

NEWPORT: ST WINEFRIDE WINDOW¹

Winefride, or Gwenfrewi in her native Welsh, a 7th century saint, is a patron of the Diocese of Shrewsbury and of its Cathedral. According to legend² she was the only child of a powerful chieftain of noble birth named Teuyth, who maintained his household ‘in suitable elegance and splendour’. She received religious instruction from a priest, St Beuno, who had built a chapel near her home, and was so inspired by his teaching that she became determined ‘to abandon the luxury and splendour of the world’ and to dedicate her life to God. One Sunday, when her parents and Beuno were at the chapel preparing for Mass and she was getting ready to join them, a prince named Caradoc, out hunting and thirsty, called at her house for a drink of water. He was overcome by her beauty and made amorous advances: these she rejected, and fled towards the chapel with the furious prince in hot pursuit. He caught up with her at the chapel door, drew his sword and beheaded her. Beuno came out and, seeing Winefride’s body and Caradoc holding a sword dripping blood, cursed the prince, who promptly melted into the ground. Then Beuno placed Winefride’s head back on her body and prayed over her, and she was restored to life. ‘On the spot where her blood had flowed there was an earthquake, with a loud noise, and a great stream of water burst forth, and has continued to flow from that day to this.’ The place became known as Holywell, in Welsh Treffynnon (village of the well). Winefride went on to become abbess of a convent at Gwytherin, where she died and was buried. In the 12th century her remains were taken by Benedictine monks to Shrewsbury Abbey where they were enshrined until the Reformation. Many of the details of the saint’s legend may be fantastic, but St Winefride’s Well at Holywell became and remains a place of pilgrimage, and many cures are attributed to prayer and to the waters there.

The artist’s depiction of St Winefride in this window, next to the St Paul window in the wall to your right as you face the altar, is not a snapshot of a particular moment in the saint’s life but a narrative: her whole life story encapsulated in a single image³. Our first impression is of Winefride the nobleman’s daughter in all her finery: this is the saint before she dedicated herself to God. Next consider her cloak, decorated in a sunflower design: sunflowers turn to the sun, the source of natural light, and Winefride was inspired to turn to Christ, ‘the light of the world’⁴. Then look at the martyr’s palm in her left hand, and at the faint scar around her neck: these are references to her murder and her being brought back to life. There followed the bursting forth of the miraculous spring at her feet, and in her right hand is her abbess’s staff, a reminder of how she spent the last part of her life at Gwytherin.

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 For which see Thomas Swift SJ (ed.), *The Life of Saint Winefride Virgin and Martyr. Based on the Acts compiled by the Bollandist Fathers* (Burns & Oates, London & New York, 1888). This is the source of the quotations in this paragraph.

³ This is not the case in the artist’s other two depictions of St Winefride. In the Great West Window at Shrewsbury Cathedral she is shown as she was at the time of her murder, and at Oxtou, Cheshire, she is shown as the Abbess of Gwytherin.

⁴ John 8:12.

Just behind Winefride is a shield bearing a red dragon and leeks, symbols of Wales. The richly coloured backdrop includes the Shropshire hills, with the distinctive conical shape of Caer Caradoc in the centre, a subtle reference to her killer's name. There are a rowan tree with its red berries, some foxgloves and buttercups, a kingfisher, a lesser redpoll and, by the water, a dipper⁵. A path leads to St. Beuno's chapel. At the apex of the window are the crown and palms of martyrdom. Just below are a lily, sign of her purity, and a rose. As the rose is shown in outline we cannot tell whether it is red or white: red would symbolise martyrdom, white purity. Either would be appropriate.

The lower panel of the window shows a scene at the holy well. On the left a woman approaches the well on crutches. Behind her comes a mother, carrying a sick child. The child's elder sister holds a can in which she will collect water from the well: in her other hand is a doll dressed in traditional Welsh costume, one of the little details with which Margaret Rope rewards the careful observer. On the right a man who has been cured of his lameness is hanging up his crutches at the shrine and a child whose foot has been healed by bathing in the waters of the spring is putting on her sock. The bandage which was around her foot before lies on the floor. Behind her a woman is praying.

Around the border of the window are a number of small pictures. At the top are more martyr's crowns. Next come two pictures recalling another part of Winefride's legend. Beuno had asked her to send him a new cloak. She placed it on the waters of the stream which flowed from the spring. The cloak was carried by the waters to the river and out to sea, and on the following day Beuno picked it up, perfectly dry, on the seashore. One picture shows Winefride committing the cloak to the waters, the other shows Beuno receiving it. Other pictures show the shrine at Holywell as it is today, with the well, votive candles and discarded crutches, and the story of the martyrdom: Winefride about to be beheaded and Beuno raising her to life by his prayer. The two shields between the main and lower panels contain the arms of Shrewsbury Diocese to the left and Shrewsbury town to the right, and in the lower corners of the window are more dragons and leeks.

At the head and foot of the main scene is the inscription 'SAINT WINEFRIDE PRAY FOR US'. The inscription at the base of the window reads 'ERECTED BY THE WHITTINGHAM FAMILY ~ 1916 ~ PRAY FOR THEIR WELFARE IN LIFE AND DEATH'. The Wittinghams were parishioners: Edwin Wittingham, who had died in 1909, was a builder who carried out work at many local churches and schools and was 'credited with being the pioneer of modern dwellings in the town [of Newport]. He was looked up to with much esteem by his fellow-townsmen, and also by his workpeople ...'⁶. Two of his sons continued the business and were responsible for the construction of the porch and baptistery⁷ in the church, completed in 1913⁸.

⁵ Bird identification from Nathalie Hildegarde Liege's website <https://www.couleurlive.com/post/a-touch-of-glass-workshop> accessed 13 Aug 2021.

⁶ *Wellington Journal* 8th May 1909, p.7.

⁷ Now the Lady Chapel.

⁸ *The Tablet* 16th August 1913, p.257.

The cartoon (full size design drawing) for the window is, very appropriately, on display in the Museum at the St Winefride's Well Shrine, Holywell. How it found its way to Holywell is unknown: it was hanging in the St Winefride's Pilgrims' Rest hostel there in the 1980s and it was transferred to the Shrine Museum when the hostel closed in 2002.

The window was unveiled and blessed by the Right Reverend Hugh Singleton, Bishop of Shrewsbury, on Sunday 30th April 1916⁹, the final day of the Easter Octave¹⁰. After the blessing of the window Pontifical High Mass was celebrated¹¹.

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⁹ Information from Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives leaflet and *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* 6th May 1916 p.6. Hugh Singleton (born 1851) was Bishop of Shrewsbury from 1908 until his death in 1934 at the age of 83.

¹⁰ The Easter Octave is the Catholic Church's eight-day celebration of Christ's Resurrection commencing on Easter Sunday and ending on the following Sunday.

¹¹ A sung Mass with incense celebrated by a bishop assisted by other priests.