

Book Review I:

The Medieval Stained Glass of Cheshire
by Penny Hebgin-Barnes. 580pp, ills including 23 pages
of colour ills, Oxford University Press, 2010.
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by David Martlew

Weighing in at an impressive 3kg, this scholarly volume is weighty enough to silence the most demanding of critics. Its 580 pages present what must surely be the definitive account of the nation's stained glass heritage in the northern county of Cheshire. But the reader must inevitably feel a sensation of awe when made aware that the same author has produced an equally weighty companion volume dealing with her research regarding the stained glass of Lancashire and yet another on the glass of Lincolnshire. She has delivered in a scant decade or so more than many achieve in a lifetime.

Not surprisingly (since this volume comes from the pen of a member of the *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* British Committee), the material is highly structured — essential if the discerning reader is to find desired needles in a hugely rich haystack. This ninth volume in the CVMA Summary Catalogue series brings together a remarkably large amount of closely researched information relating to its scope. After the expected contents page and comprehensive listing of illustrations, the book gives helpful explanations of the CVMA window identification scheme, both in respect of locating a window on the building's ground plan and also the systematic numbering scheme for individual panels in elevation within a window. There follows a well-constructed glossary of the technical terms used within the stained glass fraternity, which is most helpful to readers. Next comes a charming section explaining the typography of quarries, those small diamond-shaped pieces of glass graced with decorative and sometimes very amusing designs. This is illustrated with line drawings indicating the kinds of artistic devices being considered.

The 'Introduction' is, at 151 pages, sufficiently detailed and desirable to be published as a separate affordable volume. Certainly the content would sustain that: an overview sets the scene, drawing attention to the strong links between Cheshire and Lancashire from the stained glass point of view. In many ways, the author argues, one could regard the two counties together as presenting a contiguous tradition in the creation and use of architectural stained glass. For this reason the two volumes have virtually identical introductions. Unusually, the cut-off date for the glazings under consideration is as late as 1800 rather

than the 1540 date favoured by the CVMA. This decision, we are told, stems from the retention of the earlier styles and iconography in the region in spite of the Reformation (after all, the region is a long way from London) and also the occurrence of eighteenth century glass from foreign sources.

Several glaziers' workshops served the two counties, including an important 14th-century regional workshop, probably based in Chester, whose output survives at nine Cheshire sites and which in addition supplied the North Wales market. The evidence for such workshops is carefully reviewed. The Reformation period saw a shift from glazings with predominantly religious themes towards heraldic themes; in her section on the religious background the author explains this process and gives reasons why it did not run as rapidly in Lancashire and Cheshire as it did in the south of England. The serious church explorer will be delighted to see the very strong section on iconography in the region's glazings, which not only provides a listing of saints depicted and where they might be found, but also a well-illustrated account of the key features showing the gradual shift of emphasis as the local gentry and nobility began to commission figured glazing for their homes. Depiction of donors and the eventual fashion for armorial and heraldic designs is also discussed.

Dating a window may be attempted on art-historical grounds or by technical factors such as colour usage and painting techniques; the substantial illustrated discussion of these methods applied to the glass of the two counties is most helpful. Finally, the Introduction grapples with the foreign glass in the region. 'Foreign' in this context refers in particular to glass which had been sourced from workshops overseas, not merely that from other parts of the British Isles. The likely origins and current location of pieces located in both Cheshire and Lancashire is discussed.

The Catalogue is the major part of this work, setting out in meticulous detail the significant glazings at some fifty sites in Cheshire, mostly churches, but there are some domestic and other buildings, too. The entries are arranged in alphabetical order, first of location by village or town, then by church or building name. Greyscale photographs abound in this section, aided by some two dozen pages of full colour images at the end of the volume, and there are also line drawings from the sixteenth century and from the twentieth century.

Each entry carries a brief architectural history of the building to set the surviving glazing into a proper context, together with notes on the principal donor families and others significant in the evolution of the glazing scheme. A good example is the section on the parish church of St Wilfrid Grappenhall (page 114) in which the history of the building is meticulously researched and sources carefully listed. Not only are there explanatory notes on each window and greyscale images of the most important panels, but there are also reproductions of manuscript sketches supporting the accounts of previous restorations of the glass.

This catalogue will provide an essential reference for scholars and students of the history of medieval and early modern art and also for those who are interested in the social and religious history of Tudor and Stuart Cheshire. But more than that, the book will provide fascinating reading for the many folk who are interested in visiting these churches and

appreciating them — especially the rich heritage provided by the stained glass which is such a feature.

The major barrier is unfortunately the very substantial price tag for the book, which will place it beyond the scope of all but the most dedicated readers. Hopefully the library service can be persuaded to help out here, and I urge all interested folk to request the book from their local library. Perhaps the CVMA might consider re-packaging this material and making it available in modestly priced small volumes, each perhaps covering one village and its churches? That, together with the introduction as a separate volume, would make the fruits of Penny Hebgin-Barns' research more widely appreciated.

