

St John the Evangelist, Howsham - Safeguarding Precious Windows

An approach from Merlyn Griffiths, a conservator at the York Glaziers Trust, gave rise to a detailed study of our precious Clayton and Bell stained glass windows. We had been aware for some time that they needed repair, the most obvious problem being a missing piece of glass in the rose window above the entrance. However, Merlyn had chosen to write her dissertation for her MA as Howsham Church's windows are very important example of nineteenth century glazing; and



are a very accomplished series of windows from the early years of this stained glass firm, arguably one of the most popular and important firms of this time.

As a result of this study, we became aware of the phenomenon of “crizzling”. Following the Reformation, the demand for stained glass had rapidly declined and in the years up until the nineteenth century, many of the recipes for glass manufacture were lost. The 'Gothic Revival' brought back a desire to make windows in the same manner as in the Middle Ages and so firms like Clayton and Bell were formed to take advantage of this demand for stained glass. Before this point, the production of glass did not match that of this earlier period and the quality was deemed poor in comparison. Glass manufacturers like Powell and Sons (who generally supplied Clayton and Bell with the glass for their windows) were engaged in attempting to recreate glass of the same high quality as that produced in the Middle Ages; and so for a number of years this was a time of major experimentation in glass manufacture.

The windows made for Howsham fall right in the middle of this period and in both the West window and the window next to the font, there can be seen the results of this experimentation. Within these two windows is found some dark purple glass, that had deteriorated in a way referred to as ‘crizzling’. Unlike the rest of the glass in the windows, it had formed microcracks right the way through its thickness, had lost its transparent glassy surface and had begun to disintegrate; leaving the holes that could be seen prior to repair.

This type of glass deterioration is relatively understudied in the field of stained-glass conservation and the purple glass at Howsham is an exceptionally good example of an extremely advanced stage of this phenomenon. Merlyn's study included taking a sample of this glass for examination using a Scanning Electron Microscope and offering professional advice. Leading on from Merlyn's study, the churchwardens asked the York Glaziers Trust to undertake a comprehensive survey as a basis for obtaining quotes for repair and preservation. Estimates varied widely. In the end a compromise had to be pursued with a focus on repair and some preservation measures.

We are very grateful to Merlyn for her initial approach and subsequent advice, to the York Glaziers Trust for their comprehensive condition report, the Barley Studio for carrying out the work; and to all the organisations who supported us with grants and made the work possible.