

AN EXCITING DISCOVERY:

MEDIEVAL GLASS FOUND IN WIVETON CHURCH

By Sarah Woodhouse

The following article appeared in the June 2000 issue of the Glaven Valley Newsletter. Because of its intrinsic interest it seemed well worth reprinting in the Glaven Historian, and the work which the Society is carrying out at Wiveton makes this all the more appropriate. The Editor is grateful to the author for giving the necessary permission.

On May 10th, late afternoon in a swirling "sea fret", I stood on the scaffolding above the new boiler house with John and Chris, the two masons who are re-pointing the outside walls of the chancel of St. Mary's, Wiveton. They had just begun work right at the highest, central point of the second of the two huge chancel windows which were bricked up, for some unknown reason, several hundred years ago. These are now crumbling in their many crevices after such an age of withstanding North Sea wind and weather. '*Come and look at this - there's some glass in here still, behind all this muck! What do you want us to do with it? Cover it up or take it out?*' We picked gently away with our fingernails for 15 minutes. We licked our fingers and tried to rub the mortar off. Here and there tiny jigsaw pieces of a picture began to show; wonderful, subtle greens and browns and golds. A face with a wavy beard; a hole in his face as if a stone had been thrown at it and starred the glass. A lion with beautiful eyes and a halo. What else? It was impossible to see because of the twisted ribbons of lead and the plaster sticking everywhere.

Brimming excitement and then a flood of anguish filled me. The realisation came instantly that those two great windows had been filled with the most stunningly beautiful and intricate stained glass, from top to bottom, when the chancel was first built. I found myself standing rooted and silent on the scaffolding boards, imagining how the windows must have been bricked up by desolate Wiveton parishioners after Cromwell's men had travelled the coast smashing statues and windows in church after church. Looking down from high up the wall it was easy to visualise how these soldiers had failed to reach and smash out the topmost circular light in the second window with their poles and so had thrown stones at it from below to destroy it; how they had failed to do so and thereby left us this tiny remnant treasure.

I knew it was essential to stop any further work and not risk breaking or losing even a splinter of the glass. Luckily there was no wind to rattle it out of its twisted lead. After telephoning the rectory, Diocesan House and our church architect, Julian Limentani, I was put onto Richard Green in Hull as one of the country's experts in mediaeval glass. He was very excited by my first sketchy description of what had been found and drove straight down from Hull early the next morning with his camera and his doctor's bag of specialist tools. He spent an hour and a half in the cold gusting wind, easing out fragments of mortar and brick, freeing the little circle of colour and lead from its perilous position and wrapping it and other nearby fragments in brown paper parcels.

We warmed up and celebrated with tomato soup and I listened to Richard's fascinating description of the different approaches to the repair of mediaeval glass. He told me that this find at Wiveton is very rare indeed as the lead is also mediaeval and has never been renewed.

Richard has already cleaned it painstakingly on both sides and photographed it again in his 'light box'. He has sent these photographs and his further thoughts to us and to Julian Limentani. His first assessment is that the glass is fifteenth century from the Norwich School and that the figure is St Mark. He also says that the hole in St Mark's head was not caused by a thrown stone but by a musket ball. He will now wait to hear what the P.C.C. and the Diocese would like him to undertake towards achieving a restoration of the pieces. I felt very lucky to have been there at that extraordinary moment of discovery and thankful that we have two such careful stonemasons who noticed immediately what was hidden there and took such initial good care of it.

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