

THE PERIODIC PLAGUES OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE  
FOURTEENTH CENTURY AND THEIR EFFECTS ON  
THE ART OF GLASS-PAINTING

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After his triumphal return in October, 1347, from the French war which culminated in the battle of Crécy, Edward III, in the middle of the year 1348, instituted the order of the Garter; probably in imitation of a similar order of knighthood which the French king had recently instituted. He then immediately set about building the chapter-house and chapel of St. George at Windsor so that the newly-formed order might have some place to meet in, and at the same time began the chapel of St. Stephen in the palace of Westminster. But these works were hardly begun before the Black Death appeared in England and building operations could only be carried on by forced labour.<sup>1</sup>

By one means or another these three buildings were hastily erected and by 1351-2 were about ready for their decoration and stained glass. As regards the windows two of the principal artists who evidently had the organising and direction of the work were John Athelard and John Geddyng. Glass-painters and glaziers, like masons, carpenters, and decorators, had to be obtained by force, and these two directors and probably others also were given the king's commission and horse-hire to ride far and wide to obtain workers. We get a fairly clear idea where they went from the names of those whom they brought back with them.

‘Before the Reformation,’ wrote Aubrey the antiquary, ‘I believe there was no county or great town in England

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Gasquet in his *Great Pestilence* points out as an illustration of the difficulties of carrying on building operations at the time, that work on Yarmouth church

and Siena cathedral, both of which were then building, was stopped and has never been resumed from that day to this.

but had glass-painters,'<sup>1</sup> and the names of many of the artists employed in this work—Lincoln, Norwich, Chester, Lichfield, Waltham and Coventry—is but a list of half a dozen of the greatest cathedrals, abbeys and great churches in England, which shows how widely spread was the net. Employers as well as men were conscripted, seven names being described as those of 'master glass-painters.' The only concession they received seems to have been that three of them were styled 'mr.' (*magister*) in the accounts. The interpretation which some put upon the title 'master,' viz. that it implies one who had attained a certain standard of skill at his craft, cannot be entertained for a moment; for the gild ordinances which have come down to us make no mention of anything of the kind. Neither does it imply one who had filled the office of master of his craft gild, for though at a later date some of those mentioned in the accounts became wardens and masters of the gild, this was not till long afterwards, and in 1352 they were merely working as cutters and glaziers. A master was one who had a shop of his own.

One of these who was probably the principal director of the work, 'mr.' John Athelard, received a commission to go north-east into the counties of Cambridge, Huntingdon, Norfolk and Suffolk, and he evidently brought back with him 'mr.' John Lincoln and Henry Jernemuth, i.e. Yarmouth. John Geddyng was sent east into Kent and Essex and brought back Thomas Dunmow, John Waltham, William Walton and John Halsted, all of which towns are in Essex, for which service he was allowed one shilling per day for himself and his horse. He probably made another journey southwards into Surrey and Sussex, for John Esthawe might possibly have come from Eastbourne, and John Haddiscoe from Addiscombe, in Surrey.

Either one of the above directors or some other went through the midland counties, and conscripted Thomas Dadington in Oxfordshire, John Coventry in Warwickshire, John Carlton and three, no doubt brothers, from Lenton

<sup>1</sup> Even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the demand for windows was fast dying out, glass-painters were still to be found in some of the smallest places. William Blithe of Thaxted in Essex painted

the windows of Trinity college, Cambridge, in 1562-1564. (Willis & Clark, *Architect. Hist. of Univ. of Cambridge*, ii, 571), and 'Old Harding' of Blandford in Dorset, whom Aubrey knew, is another example.

in Notts. and John de Brampton and Roger Melchbourne (Melchebourne) in Bedfordshire.

The midlands and western counties seem to have provided a happy hunting ground for one on such an errand, for there was evidently a small but thriving school of glass-painting situated somewhere thereabouts, probably at Nottingham. At a later date, in 1386, Richard II gave Nicholas Hoppenwell a writ to impress glaziers and commandeers glass in the counties of Norfolk, Northampton, Leicester and Lincoln for the windows erected at Stamford to the memory of his mother Joan princess of Wales.

By these means a staff consisting of approximately three draughtsmen and designers (*protractionem et ordinationem vitri*), ten glass-painters, sixteen cutters and glaziers, a boy for grinding colour, and a labourer who kept the fires going for heating the soldering irons, was got together.<sup>1</sup>

Further difficulties were encountered in obtaining sufficient glass for the work. The white glass could be made in England and large quantities of it were obtained from Chiddingfold in the Weald, which was a centre of glass-making. But the case of the coloured glass was different. It had to be imported from the continent and at that time over-seas trade was practically at a standstill. It was known that ships carried the disease, and their crews were prevented by the panic-stricken populace from landing their cargoes.

In London the chief mart for coloured glass and similar imported goods was the warehouse of the Hanse merchants known as the Steelyard, in Thames Street, where also was the wharf where the ships of the league took in and discharged their cargoes. It was evidently there that the coloured glass was purchased, for in the accounts are items of the cost of 'glass of different colours' and for carriage and boat hire bringing coloured glass from 'Temesesstreete' to Westminster.

More coloured glass was scraped together from anywhere it was to be found. The large number of names of different persons from whom it was purchased proves this; as well as the insignificant amounts, in one case as

<sup>1</sup> The number of workmen given above is as given in the St. George's chapel accounts, and differs slightly both in numbers and personnel from the St. Stephen's chapel list, though they are approximately the same in each case.

little as fourteen pounds, which some were able to sell. Those bearing the king's commission empowering them to impress glass-painters were no doubt also entitled to seize stocks of glass; in the case of John Geddyng this is distinctly stated. Those of the impressed glass-painters who were masters had not only to work for wages but also to provide materials from their business stocks to forward the work, for which they were, of course, paid. Thus John Geddyng sold six pounds of 'jet,' i.e. glass-painters' flux; and silver filings for stain.<sup>1</sup>

The glass was turned out in an incredibly short space of time, three months being expended on the windows of the chapter-house, Windsor, and approximately six months on those for each of the two chapels, after which the impressed masters were allowed to go back to their own shops, taking their men with them, and resume business on ordinary lines. We find them not long afterwards supplying painted glass in the usual way by the foot, for portions such as the tower of St. Stephen's chapel and parts of Windsor castle which, no doubt, were erected subsequently to the period of their enforced labours. Thus in 1365 there was paid :—

'To John Brampton, for ninety-seven feet of white glass wrought with flowers and bordered with the king's arms for the window of the aforesaid tower (of St. Stephen's chapel) at 1s. 1d. per foot—£5 5s. 1d.'<sup>2</sup>

Shortly before this Brampton, who was evidently in partnership with one Henry Stathern, had also supplied Windsor castle with large quantities of painted glass, for a payment is recorded of :—

'1336 feet of painted glass with borders of the king's arms bought of John Brampton and Henry Stathern for the windows of the new work (royal lodging at Windsor) at 13d. a foot—£72 7s. 4d.'<sup>3</sup>

The very considerable sum which these represent in modern money shows that Brampton had prospered in the

<sup>1</sup> These items might of course merely refer to purchases which he had paid for out of his own pocket and for which he had been reimbursed. On the other hand, the John Cosyn who supplied paper for the decorators' stencils might be identical with

the John Cosyn who worked with the glass-painters.

<sup>2</sup> Brayley and Britton, *Hist. of Palace of Westminster*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> W. H. St. John Hope, *Windsor Castle*, vol. i, p. 188.



[S. A. Pitcher, phot.]

GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL CHURCH, EAST WINDOW : ST. GEORGE.

world since the time during the Black Death when he worked as a cutter and glazier. In 1373 he became master of the London Glaziers' craft (afterwards the Glaziers' company). Henry Stannermore, master in 1368, was probably identical with his partner Henry Stathern.

Another cutter and glazier on the St. George's work, William Papelwyk, in 1365 supplied 329 feet of painted glass also at 1s. 1d. per foot; and became upper warden of the craft in 1368; and, no doubt, as the rule was, master in the following year. John Geddyng, who in 1352-3 received 7d. per day as a glass-painter and also supplied various painting materials, became upper warden of the craft in 1373.<sup>1</sup>

The above facts provide an absolutely unique example among methods of turning out windows, a parallel to which it would be difficult to find. The contract for the great east window at York made in 1405 stipulated that the work was to be done in three years; and that it was actually finished in that time is proved by the date 1408 upon it. This argues a large staff at work, but there was no question of forced labour in that case. Were documentary evidence available, we should probably find that the windows of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris provided another instance of an impress of designers, painters, cutters, and glaziers, whose sweaty haste did not divide the Sunday from the week in order to satisfy the impatience of a king. This exquisite gem of architecture was begun in 1245 and finished and consecrated in April 1248. The windows consist of forty-six lights without counting the traceries, the rose window, or the windows of the lower chapel; and contain over a thousand different figures and subjects, besides a vast amount of ornamental work of the most delicate description, truly a stupendous amount of work to get out in the time.<sup>2</sup>

The list of names of those conscripted to work on the windows of St. Stephen's and St. George's chapels does not show that any were brought from the north.<sup>3</sup> The king's

<sup>1</sup> Ashdown, *Hist. Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters on Glass*, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> The windows cannot all have been in place at the consecration of the chapel in 1248, for in one of them the death of St. Louis is represented, and that event did not take place till 1270.

<sup>3</sup> William de Nafferton undoubtedly came from the small village near York, the only one of that name in England. He had probably migrated south some time previously.

commissioners do not seem to have gone further than the midlands; and the York school of glass-painting, in point of numbers second only to that of London, was left alone. There were probably several reasons for this. The distance was no doubt too great; and the uncertainty of being able at such a time to secure more than a few men at most above the average in ability made the risks and trouble entailed hardly worth the while. For in York the Death raged with an intensity equal to that in the capital. Mediaeval statistics of the numbers of deaths caused by battle, pestilence, and famine are always unreliable and generally grossly exaggerated,<sup>1</sup> so that their evidence is of doubtful value. But apart from contemporary statements of the actual numbers of deaths, an analysis of the York Freemen's Roll shows that whereas the average number of new freemen enrolled annually between 1339 and 1348 was sixty, in 1349 two hundred and eight new freemen were added. Glass-painters evidently suffered with the rest, for two years later three new names are added to the roll, this being the only instance with one exception, viz. in 1400, that three members of the craft became free in one year. The epidemic recurred periodically. After the second visitation in 1361 two hundred and eighteen new freemen had to be created in order to fill the gaps in the ranks.

We have already seen that the glass-painters working at Westminster were drawn from different parts of England. But at York, amongst the hundred or so names of members of the craft that are recorded from 1313 to 1540, all, with two notable exceptions, seem to have been either natives of the city or men who came from small country towns and villages in the surrounding district. The two exceptions were Ricardus de Welles, free in 1359, and John Thornton, who came there in 1405.

Welles was possibly a youthful member of a family of that city which fled north in an attempt to escape the

<sup>1</sup> Stow says he saw an inscription on a cross in the graveyard of the Carthusian monks, formerly 'Spittle Croft' 'outside West Smithfield barres' recording that 50,000 persons were buried there. The whole population of London in the fourteenth century did not exceed that number. A document preserved in the municipal records of Norwich state that 57,374

people 'beside religious and beggars' died there. At that time the whole population of Norfolk was not more than 30,000 (H. de B. Gibbins, *Industr. Hist. of England*, p. 71, note). Blomefield, however, in his *History of Norfolk* (folio ed.), ii, p. 681, estimates the population of Norfolk before the Plague at 70,000.



plague when it first appeared in the adjoining county of Dorset in 1348, and who on coming to York, took to glass-painting and was out of his time some eleven years later. It was in the bishopric of Bath and Wells that the disease first appeared in England, and even before it actually broke out we find the bishop of that diocese ordering prayers, processions and fastings to avert God's anger, so that the populace must have been thoroughly stirred to the gravity of the situation. 'Hence flight,' as a contemporary writer states, 'was regarded as the hope of safety by most.'<sup>1</sup>

John of Winchester who, in 1363, two years after the year of the second visitation, executed work for Durham abbey, was probably another fugitive from the south. His name does not appear in the York Freeman's Roll but he probably resided there; for Durham, not being situated on a navigable river and therefore unable to obtain glass direct from overseas, could not support glass-painters, and, in the fifteenth century at any rate, invariably had its windows painted in York.

Immediately following the Death many citizens of Winchester, we are told, 'because of the taxation and other burdens now pressing on them, are leaving the said city with the property they have made in the place and (are) betaking themselves to other localities in the country.'<sup>2</sup>

As regards John Thornton of Coventry, it has for long been an interesting subject for speculation why the dean and chapter of York in 1405 brought this artist (as we may be allowed to presume), from that city in order to design the great east window instead of employing a local man. The foundation stone of the new quire had been laid on 30th July, 1361, and less than ten weeks later promises of windows were already being made,<sup>3</sup> though some twenty years at least would have to elapse before the fabric was sufficiently advanced to receive them. In 1399, the glass for the large windows of the quire, which no doubt included the great east window, was already in the store, yet it laid

<sup>1</sup> Brit. Mus. Cotton MS. Vitell. A. xx, fol. 56, quoted by Card. Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence*, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Rol. Pat. 26, Ed. III, quoted by Cardinal Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence*, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> Agnes de Holme by will dated 11th October, 1361, bequeathed 'a sum of money

to be levied out of my goods . . . for the construction of one glass window: and I desire that in one light of the said glass window be placed a figure of St. James the Apostle and in the other light thereof a figure of St. Katherine the Virgin' (Browne, *Hist. of Cath. of York*, pp. 149-150).



there for six years or more before it was used ; evidently for the lack of a competent artist. The Death was again the cause of this delay. For, as Drake in his history of York records, in '*Anno* 1390 a contagious distemper began in these northern parts, and swept out of York in a very small time, 1,100 persons ; and in the next year the same kind of pestilence, we suppose, broke out with greater violence all over England, and, as our authorities testify, there died, in the city of *York* only, 11,000 in a short space.'

There is no need to take these figures as accurate records ; for at that time the population of York did not exceed twenty thousand persons and was probably much less. Yet there is sufficient evidence to show that the death-rate must have been appalling. At the present day glass-painters who work in studios where spirits of tar are used as a vehicle for painting are said never to suffer from influenza on account of the antiseptic properties of the odour of the pine trees from which it is extracted. But this medium was never used in ancient times.

There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that glass-painters suffered less than other crafts, and they probably suffered proportionately more than some. They were, no doubt, always few in numbers,<sup>1</sup> and some of the smaller crafts, like some of the smaller religious houses, seem to have been completely wiped out.<sup>2</sup>

The younger men who were coming on and who, in course of time, would have replaced the older generation, had probably been killed off in the visitation of 1349, 1361, 1369, and 1390, for contemporary chroniclers tell us that 'the mortality attacked the young and strong especially, and commonly spared the old and weak.'<sup>3</sup> John Burgh the glass-painter, whom it would seem the dean and chapter had always employed, was, however, still alive. He did some work for the minster in 1399, and as late as 1419 he was still called in when repairs to the windows were needed. But as likely as not Burgh was an

<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth century there was probably more stained glass being turned out than at any other period. Yet at York in 1461 when the craft appeared before the lord mayor to have new ordinances granted the number of masters seems to have been eight only.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. The Cutlers and the Hatters of London. *Vide* Creighton, *Hist. of Epidemics in Britain*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> *Chronicon Galfridi Le Baker de Sawnebroke*, ed. by E. M. Thompson.



[S. A. Pitcher, phot.]

GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL CHURCH, EAST WINDOW: ST. KATHERINE.

old man and, as an artist, somewhat out of date.<sup>1</sup> Already reports of the new style of work which was being done by Thomas the glass-painter of Oxford for William of Wykeham's college at Winchester and elsewhere must have reached York, for the great builder-bishop was not unknown in the northern city, having previously held the prebendary of Langtoft in York cathedral. Yet contemporary York work was far behind what was being done in Oxford. If we compare windows which were executed prior to the coming of Thornton, and therefore presumably by Burgh and his contemporaries, with Thomas of Oxford's work at Winchester,<sup>2</sup> we see that the latter is far in advance in style, and even in some respects (as for example, in the design of the canopies) even more advanced than Thornton's east window, though it is at least 12 years earlier in date.

The east window of Gloucester cathedral has long been a puzzle to antiquaries, for as Winston pointed out, 'the stone framework of the window is an early but decided example of the perpendicular style, and the painted glass is a pure example of the decorated.'<sup>3</sup> 'The incontrovertible evidence of date afforded by the heraldry' enabled Winston to conclude that 'if it was not executed in 1347 or 1348 (it) was designed or ordered then and executed within a year or two after.'<sup>4</sup> Westlake, however, whose judgment was rarely at fault when a date had to be deduced solely from the evidence provided by design and technique, whilst agreeing with Winston that 'there is a possibility that it was ordered earlier,' said 'my own idea is that it is as late as 1360 in execution.'<sup>5</sup> There can be little doubt that Westlake was right and that there was a considerable lapse of time between the year when the

<sup>1</sup> That this statement is not made without due consideration is shown by the fact that in the east window of St. Saviour's church, York, a fine example of transitional work probably by the same artist who painted the beautiful transitional window in the minster and most likely John Burgh, the heads, probably the work of the chief artist and evidently an old man, have been painted in the smear shading method of the fourteenth century; the draperies, evidently by a younger hand brought up in the newer methods of technique and handling, in the stippled style of the fifteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> The windows at Winchester College are copies. Portions of the original glass are to be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at Ettington Park in Warwickshire.

<sup>3</sup> Winston's paper on the window in *Memoirs Illustrative of the Art of Glass Painting*, 1865, reprinted from *Arch. Journ.* xx, 1865, pp. 239-253, 319-330.

<sup>4</sup> Winston's *Memoirs*, p. 305.

<sup>5</sup> *Hist. of Design in Painted Glass*, vol. ii, p. 40.

scheme for the design of the window was drawn up and the time when the glass was actually executed. For if the glass was actually made 'within a year or two after' 1348 this takes us back some years earlier for the design of the stonework, which, in view of its advanced style is, to say the least, very unlikely. There can be little doubt that Winston's estimate of the date 1348 for the general scheme, and Westlake's conjecture of the year 1360 for the execution of it are correct though Westlake does not suggest any explanation for the lapse of time between the conception of the scheme and the completion of it. From what we have seen, the delay was as likely as not caused by the Black Death which broke out in the former year. At first, in a vain attempt to prevent the spread of the infection, Gloucester forbade any dealings with Bristol, through which port the glass from overseas was imported.

There is what is probably corroborative evidence that this delay was due to the Death in the window itself. As Winston pointed out, in 'its material, its mode of execution, the use of smear shading' and other characteristics which he noted at length, the window 'has no resemblance to a perpendicular example except in the very large proportion which the white glass bears to the coloured.' We can hardly suppose that an artist who was old-fashioned and even hopelessly out of date in design, draughtsmanship and technique, was yet at the same time as a colourist in advance of his age, and can only suppose the large quantities of white glass used was because, being made in England, it was available, whereas coloured glass was not.