

THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE.

SUGGESTED ORIGINAL ARRANGEMENT OF GLASS IN EAST WINDOW, 1498-1821.

THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY GLASS IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE.¹

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The painted glass in St. Michael's, the parish church of Ashton-under-Lyne, is an extremely fine though somewhat damaged example of the work of the middle ages. The glass, which portrays incidents in the life of St. Helen, was originally the glazing of the great east window of six lights, and as such is referred to in a manuscript of 1586, but, subsequent to a fire which occurred in the year 1821, the stonework of the east window was entirely altered, becoming a window of seven lights, and in this the old glass was reinserted.

In that situation the glass remained undisturbed until the year 1872, when, in a misguided moment, the charming original glass was removed, in order to provide accommodation for a modern memorial. Upon its displacement, the ancient glass was releaded, with wide-leafed lead, and the panels placed, with but little attempt at the continuity of the events depicted, in four other windows, three being in the south aisle and one in the north.

It is a matter of some little difficulty to form an opinion as to the exact date when this glass was originally placed in the church, but we know from the manuscript mentioned above that in the year 1586 there were in the base of the window certain figures of donors and dedicatory inscriptions extant, there being one such inscription in each of the six lights. The inscriptions were as follows :

¹ Read before the Institute, 17th April, 1912.

I. A^o Domini mcccci . . .

Four sons and seven daughters.

- II. (O)rate pro (bono) statu (Thome Asheton) militis (A)gnetis uxoris sue et (pro animabz) Elizabethhe & Anne uxorum (eius) q' cam' om ecclesie timebat

A man kneeling with three wives, with arms silver a molet sable.

- III. (O)rate pro animabz Johannis A(ssheton) militis Dulcie Margerie & Isabelle uxoris eius qui in predictam (edificacionem) proce(de)bat
A man with three wives, with arms silver a molet sable.

- IV. Orate pro animabz Thome Assheton militis et Elizabethhe uxoris sue qui istam ecclesiam . . .

A man in coat armour and a woman in same, arms silver a molet sable.

- V. Orate pro anima Laurencii Assheton (quondam rectoris) istius ecclesie qui istam ecclesiam una (cum Thoma) Assheton et Johanne Assheton militibus (edifica)cionem predictam continuabit

A priest, parson of the same.

- VI. Orate pro bono statu Gerbes Assheton rectoris istius ecclesie qui istam ecclesiam una cum Thoma Asheton milite fieri fecit.

A priest kneeling.

In order that we may arrive at the date of the dedication of this glass it is necessary that we should consider the pedigree of the Ashton family between the years 1400-1516, which is given opposite.

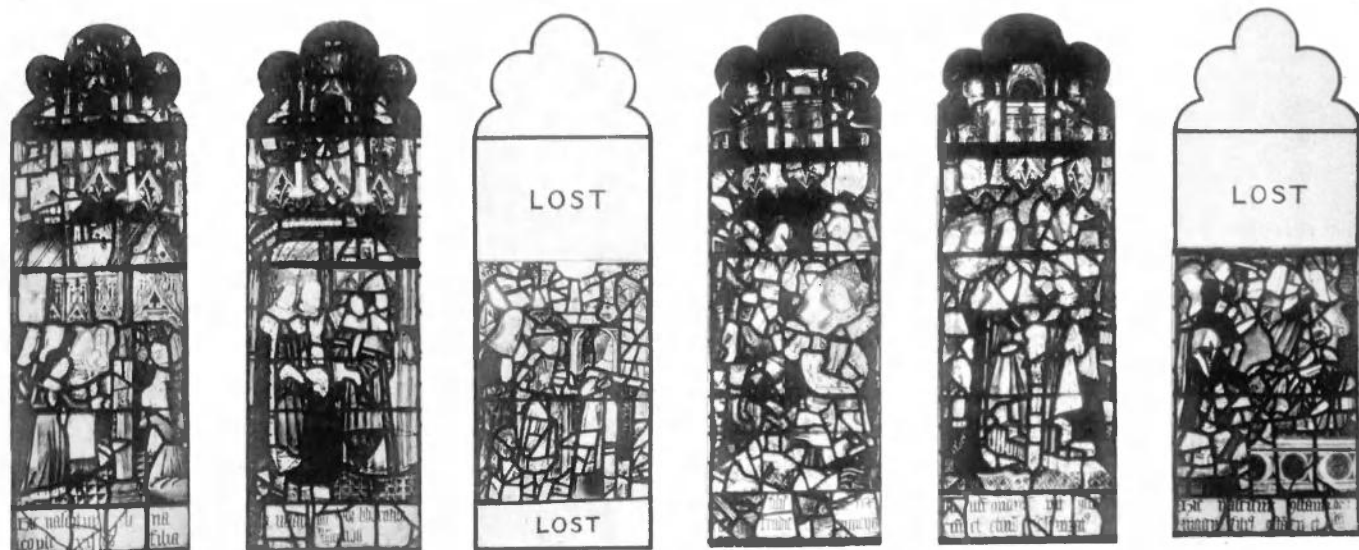
Now it would appear that the insertion of this window must have taken place between the years 1498 and 1513. We find that it is subsequent to 1488, since Sir John Ashton died in 1484, and his third wife Isabel died in 1488:¹ and it is after 1498, as dame Elizabeth Ashton was alive in 1498, but prior to 1516, the year in which Sir Thomas Ashton died,² whilst it is probably anterior to 1513, since Gerves Ashton, rector, was alive in 1513.³ It would seem likely that the subjects represented in the story of St. Helen were painted about the year 1480, since the armour worn by the soldiery, in the panel representing the victory of the emperor Constantine over Maxentius, was that in vogue towards the end of the wars of the Roses, the conjunction of the salade and pointed sollerets suggesting that date. If this is the case, the glass must evidently have been finally dedicated some few years subsequent to the date of its production.

The glass, as it exists to-day, comprises some nine

¹ See inscription iii.

³ See inscription vi.

² See inscription ii.



THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE
CANOPIED PANELS ABOVE STONE TRANSOM.

canopies of two different styles, eighteen panels measuring 41 by 20 inches depicting events from the life of St. Helen, together with four groups of donors, fragments of numerous inscriptions, and various tracery-lights.

I have arranged the various scenes from the life of St. Helen, not in the order in which they occur in the various windows, but in what I presume to have been their original distribution, whilst I have placed in brackets figures indicating their present situation.

It is the intention of the rector of Ashton, the Rev. F. R. C. Hutton, to have the glass adequately restored and reinserted in four windows of the south aisle, and with this object in view he has enlisted the services of Mr. Caldwell of Canterbury, who has suggested a suitable scheme of restoration.

It is curious to observe how closely the inscriptions beneath the various panels follow the text of the *Nova Legenda Angliae* of John Capgrave and the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, in their accounts of the life of St. Helen. I accordingly print such portions of these works as have bearing upon the several subjects depicted, which might be somewhat obscure in their absence.

Nova Legenda Angliae of John Capgrave. De sancta Helena regina. Helena Cloelis regis Britanniae unica fuit filia.

. . . ut igitur intra insulam Constancius applicuit direxit Cloel legatos suos ad illum petivitque pacem, etc.

Quo defuncto insignivit se Constancius regni diademate duxitque filiam Cloelis . . . cujus singularis pulchritudo provinciales puellas facile superabat; nec uspiam reperiebatur altera que in musicis instrumentis sive in liberalibus artibus illa doctior haberetur, . . . erat namque humilis et pudica, prudens et pacifica, cunctis eam considerantibus amabilis et gratiosa ac bonis operibus plenissima.

Constantine conquers Maxentius and becomes the ruler of the world.

St. Helena resides at Byzantium and becomes a Jewess.
Baptism of Constantine by St. Silvester.

Victory of St. Silvester over St. Helena's Jewish doctors, though the story of the bull is not directly named.

. . . tam ipsa quam omnes Judei iudicesque et ceteri omnes conversi sunt ad fidem . . . a beato Silvestro baptismum humillime postulavit, & . . . multas ac honorificentissimas basilicas fecit ditissimeque donis innumerabilibus dotavit.

The story of the finding of the Cross follows here :

Judas etc . . . tres cruces invenit quas reginae detulit ; sed cum Christi crucem ab illis duabus qui latronum fuerant nescirent discernere, et circa horam nonam quidam mortuus in feretro portaretur, Judas feretrum tenuit ; et prima ac secunda cruce appositus, mortuus minime se movit. Mox vero ut apposuit tertiam protinus ille qui defunctus erat rediit ad vitam, etc.

Legenda Aurea (Morris reprint). Legend of the bull and St. Silvester. "Thenne said one of the maistres of the jewes named Zambry, I merveylle, said he, that ye be so wyse and enclyne to theyr wordes, Late us leve all thies werdes and goo we to the effecte of the deedes.

Then he dyde do come a cruel bulle, and sayd a worde in hys eer, and anon the bulle deyed. Thenne the peple were all ayenst Silvester. Thenne said Silvester, beleve not thou that he hath named in the eere the name of Jhesu cryst, but the name of somme devyl, know yu verely it is no grete strengthe to slee a bulle, for a man, or a lyon or a serpent may wel slee hym, but it is greete vertue to reyse hym agayn to lyf, thenne yf he may not reyse hym it is by the devyl. And yf he may reyse hym agayn to lyf I shal beleve that he is deed by the power of God. And whan the juges herde thys they said to Zambry, that had slayn the bulle that he shold reyse hym agayn. Thenne he answered that yf Silvestre myght reyse hym in the name of Jhesu of Galylee his maistre, thenne he wold byleve in hym and there to bonde them alle the jewes that were there. And Saynt Sylvestre fyrst made his orysons and prayers to our Lord and sith cam to the bulle and said to hym in hys eere.

Thou cursed creature that art entred in to this bulle and hast slayn hym, goo out in the name of Jhesu cryst in whos name I comande the bulle, aryse thou up and go thou with the other beestes debonayrly, and anon the bulle aroos and wente forth softly.

Thenne the quene and the juges, which were paynems, were converted to the faith."

The empress Helen, as a result of a vision, was encouraged to make a journey to Jerusalem, with the object of discovering the true cross. Upon her arrival there, she gathered together the wise men, in order to elicit from them the location of the cross. The Jews were alarmed at the empress's inquiry, since one of them, by name Judas, had declared that so soon as the cross was discovered, the tradition and ancient law of the Hebrews would be abrogated, this having been revealed to him by his father Simon, whose brother Stephen had been martyred as a believer in Christ. Unable to extract the necessary information, the empress ordered that they should be buried alive, under which threat they declared that Judas was the one who knew most about the matter. He, however, did not betray his secret, until he had been starved for the space of six days and was almost *in extremis*, under pressure of which circumstance he declared that the cross lay buried beneath the temple of Venus, a building which had been there erected, to annoy the Christians, by the emperor Hadrian. By command of the empress, the building was destroyed and, Judas having dug down some twenty feet, three crosses were found buried. The difficulty now arose as to which of the three was indeed the true cross, and in order to elucidate this point the bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, suggested that a corpse which was at that moment being borne past for burial should be placed upon the crosses. It was in turn placed upon each cross, but it was not till it had been brought in contact with the third that it was restored to life, thus revealing the true cross.

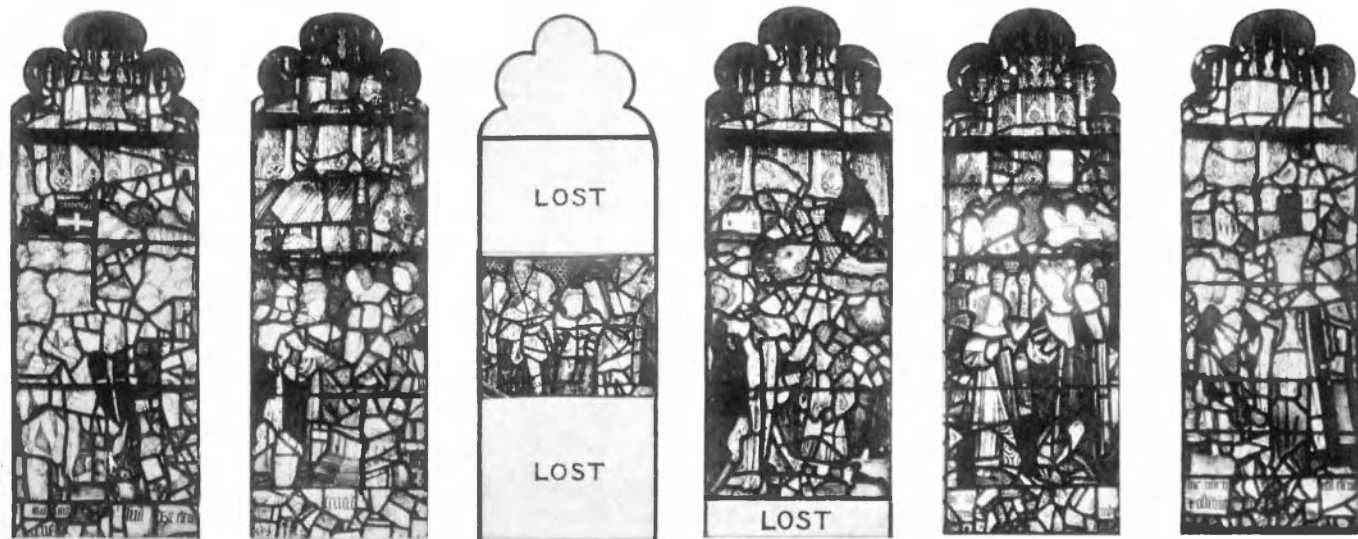
The original arrangement of the panels, shown as a whole in plate I, and separately in plates II, III and IV, was probably as follows: the figures in brackets, other than plate references, indicate the position of the various panels in 1912, i, ii and iii being in the south aisle, iv in the north.

A. Upper lights (plate II).

1. The birth of St. Helen, A.D. 246.

Hic nascitur elena.

Coyle regis filia. (i, 1).



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CANOPIED PANELS BENEATH STONE TRANSOM.

2. St. Helen enters a convent school.
Hic elena (in art)ibus liberalibus
(? est instrue)nda. (i, 3).
3. St. Helen returns home and visits prisoners. (iv, 2).
4. St. Helen betrothed to the emperor Constantius.
(ii, 1).
Hic rex coyle filiam suam
nunciis Constancii tradit.
5. The marriage of St. Helen to the emperor Constantius, A.D. 273.
Hic matrimonium inter Constan
cium et elinam solemnizatur. (ii, 3).
6. The birth of Constantine the Great, A.D. 274.
Hic nascitur Constant(inus)
magnus filius Constancii et elene. (iii, 5).
Window divided here by transom.

B. Lower lights. Upper row (plate III).

1. Constantine the Great defeats the emperor Maxentius, A.D. 312.

The soldiers, who are wearing armour of about 1480, are arrayed under the labarum, "In hoc signo vinces."

2. The baptism of the emperor Constantine.
..... quad
..... (i, 2).
3. The Church Council of Nicea, A.D. 325 (iv, 3).
4. St. Helen lands at the Holy land, A.D. 325 (iii, 1).
5. St. Helen questions Judas as to the location of the Cross, A.D. 326.
Hic ad . . . (ii, 2).
6. The whereabouts of the true Cross is revealed.
Hic nuncii (be)atam elenam
et ostendunt (iii, 3).

C. Lower lights. Middle row (plate iv).

1. The magician
- Zambry*
- kills the bull, A.D. 314.

*Hic arte diabo(li Zambres) magus Elene
sufflabat in aure tauri et cecidit mortuus (ii, 5).*

2. The bull lies dead.

*. . . . tur
. . . . flans (ii, 4).*

3. The bull being restored to life by St. Silvester,
-
- St. Helen is converted to the true faith.

*(Hic Silvester Dei virtu)te taurum resussitavit
(et elena convertitur) ad fidem cum sua tota d(omo)
(ii, 6).*

4. Upon digging three crosses are discovered.

*Hic (re)p(eri)ebat . . . in . .
aliis et . . . Constanci . . . envie (iii, 4).*

5. The true Cross is revealed by its restoring a corpse
-
- to life. (iii, 6).

6. A church is founded at Jerusalem (iv, 1).

D. Lower lights. Bottom row (plate iv).

The figures of donors, etc. were as follows : the figures
of panels 1, 2, 3 and 4 still survive :

1. The children of Sir John Ashton i, ob. 1428, viz :
-
- Four sons, Thomas, Lawrence, Robert, and John, and
-
- seven daughters, viz : Lucy, Margaret, Katharine, Eliza-
-
- beth, Agnes, Anne and Isabel.

2. Sir Thomas Ashton ii, ob. 1516, and his three wives

1. Elizabeth Stayley, alive 1498.

2. Anne.

3. Agnes.

3. Sir John Ashton ii, ob. 1484, and his three wives,

1. Dulcia.

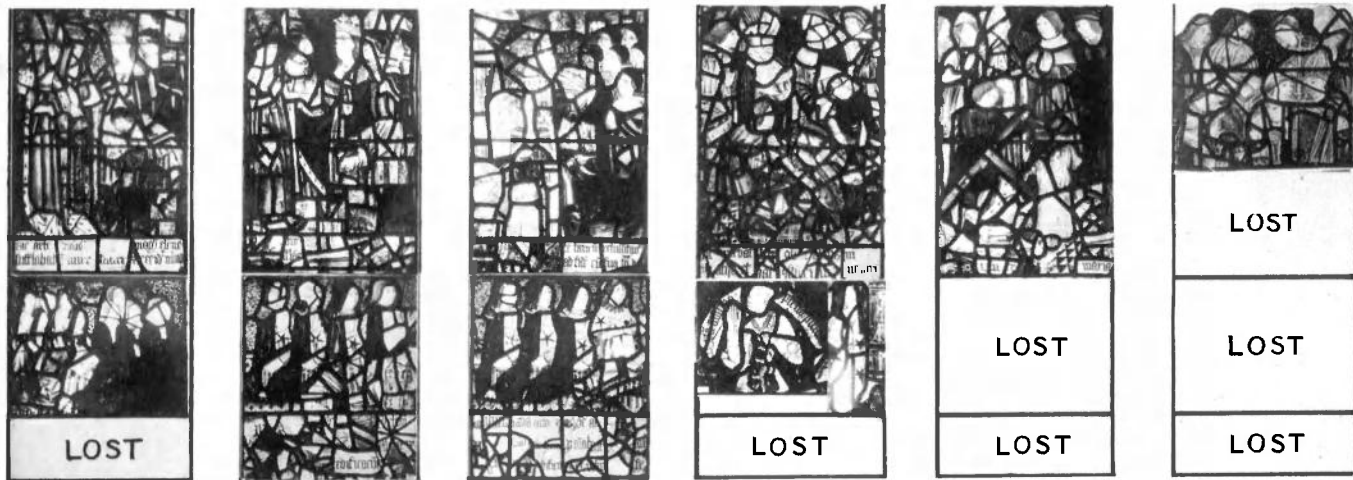
2. Margery.

3. Isabel, ob. 1488.

4. Sir Thomas Ashton i, ob. 1454, and his wife,
-
- Elizabeth Byron.

5. Laurence Ashton, ob. 1486.

6. Gerves Ashton, alive 1513.



THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE.

UNCANOPIED PANELS, GROUPS OF DONORS, AND DEDICATORY INSCRIPTIONS.

The figures of the various donors are now placed in the following positions: The children of Sir Thomas Ashton i, four sons and seven daughters, occur in the bottom of the first light of the first window in the south aisle, Sir Thomas Ashton ii and his three wives at the foot of the second light of the same window as the former, whilst Sir John Ashton ii and his three wives are at the base of the third light of the same window as the preceding figures.

Dame Elizabeth Ashton, *née* Byron, is now placed in the upper part of the east window of the south aisle, beneath whom is a portion of an armoured figure, having short hair, as worn circa 1430-1470, wearing the collar of SS, of the Lancastrian house.¹ Upon the body of this figure occur the following arms, which, however, are not in their original position, silver three lions rampant purpure, Talbot.

It is not impossible that this figure may represent Sir Thomas Ashton i, and may have been originally in another window and subsequently placed in the great east window, as the style of hair-dressing and the armour is much anterior to anything occurring on any of the other figures.

The inscriptions were probably originally arranged as shewn on page 2. The letters within brackets still survive.

Of the tracery lights some seven more or less mutilated figures remain, of which five are now inserted in the tracery of the west window of the north aisle, which window also has inserted in its central main light, three of the panels from the Life of St. Helen.

In addition to the three panels, this window also accommodates in its two lateral lights fine figures, about half life-size, of two kings, each represented as crowned, nimbed and holding a sceptre, whilst beneath each is a label, one reading EDWARD, the other HENRY. These labels appear to have been changed, as that named Henry has in one hand a ring, which no doubt refers to the legend of St. John and St. Edward the Confessor. I think, therefore, that we may regard these as being St. Edward the Confessor and that quasi-saint, king

¹ Examples of figures in glass wearing the collar of SS exist also at Great Malvern and at Thun in Switzerland.

Henry of Windsor ; and, as the Ashtons were Lancastrians, this attribution is, I think, not an unreasonable one.

These figures of kings, as also the fragment of a bishop in the upper part of the same window, probably formed part of the east window of the north aisle, beneath which there was, as recently as 1586, the following inscription :

*Orate pro bono statu Nicholai Ashton Elizabethę uxoris sue
Laurentii Ashton rectoris istius ecclesie et Edmundi Ashton militis Anne
uxoris sue heredumque suorum qui istam fenestram fieri fecerunt.*

In conclusion I should like to express my indebtedness to Mr. Brownbill, Mr. A. Hamilton Thompson and Mr. W. H. St. John Hope for much assistance in regard to the inscriptions and their due restoration, and also to the rector of Ashton for his kind help in the preparation of this paper.