet. A yellow stain could also be produced by treating white glass with a silver compound before

firing. This process was also applied to blue stained glass in order to create a green colour.

The term ‘stained glass’ is also commonly applied to windows of enamelled glass in which the colours have been painted onto the surface of the glass to form a picture. A pigment of ground glass and metal oxide, mixed with wine or vinegar and gum Arabic, formed the paint which was fused to the glass by heating in a kiln. Large pictures, in the form of windows, are made up from numerous pieces of stained glass held together by specially formed lead strips (‘cames’) which are soldered in place. The weight of the window is supported by horizontal metal saddle bars which are let into the surrounding stonework and tied to the window’s lead cames.

It is likely that the church was built with plain glass windows, and all the existing coloured glass was installed later. Judging from a recorded but now lost window inscription, the large east window was made in the 1660’s and installed as part of a refurbishment of the church completed by Hext’s grandson, George Stawell, in 1668.

Design of the east window

The window has three main individual glazed compartments (‘lights’) with extensive stone tracery above. The central light contains a large cross, around which are two coiling scrolls. The upper one bears the Latin words ‘Non Marte sed Morte,’ an error for ‘Non Morte sed Marte.’ The Latin word ‘Marte’ is a variant of the name Mars, originally an agricultural god to the ancient Romans, symbolising fertility, burgeoning of life and renewal. In the Christian religion this is associated with the resurrection. Thus the Latin phrase ‘Non Morte sed Marte’ can be interpreted as ‘Not Dead but Risen.’

The lower scroll continues the sentence begun on the third scroll, above the cross, ‘Christ is risen from the dead & become the first-fruits of them that slept.’ In the pedestal at the foot of the cross are the words ‘O grave I will be thy distruction.’ The left and right-hand lights contain the figures of the Virgin Mary and St John standing on pedestals. Behind the base of the cross is a view of Jerusalem. Each of

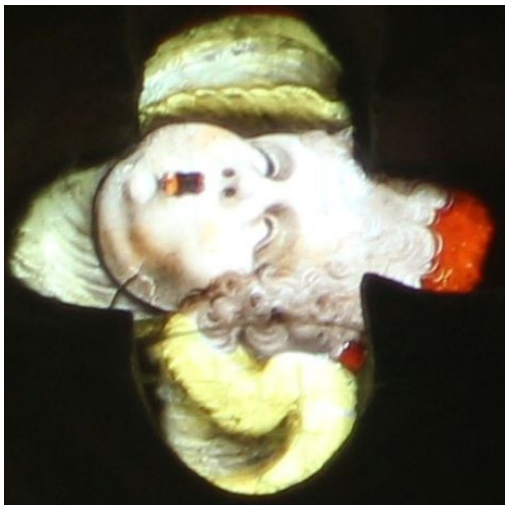
the main window lights is surrounded by a border of scrolling acanthus leaves of thirteenth century pattern.

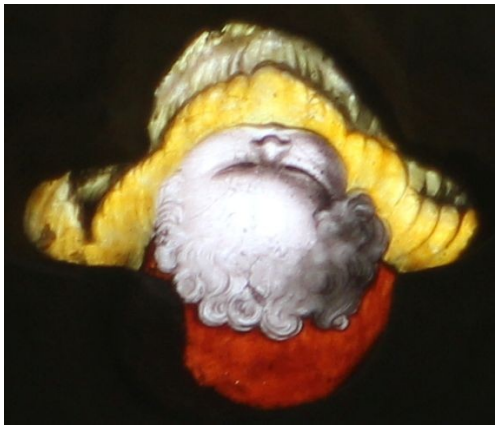
Of the 17th century glass, only the blue robe of Mary and the blue tracery lights are of coloured glass. The yellow colour has been achieved by silver-staining and all other colour effects are painted. On the Evangelist's robe the red pigment can be seen to be wearing thin. As has been remarked by others, the style of the window is not well accomplished, and the limited use of stained glass suggests cheap manufacture.

In the stone tracery, in the upper part of the window, a spectacular central 'glory' contains the Sacred Name of God in Hebrew characters. In the surrounding circular pattern of tracery lights are three cherubim and, at the top, a stylised white rose, all interspersed with four flower and leaf devices. An outer encircling pattern of tracery openings is filled with mostly blue coloured plain glass.

Tracery lights

The cherubim appear to be the work of a more skilled glass painter than that of the main window lights. The use of white for flesh colour, with fine line drawing and modelling enhanced by matt shading reflects the English style of glass painting developed in the fifteenth century. The identity of the painters is not known.





The tracery cherubim

Evidence that the window has been broken and repaired is shown by the truncated pedestal below the cross, with a newer panel of acanthus leaf border to its right (as shown below).

The window originally carried a Latin inscription, written across the bottom of the three main lights. Only two fragments remain, painted with a bright yellow stain, set in the lower left corner of the left-hand light.

The two surviving fragments of the original inscription, now part of the infill glass at the bottom of the left-hand light

The missing inscription

The only known first-hand record of the original inscription was made by Edmund Rack during his survey of Somerset, between 1781 and 1787. By reconstructing missing letters of the alphabet, with reference to contemporary texts, precise measurements and computer simulation of the text layout, the complete inscription has here been recreated as it would have originally appeared, extending across the bottom of the three window lights:

The size of the inscription panel in the left-hand light was determined from measurements of the two surviving fragments. The apparent symmetry of design of the left and right-hand window lights suggested that the dimensions of the inscription in the right-hand light would have been similar to that in the left.

Reconstruction of the section of the inscription in the left-hand light, in which the two surviving fragments can be identified

The dimensions of the centre light, together with evidence that the glass in the upper part has not been altered or repositioned since its original installation, restrict the available space for an inscription of similar size to that in the other lights. It is suggested that this would have been resolved in the original installation by a small alteration in the height of the inscription panel. This would have been possible, retaining exactly the same sized lettering and spacing as in the other lights, with the text aligned exactly across all three lights, as shown in the reconstruction of the inscription.

The Latin text can be translated as follows:

'In honor and glory and for the divine worship of the Great God at the sole expense of George Stawel Esqr this chapel was founded and finished the foundation was laid on the 20th day of May in the 20th year of the reign of King Charles the 2nd and it was consecrated on the first day of September in the year one thousand six hundred and sixty nine. Glory to God on High.'

The wording of the text, once prominently displayed above the altar, is misleading. The claim that George Stawel laid the foundation implies that he demolished Hext's church and rebuilt it at his own expense. In fact his work (completed in 1668 according to the inscription) appears to have been limited to the possible repair of minor damage caused during the Civil War (the battle of Langport was fought close by in 1645), the installation of the east window, the addition of the Stawel arms on the north door of the chancel and on the rainwater heads, and the addition of the painted angels and the inscription on the chancel screen with a Charles II coat of arms above. The meagre scope and nature of this work suggests that its main purpose was self-aggrandisement.

Rack's manuscript notes were not published until 2011. The existence of the inscription in the east window and the date of consecration were first briefly mentioned in print by Collinson, in his 1791 *History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset*, based on the information provided by Rack. An independent reference to the inscription is found in an old paper discovered at Netherham Farm in 1921. Part of the manuscript history entitled *Antiquities of High and Low Ham*

written by successive rectors of High Ham, it carries an abbreviated English translation of the inscription, which it states was ‘Written on the Chancel Window of Low Ham Chapel.’ It translates the Latin consecration date of 1669 incorrectly as 1690.

The Stawel Arms on the north door

The medieval glass

Sometime after 1781, the lower part of the window was broken and, apart from two fragments, the Latin inscription was lost. The window was subsequently repaired, filling the space previously occupied by the damaged glass at the bottom of each of the three lights with a patchwork of fifteenth-century glass fragments. Surprisingly, for such a significant local occurrence, no record of these events has been found.

Fifteenth-century glass infill at bottom of the window

The most noteworthy of the fifteenth-century glass is the panel bearing the image of a lion's mask, an image popular in medieval art, usually carved in wood or stone. This stylised version with its squinting eyes, cleft lip and protruding tongue, enclosed in twining sprays terminating in oak leaves, appears in stained glass of the fifteenth-century. It is found in tracery lights, borderwork, and in the cusps of main window lights of a number of Somerset churches, including at Langport and Trull; a few other examples have been found in Wiltshire and Dorset. Fifteenth-century painted glass in many Somerset churches, including some of the east window repair infill, can be attributed to a single local workshop. The lion mask images at Langport and Trull, and several other churches, appear to be the work of the same glass painter.

An inscription scratched on the glass suggests that the panel painted with the lion mask, probably together with the other fifteenth-century glass, was then in different ownership. The now partially legible inscription includes the owner's signature, possibly that of John Hugh Smyth of Ashton Court, with a partial date of 17?7. The latter shows that the glass could not have been part of the original east window but was, instead, included as part of the later repair. Several windows at Ashton Court have been described as containing fifteenth-century glass removed from other Somerset mansions. One piece is recorded as carrying a similar scratched inscription with the Smyth signature.

John Smyth was a wealthy Somerset landowner, a JP, active in other public offices and a generous donor to charities. He was an enthusiastic amateur historian and sponsor of Collinson in the writing of his *History*. Smyth showed a special interest in churches and historical stained glass. He was concerned with the demolition and rebuilding of one of Bristol's medieval churches, one of several which were rebuilt at this time, and consequently had access to earlier stained glass.

The Low Ham lion mask is clearly part of the window repair and has been positioned on its side in order to fit into the available space. Its present position on the cross can, however, be considered appropriate in the light of the medieval tradition which regarded the lion as the King of Beasts. By roaring, it was said to bring to life its stillborn offspring on the third day after their birth, an allegory of the Resurrection.

Later history

Various restoration work, mostly undocumented, is known to have been carried out on the east window. This has usually involved removal of the window glass to replace the lead cames, which become brittle over time and can crack, threatening the integrity of the window and its fragile glass.

The east window is known to have been re-leaded at least three times. Holes in the stone surround and mullions, close to the existing saddle bar fixings, were noted during the 2006 quinquennial survey of the church, suggesting that the glass and saddle bars of the left and right hand main lights had been repositioned at some time. The scope of work for the most recent restoration of the window, for the Churches Conservation Trust completed in 2018, included the repair of 'numerous holes from earlier fixings.'

The only significant change to the window has been the inclusion of the fifteenth-century glass, during the repair of unknown date. Measurements of the window, together with evidence in the stonework of earlier fixings, indicate that incorporation of the fifteenth-century glass in the left and right-hand lights would have required repositioning of the remaining glass, resulting in unfilled space at the top of each. This could have been remedied by the installation of new plain glass panels, simply painted as a cloudy sky, at the top of each light. Similar evidence shows that the main part of the centre light would not have had to be repositioned to accommodate the infill glass.

An engraved inscription in the window records its restoration in 1883 by Edwin Horwood of Frome, who also made the four windows depicting the saints and evangelists, installed on each side of the chancel as part of Sir Charles Wathen's refurbishment of the church between 1883 and 1889.

A photograph of the window, published in 1946, shows the uppermost tracery light containing a cherub. This has since been replaced by a stylised white rose, evident in more recent photographs.

Floral device in the tracery

The most recent restoration of the window was completed in 2018, as part of major refurbishment of the church by the Churches Conservation Trust.

Saving the plate

The history of the window would be incomplete without the traditional local story of how the window saved the church plate. In 1921 the Low Ham estate, after being advertised for sale for several years, received an offer to buy just the church which at that time was still a private chapel. The potential buyer claimed that ownership would entitle him to all the chattels in the chapel, including the church plate which he apparently considered to be of great intrinsic value.

The rector of High Ham and his wife, campaigning to preserve the plate, consulted the Church authorities in Wells. The Bishop confirmed that the plate belonged to the Church only if satisfactory proof of the building's consecration could be produced. Unfortunately, none could then be found. (Rack's notes, recording the lost window inscription, were acquired by the owner of a private archive soon after Rack's death in the 1790's. The archive, including Rack's notes, apparently remained undiscovered or inaccessible to the public until it was purchased by the Bristol Record Office in 1947.)

One day after the meeting with the Bishop, following a service in the church, the rector's wife was offered an old paper found at Netherham Farm, on which was a handwritten note of an English translation of the Latin window inscription recording the consecration. This was subsequently demonstrated to have been written by the Rev. Joseph Shaw, a former rector of High Ham, and provided the crucial evidence that saved the plate by proving that it was the legal property of the Church.

Research and photography by John Head

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