

NEWPORT: ST PETER WINDOW¹

Peter is one of the saints to whom Newport Catholic church is dedicated, and this window, to the left of the altar, depicts him in his role as leader of the Church, shepherd of Christ's flock. In his right hand is his shepherd's crook and around him are gathered lambs and sheep, representing the faithful. This recalls Christ's command to him 'Feed my lambs ... Look after my sheep'². He holds in his left hand the keys of heaven, sign of the authority given to him by Christ³⁴ and, Catholics believe, handed on to his successors, the popes. One of St Peter's keys is iron, symbolising his power to bind, or exclude from communion with God, and the other is gold, representing his power to loose, or welcome back into the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter is wearing a pallium (a strip of white fabric woven from the wool of lambs and embroidered with black crosses), emblem of jurisdiction. He is also wearing a red robe, symbol of his martyrdom (see below).

Behind Peter rises a rock, on its summit St Peter's church, Rome, built over the saint's tomb: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church'⁵. The name Peter derives from the Greek 'petros', meaning stone or rock. At the base of the rock is the sea, and a boat with brown sails reminding us that Peter was once a fisherman (see below). The boat also serves as another symbol for the Church, travelling through the waters of life, carrying the faithful and steered by Christ. Seagulls fly overhead, and above them are broken chains, symbolising Peter's miraculous escape from prison⁶, and St Peter's Chair, an ancient wooden throne used, according to tradition, by the apostle himself. It is kept, enclosed in a gilt bronze casing, in St Peter's, Rome. At the apex of the window are the arms of the Holy See (the central government of the Catholic Church) consisting of the triple tiara once worn by the Popes and the keys of heaven. Here the keys form a cross, a reminder that the powers given to Peter and his successors came from Christ. Around Peter's feet are flowers associated with him: cowslips, once known as St Peter's Keys, rock roses ('Peter' = 'rock'), and samphire, its name being a corruption of 'Saint Pierre' (St Peter). The tree behind him is an English oak: until the Reformation there was a great devotion to St Peter here, and on the Feast of St Peter & St Paul, 29th June 1893, at Pope Leo XIII's request, the Bishops of England and Wales consecrated England to Mary, Mother of God, and to St Peter. The Pope referred to Peter as the 'Prince of the Apostles' and the 'principal patron' of the country, and asked that devotion to these 'two patrons of the faith' and 'guardians of all virtue' be revived.⁷

¹ An undated leaflet (presumably contemporary with the window) in the Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives has been very helpful in the preparation of this commentary.

² John 21:15-16.

³ Matthew 16:19.

⁴ Luke 15:3-7. Parable of the lost sheep.

⁵ Matthew 16:18.

⁶ Acts 12:7-11.

⁷ *The Consecration of England to the Mother of God and to the Prince of the Apostles: A Letter from the Cardinal Archbishop and Bishops of the Province of Westminster*, Burnes & Oates, London, 1893.

Below we see Peter's execution in Rome⁸. According to tradition he was crucified upside down at his own request because he considered himself unworthy to be crucified in the same way as Christ. Note the swallows in the sky: it used to be thought that they hibernated in the mud of lakes and ponds in the winter to emerge and fly skywards in the spring. A parallel was seen between this and Christ's rising from the tomb at Easter, so swallows came to symbolise the resurrection of Christ and the everlasting life which he promised to Peter and to all believers.

Around the border of the window are more representations of the triple tiara and the keys of heaven, these in a loop of knotted cord recalling Jesus's words 'whatever you bind on earth ...'⁹. There are also references to incidents in Peter's story. The net full of fishes refers to the occasion when fishermen Peter and his partners James and John became Christ's disciples. After a night at sea when they had caught nothing, they were told by Jesus to let their nets down once more. They did so and this time caught so many fish that they needed help from another boat to land them. Jesus said to Peter 'from now on it is men you will catch' and they left everything to follow him¹⁰. The fish with a coin in its mouth is a reference to the time when Jesus wanted a coin to pay the temple tax: he told Peter to cast a line into the sea, take the first fish he caught and open its mouth, and there he would find a shekel, the exact amount Jesus needed¹¹. The cock at sunrise recalls Peter's disowning of Christ after his arrest, exactly as Christ had predicted: 'before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times'¹².

At the head and foot of the window is the inscription 'SAINT PETER PRAY FOR US'. The inscription above the martyrdom scene reads 'PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF MICHAEL SHAUGHNESSY WHO DIED 21ST JULY 1906 & MARY SHAUGHNESSY WHO DIED 27TH SEPTEMBER 1913 · R · I · P'¹³. A contemporary newspaper report¹⁴ tells us that 'the window is the pious gift of Miss Shaughnessy, in memory of her parents, who were devoted members of the Church.'

⁸ The bible does not explicitly mention Peter's death: we are reliant on later writers and tradition for these details.

⁹ Matthew 16:19.

¹⁰ Luke 5:1-11.

¹¹ Matthew 17:24-27.

¹² Matthew 26:34, 69-75.

¹³ RIP = Requiescant In Pace (Latin for 'may they rest in peace'). Michael Shaughnessy and his wife Mary were parishioners: they died at the ages of 64 and 71 respectively (General Register Office Deaths Index: 1901 Census [The National Archives ref. RG13/2566/9/9]).

¹⁴ *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* 11th July 1914 p.10.

The window was unveiled and blessed, with the St Paul Window to the other side of the altar, by the Right Reverend Hugh Singleton, Bishop of Shrewsbury, on 5th July 1914, the Sunday within the Octave of SS Peter and Paul¹⁵. After the blessing of the windows Pontifical High Mass was celebrated¹⁶.

© Roger Hall September 2021

¹⁵ Information from Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives leaflet and *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* article. Hugh Singleton (born 1851) was Bishop of Shrewsbury from 1908 until his death in 1934 at the age of 83. Until 1955 the lives of SS Peter & Paul were celebrated not only on their Feast Day, 29th June, but for the following 7 days as well. This eight-day celebration, known as the Octave of SS Peter & Paul, was suppressed in that year along with most other Octaves as part of Pope Pius XII's reform of the liturgical calendar.

¹⁶ A sung Mass with incense celebrated by a bishop assisted by other priests.