

THE ENGLISH HERITAGE OF STAINED GLASS

By L. M. Angus-Butterworth

WHEN the Ancient Monuments Society was founded provision was wisely made for the study and conservation of fine old craftsmanship as well as historic buildings. Clearly the craftsmanship is often part and parcel of the fabric which it adorns, and this is notably the case with stained glass. Thus York Minister, when bereft of its stained glass during the war of 1939-45, lost more than half its glory.

In stained glass we have one of the most lovely and sumptuous forms of the art of the glass craftsman. Professor W. R. Lethaby, in his "Medieval Art", has spoken of the window of dyed glass as the most perfect art-form known. He says that the old glass as it were holds the sunlight within it, so that the whole becomes a mosaic of coloured fire. In the early windows the usual colour scheme was of crimson and azure, cleared by small fragments of white, yellow and green. One feels that this dazzling mixture was made use of by a deeper instinct than taste. Such windows seem to fulfil an active part in cathedral ritual—an incense of colour. Keats, in speaking of stained glass windows, says they are:

Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,

As are the tiger-moth's deep damask'd wings.

The pitch of colour is the intensest conceivable, and stimulates the sensibilities like an exultant anthem. Largely by virtue of their windows the great Gothic churches became the art galleries of medievalism. What emotional appeal there is in stained glass, of story told in translucent, harmonious colour, that waxes and wanes with the changes from dawn to twilight.

But it is of the utmost importance that our priceless English heritage of stained glass should be protected through the influence of such bodies as the Ancient Monuments Society. The forces of destruction are constantly at work now as in the past, and often the worst harm has been done not by storm and frost but by human agency. Consider for example the great number of splendid thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth-century windows which at later dates suffered so grievously from misguided intolerance. Think of the "petition of the weamen

of Middlesex" in 1641, which bore over 12,000 signatures. It tells its own tale:—

"We desire that prophane glass windows whose superstitious paint makes many idolators, may be humbled and dashed in pieces against the ground; for our conscience tells us that they are diabolical and the father of Darknesse was the inventor of them, being the chief patron of damnable pride."

MOSAIC WINDOWS (12th century)

In the twelfth century some coloured glass was already being brought to England for use in the churches, but it was still in the countries bordering the Mediterranean that it found its main employment. Only small pieces of glass could be produced at this time, but in any case the desire in hot countries was to exclude excess of light, so that the churches should be pleasantly cool inside. The glazier's task was to soften and bedim the light, and with his glass he gave a deep solemn effect of harmonious colour.

The colours of the mosaic windows of this period were obtained not by painting on the surface of the glass, but in the crucibles or pots when melting the glass itself. Of the early glass especially it may be said that colour, not form, is its outstanding beauty. The figure drawing was archaic and stiff, although remarkably expressive of thought and emotion.

The medallions which are so characteristic of the twelfth-century are exquisitely correlated through the colour key. The early craftsmen knew relativity of values and understood the enhancing value of black. They had unerring judgment for the general effect of colours, and often used them quite arbitrarily. We find horses of green, yellow and red, especially in the earliest windows, and Christ entering Jerusalem on a blue donkey. Colour was the paramount thing, and colour harmonies more important than local truth of colour.

In this country the chief examples of twelfth-century mosaic medallion windows are at Canterbury Cathedral, which has the richest store of them, the Minster and the Church of St. Denys at York, Lincoln Cathedral, Dorchester Abbey, Lanchester in County Durham, Wilton, and Rivenhall in Essex. Those of this type in the choir of Canterbury, the oldest in England, were placed in position in 1174. Many such windows have suffered damage and have been restored, but those which remain testify to the lovely jewel-like quality of this early period.

GRISAILLE (13th century)

In the thirteenth century there was a reaction against the dark, opulent splendour of the mosaic windows. The glaziers came to produce windows on a larger scale, admitting more light and with larger figures. This tendency towards more light was particularly evident in what were known as grisaille windows.

England, with her grey climate, felt the need for this change most, and soon windows were made with but little coloured glass. They were beautiful in a new way, giving effects of opalescence and mother-of-pearl. They were delicately decorated with geometrical patterns, foliate designs, diapers, and interlacing band-and-strap and fret patterns freely drawn. Sometimes there was a border studded with jewels of colour, and the backgrounds were cross-hatched or stippled. The main colours were a most delicate blend of white, grey, silver, brown and black. The so-called "white" was greenish, bone-colour or horny, giving an effect of pearly whiteness when contrasted with darker colours or with the apparently black bars and leads. It is astonishing how beautiful these windows became, full of silvery light, delicate as a spider's web.

There are splendid examples of these windows at Salisbury and elsewhere. The finest in England, however, and perhaps in any land, are "the five sisters" at York, "a shimmering mass of pearl and silver, delicately veined and jewelled with colour, to give quality to its whiteness". It has been remarked that "more delicate, clear and exquisite fields of simple colour can never have been wrought than these which fill 'the five sisters'."

DECORATED (14th century)

The Decorated period extended from about 1280 to 1380, and in it marked changes occurred in stained glass. More and more light was admitted into the churches. Larger, and especially broader, windows led to mullions and traceries whose elegant divisions, interlacing curves, lozenges, trefoils and quatrefoils, stimulated glaziers to design their windows with skill and felicity. The craftsmen filled the great spaces with bright, even gay colours, in remarkable contrast to the sombre pioneer mosaic. Their drawing showed greater vivacity, with larger figures in flowing drapery which suggested movement. Decorative borders and backgrounds were shown with natural plant forms, including oak, maple and ivy, trailing freely over the window, while diaper patterns enlivened the quarries.

Colour schemes became lighter, grisaille being much used in



Crown Copyright.

FIG. 1. Saint Nicholas, from a window of Merton College Chapel, Oxford, c. 1300.

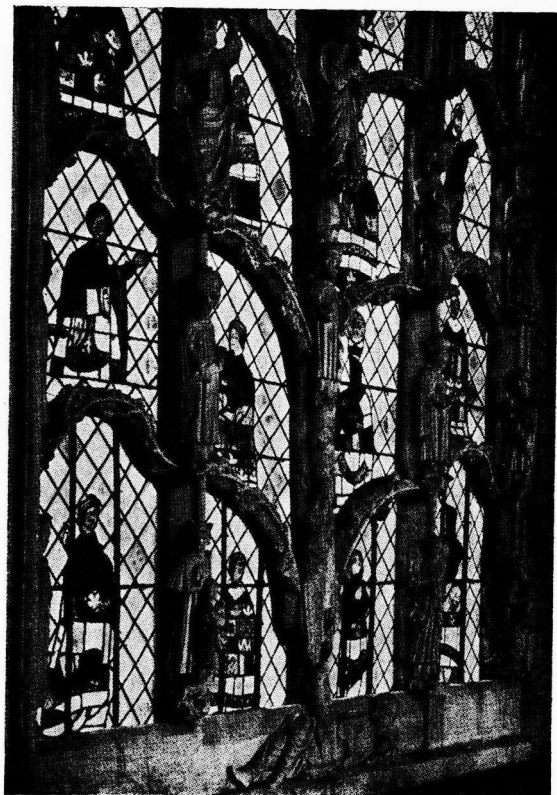


FIG. 2. Dorchester Priory, Oxfordshire. The "Jesse" window in the chancel, north side. Fourteenth century.

combination with coloured figures. Ruby and blue became less deep in hue; a cool emerald green appeared; and flesh colour became paler and yellower. Stone yielded more and more to glass. We are gradually approaching the time when "a cathedral became a stone cage with films of stained glass suspended in the voids, a marvellous jewelled lantern". Possibly the glass sometimes, influenced the architect in his evolutionary changes of style, though usually the stone structure of the window controlled the changes in the glass.

Early in the fourteenth century, about 1310, yellow stain produced by oxide or chloride of silver was invented, and it has been extensively used in stained glass ever since. It was a very important discovery and led to many advances in technique. Hitherto the only yellow in stained glass was of a brassy tinge, and of course in pot metal. Now it was found that this solution of silver, painted upon the greenish-white glass, took in the kiln a transparent stain of yellow, with a full range of tones from lemon to orange. It was indelible and was incorporated into the glass—the only stain found capable of this until our time. It has the variety of a wash of water colour, and could be used by dots and touches for pearls, gems and hair, crockets and finials, delicate drapery and such enrichments. Its application was not confined to white; when incorporated with other coloured glasses it produced fresh tints, greatly diversifying the palette of the glass stainer.

Great control of colours enabled heraldry to find its way into windows. Glass is the ideal medium for displaying heraldry, as the proper colours are permanently reproduced, glowing in undiminished bravery. From the reign of Henry III to this day heraldry in glass has continued in unbroken use. We will return to this subject later.

One very curious example from this century is the unique Jesse window at Dorchester Abbey in Oxfordshire. The figure of Jesse is carved in the stone base of the window and the tracery of the window springs from his loins, being carved with figures and foliage which combine with the figures in the stained glass to show the maternal ancestry of Christ. In this Tree of Jesse, therefore, we have architectural features, sculpture and stained glass united into a harmonious whole.

In England we may study every phase of fourteenth-century glass, from the windows of 1300 in Merton College Chapel, Oxford, to Wells, Bristol, Tewkesbury, Cirencester, Gloucester or Oxford Cathedral in 1385, and finally to New College, Oxford, on the



FIG. 3. The East Window, Gloucester Cathedral. Fourteenth century.

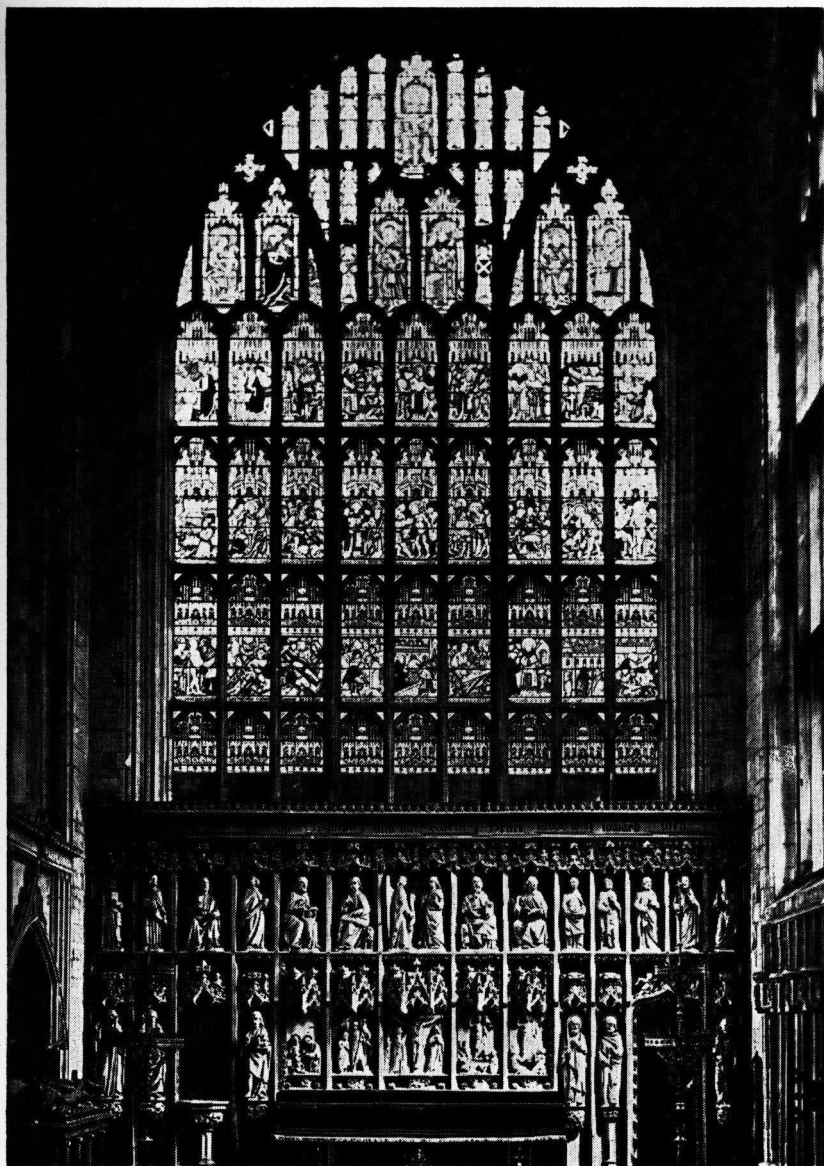


FIG. 4. The East Window, St. Laurence's Church, Ludlow, Shropshire: depicting the life and miracles of St. Laurence in twenty-seven scenes. Dated 1445.

threshold of the Perpendicular. The east window of Gloucester Cathedral is a wonder of silver light. It is the largest in England, 72 feet by 38 feet, higher than the length of a cricket pitch and occupying the entire east end of the choir. No deep colour is admitted. The figures are of silver and the whole vast area pulsates with mild radiance, like that of the moon.

PERPENDICULAR (15th century)

The most prolific period for stained glass in England was the Perpendicular. The style scarcely exists on the Continent, for there the Decorated and Flamboyant styles persisted until superseded by the Renaissance movement. There had been a great accession of wealth in our country, and from this arose an immense output of stained glass to add splendour to the windows of the churches. The glazier's craft remained at its height, in command of delicate colour and fine draughtsmanship. The vertical lines of the delightful silver-stained canopies suited the Perpendicular style. Several important changes took place in this characteristically English period of stained glass. Natural form in ornament was replaced by diapered backgrounds and regular quarries. Ruby was abraded for lively effects, and coated blue appeared with a similar treatment. A wash of enamel colour upon white represented flesh-painting. Coats of arms and heraldic devices increased in number. In general the fifteenth-century windows evidenced many excellencies, especially exquisitely modulated light, good drawing, and emergence from traditional stiffness.

The light colouring of Perpendicular glass suited the English climate, but would have resulted in an intolerable glare in more southern lands. While the colour schemes grew ever lighter, so also the shading was kept luminous, being stippled instead of smeared, and graduated in semitones. Inscriptions were no longer scratched in enamel brown, but were in dark lettering on a light ground.

Of Perpendicular work many magnificent examples have survived. We may see windows of this great period in the antechapel of New College and in chapel of All Souls' College, Oxford; at Gloucester, York, Salisbury and Winchester; and at Great Malvern, Coventry and Warwick.

RENAISSANCE (First half of 16th century)

The final spurt of stained glass of great quality in England lasted from 1500 to 1550, and was part of the Renaissance movement which spread widely on the Continent. For these fifty years the windows



FIG. 5. King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Detail from window on south side of nave showing the Harbour of Samothrace (or Troas). 1526-31.

attained remarkable splendour. The "picture window" had arrived. Painting and draughtsmanship were at a high level of attainment. The glass designers worked with boldness, imagination, resource, and a mastery of their materials. They used large pieces of glass and disregarded the curbs and discipline of leads and mullions, but they retained a notable rhythm.

Records of great value are preserved in the stained glass of this period. In one window, for instance, we have preserved the only authentic portrait of Arthur, Prince of Wales, the elder son of Henry VII. To mention just one other, there is a rare example of English domestic enamelled glass of the time of Elizabeth I to be seen in the Great Hall of Gorhambury. Members of the Ancient Monuments Society who saw this glass when entertained at Gorhambury by the late Earl of Verulam will recall that one of the small panels in it contains the earliest recorded depiction of a tobacco plant. While, therefore, we may value these windows primarily as objects of beauty, they warrant preservation also as part of our national historic records.

The stained glass artists now spread their designs over the entire window; they painted landscapes and excluded illumination by heavy smeared and stippled shadows. They employed the whole gamut of colours, and introduced as accessories to their striking figures many sumptuous ornaments: jewels, armour, rich raiment, garlands of flowers and fruit; architectural features such as staircases, balustrades, altars and columns; and sculptural features such as statues, masks, cherubs and arabesques.

For a time the windows of this period were fine, with strange new notes in them. They combined the old pot-metal glow with the use of opaque enamel paint. Gradually, however, the technique of oil-painting eclipsed the true nature of stained glass. A great divergence from the Gothic traditions occurred, by the use of heavy patches of paint and the introduction of chiaroscuro, perspective and foreshortening. The enameller and painter were usurping the glazier. With all its finery and splendour this superb phase of the glazier's art was a forerunner of decline. It was the worldly and sensuous reaction from early reverence and depth of feeling. By 1550 great stained glass ceased to be produced in England.

It was perilous to imitate oil paintings on glass, for we look at pictures on canvas and *through* pictures in windows. Glass presents only one plane and that transparent or translucent. It is futile to attempt the illusion of linear and aerial perspective—of receding planes and the like. The craftsman should not ignore the laws of

optics. The light is reflected from an oil painting; it passes through a window. The glazier had to study irradiation in building up his window. To each art its own conditions and technique. In seeking pictorial effects the glass painter lost translucency by using opaque enamels, and sacrificed the peculiar qualities and beauties of glass. Eventually his methods brought about the fall, for a long time, of a noble and brilliant art.

VICTORIAN REVIVAL (Second half of 19th century)

Limitations of space make it impossible to discuss the reasons why the art of stained glass has remained for so long in eclipse, in spite of the encouragement given in recent years by the Worshipful Company of Glaziers and Painters of Glass, an old Guild of the trade with a continuous record back to 1328.

Brief reference should, however, be made to a movement begun by William Morris (1834-96) just a hundred years ago. Morris established a workshop for glass-painting in Red Lion Square, London, in 1861. The workshop was afterwards moved to Merton Abbey, Surrey, where stained glass was designed until the end of the century by Morris himself, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82) and Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98).

Much of the best work of this group was done by Burne-Jones. His breadth of treatment, with avoidance of petty detail, was well suited to the nature of stained glass, and his grouping of colour was also effective. He developed the use in bold masses of a beautiful ruby or pinkish-crimson derived from gold, and associated this with foliage in rich olive-green tones.

Burne-Jones designed some stained glass panels, showing the story of the Holy Grail, for his house at North End, Fulham: these are now preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Perhaps his most successful work in this medium are the two great windows in Birmingham Cathedral representing the Nativity and the Crucifixion, erected in 1887.

HERALDIC GLASS

In our survey of stained glass attention has been concentrated on general principles and upon the major changes that have taken place in the course of the centuries. Such are the riches of our heritage, however, that studies could well have been made of a dozen different sections. One of these, heraldic glass, is so important in England that it seems fitting to devote special attention to it.

We have in stained glass an ideal medium for displaying the pride and pomp of heraldry. Coats of arms can be brilliantly and accurately represented. Such gay and vivid colouring is obtainable in this way that by comparison heraldry in other forms appears dull and lifeless. Stained glass also has the advantage of being very permanent, for unless it is accidentally damaged or deliberately smashed it will continue for centuries without perceptible deterioration. In point of fact the beauty of the glass is often enhanced by age.

It is worthy of notice that heraldic work was the branch of stained glass that resisted deterioration longest. We have observed the curious paradox that in other branches of the craft, growing command over the material caused artistic debasement, because so much was attempted that the essential nature of stained glass ceased to be considered. One reason for the continued excellence of heraldry in glass was the restraint imposed by the heraldic laws, which combined bold designs with simple colours.

It is said that coats of arms came into use when knights adopted closed helmets which concealed their features. When the head of a family had chosen a particular device as a means of identification it was natural for his near male relations to use the same design with slight "difference" marks. Thus the arms that had first appeared only on the shield that the lord of the manor carried in battle came to be a representative symbol for his whole family and their descendants. When the use of defensive armour was discontinued, heraldry survived and found its way into stained glass and other forms.

The scope of heraldry for peaceful purposes was soon found to be extensive. Coats of arms in stained glass could be displayed equally well in the windows of church or manor house. By impaling arms, that is by showing those of husband and wife side by side on the same shield, a family alliance could be recorded and in due course, by quartering, descent could be shown. In time some coats were shown with as many as fifty sub-divisions or quarterings, giving a magnificent blaze of colour.

To serve their main purpose it was essential that coats of arms should remain unaltered through the centuries, for only in this way could recognition of their owners be ensured. Changes did, however, take place in other ways. In the Early English period the shield was rarely in more than two colours and was normally charged with a single, simple device. In the Decorated period impaling and quartering are found for the first time. In the Perpendicular period not only was much more richness of detail introduced, but quartering was greatly

developed. With the Renaissance everything was lost. The science of heraldry passed into decay. Shields were given absurdly contorted outlines and flamboyant accessories were introduced. The treatment of stained glass with opaque enamels caused interiors, instead of being filled with joyous light, to be given over to darkened and almost sinister gloom.

Sometimes heraldry must have been introduced into windows largely for decorative purposes, for the aesthetic appeal is very strong. In early days especially, however, heraldry had a more serious part to play. Members of leading families might derive pleasure from seeing their arms glowing in their windows in bravery that was undiminished from generation to generation, but the arms served also as evidence of rank and noble descent. The right to bear a certain coat of arms was one of considerable importance in medieval times, and in 1386 Chaucer mentioned stained glass in this connection in one of the most remarkable cases in British law. Part of his evidence was recorded in these words: "Geoffrey Chaucer, Esquire, of the age of forty and upwards, being asked whether the arms 'Azure, a bend Or' belonged to Sir Richard Scrope, said 'Yes'. Being asked how he knew the arms appertained to Sir Richard, said that he had seen them displayed on banners, *glass*, paintings and vestments, and commonly called the arms of Scrope."

The loss of evidence of this nature was irreplaceable, and when windows were destroyed it was genuinely a tragedy to the owner. Shakespeare referred to such a case when he wrote:—

"From my own windows torn my household coat,
Razed out my impress, leaving me no sign,
To shew the world I am a gentleman."

Fortunately much evidence of this kind remains in the heraldic glass of our old halls and manor-houses, our cathedrals and churches, the colleges of our older universities and the Inns of Court. England is, in fact, one of the four countries in which this branch of stained glass reached its highest level, the others in which good heraldry in glass is found being Holland, Germany and Switzerland.

The east window of Gloucester Cathedral, to which reference has already been made, is a very noteworthy example of the kind of thing with which we are concerned. Here we find the coats-of-arms of all the noblemen who fought at Crècy in 1346. In it some of the most famous families in the land have a joint memorial of their ancestors. Thus we have in the window history enshrined in glass, and it is

remarkable to consider that although glass is regarded as one of the most fragile of materials this glorious work has been in position for more than six centuries.

We frequently meet with individual memorials that are heraldic in character. A typical example of the fifteenth century is the window to Nicholas Blackburn and his wife in the east window of All Saints' Church at York. The lion rampant of the Blackburns is not only depicted boldly on a shield, but appears also on the surcoat of the kneeling figure of Nicholas. Incidentally the surcoat here is limited to a kind of shoulder cape, just large enough to show the armorial bearings, but cut away to reveal the richly ornamented armour beneath. Another very similar example from the same county is in the church of Melton-on-the-Hill in the West Riding, showing a very spirited golden lion rampant on a crimson ground.

The short heraldic surcoat of the knight or esquire could be used with admirable artistic effect in stained glass, as in the case of Nicholas Blackburn. Even more graceful and pleasing, however, was the gown of the lady, which was often ornamented in the same way. A delightful window of this kind is in Long Melford Church, Suffolk, and shows Lady Anne Reinsforth. The kneeling figure has an elegant head-dress, and a gown richly figured with fleurs-de-lys, lions rampant, big and little fish and eagles. The long folds of the garment fall naturally, and the whole effect is highly decorative.

The use of heraldry became very widespread. Thus the widow of Lord Scrope of Bolton in Yorkshire, who in 1498 left bequests for the erection of stained glass windows in nearly fifty churches, stipulated that on all of them: "My husbondes armys and myn" were to be prominently displayed. A more remarkable case is to be found in York Minster, in the windows of which Bishop Skirlaw and Archbishop Bowett are both shown kneeling before altars on which are no sacred emblems but only their personal arms, so that these leading ecclesiastics would appear to be engaged in a kind of ancestor worship.

A very striking change took place in the heraldic glass of the sixteenth century, due to the discovery of the process of abrasion. Progress in methods of fabrication is constantly being made but sometimes the consequences can be remarkable. F. Sydney Eden has observed that as a direct result of the abrasive process less lead binding was required for a window. Previously, if the royal arms of England were to be shown, the shape of the lions had to be cut carefully in a ruby sheet, and yellow glass inserted. The yellow and ruby glass had to be held together by grooved lead binding. Each lion, therefore,

had its own little frame of black, which helped to accentuate the brilliance of the colour.

The new process depended upon the fact that ruby is a flashed colour. That is to say it is so dense that the glass is not coloured throughout, but is plain with just a thin layer or flashing of ruby superimposed. Accordingly in the royal coat the ruby layer is ground away just in the space where the heraldic lions are to be. Yellow stain is then used, much more effectively than any philosopher's stone, to turn the beasts into gold. They remain part of the field and so are not surrounded by lead. This process was afterwards applied to flashed blue and green glasses.

When the royal arms are depicted we have history in heraldry. In the magnificent Henry VII Chapel of Westminster Abbey, for example, we find that the house of Tudor blazoned its badges to show the noble descent upon which was based its right to occupy the throne of England. There are the red rose of Lancaster and the white one of York. The lions or leopards of England are found with the lilies of France. The red dragon of Wales appears as a reminder of Henry's descent from Cadwallader, termed the last of the British kings. There is the portcullis of the Beauforts, the family of Henry VII's mother; the daisy root badge of the Countess of Richmond; the greyhound of the Nevilles; and the falcon of Edward IV. Finally, and most picturesque of all, there is the green bush with its golden crown, recording how Henry was crowned on Bosworth field when the diadem of Richard III was picked from a thorn bush.

A rich but not elaborate royal coat, showing the arms of Henry VIII dates from 1540. It was removed from Cowick Priory, Devon, and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. In it the lilies of France and the lions of England are enclosed in a wreath of red and white roses, for Lancaster and York, amid dark green leaves, surmounted by the crown.

It would be a mistake to regard the armorial stained glass of the great Tudor period as being associated exclusively with aristocratic families of long descent. This element was certainly present, but with it we find a large proportion of the arms of families then newly risen to prominence. The art of heraldry was in its prime, and while a good tradition in design was fully maintained many of the coats introduced at this time were unrivalled in their vigour, distinctiveness and good taste. The flowering of the age in which England found

her greatness showed itself in the splendour of these heraldic windows as in so many other walks of the national life.

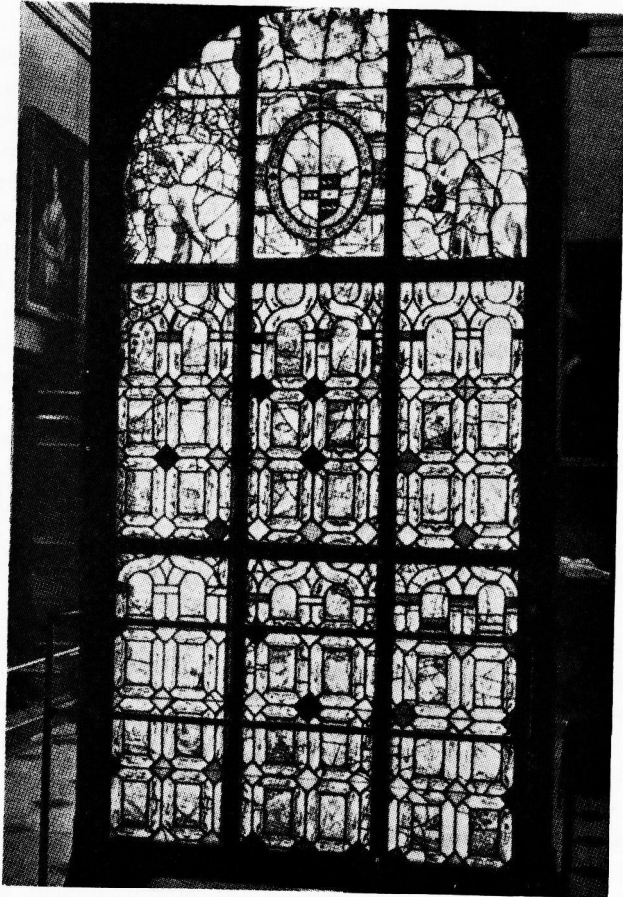


FIG. 6. Gorbamby, Hertfordshire. One of the two windows from the Tudor house, preserved in the Great Hall. Domestic enamelled glass of the late sixteenth century.