

## **NEWPORT: ST PAUL WINDOW<sup>1</sup>**

Paul is one of the saints to whom Newport Catholic church is dedicated, and this window, to the right of the altar, depicts him holding the sword with which he was beheaded (see below), and a book containing his teachings: he was the author of 13 of the Letters (Epistles) in the New Testament. There are swallows in the sky, symbolising resurrection (see the St Peter window): Paul's Letter to the Romans, his first in the order in which they appear in the Bible, begins "This news is about ... Jesus Christ our Lord who ... was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead."<sup>2</sup> Behind him is the city of Damascus, towards which he was heading when he experienced his conversion to Christianity<sup>3</sup>. It was there that he began his preaching in the name of Jesus: the Jews plotted to kill him, but he escaped by being lowered in a basket down the city wall from a window<sup>4</sup> - you can see this if you look carefully. A caravan of camels is passing, and, beyond the city, ships are crossing the sea to distant lands, recalling his missionary journeys. By Paul's feet is a snake, a reference to a miraculous incident on the island of Malta during one of these journeys. He was putting wood on a fire when a viper fastened itself onto his hand. He shook it off, but vipers are poisonous, so his companions expected him "to swell up or drop dead". They were amazed when the bite had no effect on him.<sup>5</sup>

Around the border of the window are representations of the martyr's crown, and crossed swords. One sword recalls Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians (and to us) to "take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"<sup>6</sup>, and the other recalls the instrument of his martyrdom. There are also more references to his story. The tents remind us that Paul was a tent-maker<sup>7</sup>. The scourges and sinking ship tell of his sufferings as an Apostle of Christ: in his Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul recounts how "five times I had the thirty-nine lashes" and goes on to list 3 beatings with sticks, a stoning, 3 shipwrecks and numerous other dangers and discomforts<sup>8</sup>. Two pictures show, first, his being struck down blind by God on the road to Damascus, and then his receiving back his sight, after his conversion. For the significance of the three springs see the next paragraph.

The lower panel shows Paul's martyrdom<sup>9</sup> outside the walls of Rome, which is said to have taken place during the Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians around 67 AD. Being a Roman citizen Paul was by law spared the lingering death of crucifixion and was

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

<sup>2</sup> Romans 1:3-5.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:1-19.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:23-25, 2 Corinthians 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 28:3-6.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 6:17.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:3.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:24-27

<sup>9</sup> The bible does not mention Paul's death: we are reliant on later writers and tradition for these details.

beheaded instead. He is kneeling in prayer, bound to a column: two soldiers stand guard and a third is about to behead him. The spectators include a woman weeping and another praying, and a charioteer rides past. Note the three fountains: tradition has it that Paul's severed head bounced three times, and that a fountain sprang from each point where it hit the ground. The artist has shown in one scene both the beheading and its consequences. The column to which Paul is supposed to have been bound can be seen in the church of San Paolo alle Tre Fontane (St Paul at the Three Fountains) in Rome, built on the traditional site of his execution, which also contains three altars marking the sites of the three fountains.

At the head and foot of the window is the inscription SAINT PAUL PRAY FOR US. The inscription above the martyrdom scene reads "ERECTED IN THANKSGIVING + PRAY FOR THE DONOR AND FOR THE SOULS IN PURGATORY."

The window was unveiled and blessed, with the St Peter Window to the other side of the altar, by the Right Reverend Hugh Singleton, Bishop of Shrewsbury, on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1914, the Sunday within the Octave of SS Peter and Paul<sup>10</sup>. After the blessing of the windows Pontifical High Mass was celebrated<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Information from Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives leaflet and *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* 11<sup>th</sup> July 1914 p.10. 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, 29<sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> A sung Mass with incense celebrated by a bishop assisted by other priests.