

THE STAINED GLASS OF WIVETON CHURCH ANOTHER VIEW

By John Wright

Edwin Rose's article in this issue of the Glaven Historian¹ opens up the question of when the stained glass in the chancel of Wiveton church was broken and the windows bricked up. He suggests that there are three periods in history when this might have been done: at the Reformation in the mid 1500s, at the time of the Civil War in the 1640s or during the 1700s when support for the church waned and many churches were allowed to deteriorate. On the evidence of the brick infill he concludes that the latter period is the most likely time for the glass to have been removed and the window blocked. This response suggests, in the absence of any actual evidence for depredations by Cromwell's supporters in the area, that the damage was probably done during the Reformation.

Those who read the initial article in the previous issue of the *Glaven Historian* (No. 3) will know that in May last year some medieval glass fragments were found in the upper part of one of the blocked north-facing chancel windows while repairs were being carried out.² These fragments included the upper part of a saintly figure neatly - and literally - defaced with a relatively clean-cut hole from a musket ball, or at least from some high velocity projectile. Richard Green from Hull, an expert in medieval glass, quickly arrived on the scene and agreed to take charge of the glass and carry out some initial cleaning.

Since the last article was written Richard has told Wiveton PCC that the glass clearly dates from the middle of the fifteenth century and was created by the 'Norwich School' of glassworkers. The figure is St Mark, identified by his symbolic lion, and quite possibly the other chancel windows held images of the other three gospel writers.

Richard has also emphasised that the glass is in very good condition: it is not weather-pitted as would be the case if it had been exposed for several centuries. More particularly, the leading that holds the glass is not only original fifteenth century work, but is also in excellent condition. Medieval leading rarely survives more than 150 years or so before it has to be replaced.

These observations from an expert in medieval glass seem to suggest that both the glass and the leading did not have to face the elements for much more than a century before being protected in their brick sandwich. One hundred years on from the middle 1400s came the Reformation, which therefore seems to be the time when at least the upper part of the chancel window was bricked in. Conversely, the Civil War period, some 200 years after the glass was put in, now seems an unlikely date for its destruction, and the eighteenth century, nearly 300 years later, is virtually impossible.

The evidence of the brick infill cannot, of course, be disregarded, but it is only the *lower* section of the window that contains bricks dateable to the 1700s. The dating of the *upper* brickwork containing the glass remnants is not at all clear - as Edwin Rose concedes. The

evidence of the infilling therefore does not necessarily point to the destruction of the upper glass in the 1700s, and the condition of the glass itself rules it out.

If there were Puritans in Wiveton with iconoclastic tendencies in the early 1600s it is not apparent from the accounts prepared by the churchwardens. True, these are rather desultory and few, but those for 1612 compiled by Stephen Howsego are interesting.³ He records that one shilling was spent on 'mending of the pillar of the church window' and a further 8s 7d on 'glassing the church'. This expenditure shows that the churchwardens were quite content to spend parishioners' money on repairing and reglazing the church – though perhaps not with stained glass.

But which church were they glazing? Not necessarily Wiveton church for the parish had already received the rectory of Briston from the proceeds of Ralph Greeneway's bequest of 1558. This entitled Wiveton to the great tithes which were to be used in part to aid the poor and in part to repair Wiveton church.⁴ It also, presumably, required them to maintain the chancel of Briston church. So the 'glassing' may have been carried out in Briston rather than in Wiveton. In fact, there are two further items in the 1612 accounts, separated a little from the previous two: one shilling for a 'lock for the chancell dore' and four shillings for 'glazing Burston [ie Briston] chancell'. This latter item suggests that the earlier reference may have been to Wiveton church after all, but there is no certainty. Either way, the wardens were carrying out their responsibilities for church maintenance by putting glass in – not taking it out.

There is no further evidence to hand to show what was happening in Wiveton in the early 1700s when the main brick infilling was done. Perhaps this material was a replacement for fifteenth century infilling? If so, the circumstances are unclear.

To return to the glass, Richard Green has made some suggestions about what should happen to it: first it should be properly cleaned and conserved, and then it should be displayed – either back in its former position or in some other (protected) place where it can be seen more easily. The PCC has begun to consider these options and also the financial implications, which could be of the order of £10,000. In any event, we can now look forward to having St Mark back on display in the church for the first time in over 400 years.

NOTES

- 1 Edwin Rose, 'One of the churches that Cromwell knocked about a bit – or not?', *The Glaven Historian* No. 4, June 2001.
- 2 Sarah Woodhouse, 'An exciting discovery: Medieval glass found in Wiveton church', *The Glaven Historian* No. 3, June 2000.
- 3 NRO FX 245/5/5 Churchwardens' accounts, Wiveton, 1612.
- 4 V. Morgan, J. Key and B. Taylor, eds, *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey, Vol IV 1596-1602*, Norfolk Record Society, Vol LXIV 2000, p.271 and 273 note.