

BLAXHALL: HOLY FAMILY WINDOW

The east window in the Anglican church of St Peter, Blaxhall, was designed and made by the Catholic artist Margaret Rope about 1913. It commemorates her grandparents George and Anne Rope, their sons Henry John (Margaret's father) and Richard Frederic, and their grandson Arthur George Michael: the Rope family were worshippers here. It is fitting that a window commemorating a family should depict the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and some of the other figures in the scene have a family significance too, as will be explained below. The window also contains allusions to the everlasting life in heaven which Christians believe awaits them, another appropriate theme for a memorial.

So far as we know this is the only one of her windows which Margaret signed: her monogram 'MAR' (Margaret Agnes Rope) with the Latin word 'fecit' (made) is at the bottom right corner below the memorial inscription.

The Holy Family

In the centre of the window St Mary sits in the stable where Christ was born, gazing at the holy infant on her lap. If we examine the background we can see that the artist has transported the stable from Bethlehem to the Suffolk countryside familiar to her contemporaries: there in the fields are a shepherd with his flock, a man riding a horse, Blaxhall windmill, a farm worker carrying an implement on his shoulder, a woman holding a child, a ploughman and horse, and a girl bringing a posy of flowers for Mary. By putting what happened in Palestine over 2000 years ago into a modern East Anglian context Margaret Rope is saying that the Christian message - the Good News - is timeless and universal. The shepherd and his flock are also a reminder that after Christ's birth shepherds, summoned by an angel, visited the Holy Family in Bethlehem.

Mary has a wooden rod in her right hand, which the Christ Child is also holding: the rod is a spindle, used for spinning yarn. Spinning was traditionally a woman's task, and so the spindle is a symbol of Mary's domesticity. Christ is grasping the rod firmly: for him it becomes a sceptre, symbol of his kingship.

Below, St Joseph the carpenter is busy in his workshop, supporting the family by his labours: there are wood shavings from his plane on the floor. Behind him an angel watches over him, protecting Joseph as Joseph protects his family. The angel is Gabriel: he is holding a lily (see next paragraph), which refers to his role in the Annunciation, when he told Mary that, though a virgin, she would give birth to a son, Jesus. Gabriel will later warn Joseph in a dream to take his family to Egypt because King Herod intends to find and kill Jesus. By Joseph's workbench is a pot of lilies, again a symbol of chastity.

Behind Mary we can see the Star of Bethlehem, which guided the Wise Men on their journey to find the infant king of the Jews. Beside her grow white Madonna lilies, emphasising her purity and chastity. Around her are roses, long associated with her,

and ox-eye daisies. These daisies used to be known as 'Mary's Star': according to legend on reaching Bethlehem the Wise Men knew where to find Jesus when they saw these star-like flowers growing by the stable.

Above is the thatched roof of the stable: the dove perching on the thatch represents the Holy Spirit, through whose power Jesus was conceived. A dove is used to symbolise the Spirit because in the Gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit descended on him 'like a dove'. The dove's cruciform halo is a sign that the Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Two angels look down on Jesus, six-winged seraphs as described in Isaiah 6:2. Seraphs are the highest ranking angels whose function is to stand before the throne of God and to shout his praises, and their presence in this scene is a sign of Christ's divinity (see also St John below).

A grapevine trails across the thatch. Grapes are a symbol of eucharistic wine, and hence of the blood of Christ, which was shed when he died on the cross. Looking further up, the dome of the thatched roof becomes Mount Calvary, the site of the Crucifixion, and there is the Cross, supported by two more seraphs. It bears some of the instruments of Christ's Passion - the scourge, the nails and the spear. The scourge and spear are lashed to the Cross with rope: this is not one of the instruments of the Passion but a rebus on the family (and artist's) name. Margaret Rope has linked Christ's birth with his Crucifixion because Christians believe that he was born to save mankind from sin and death by offering himself on the Cross so that all who believe in him should when they die, be reborn to everlasting life in heaven - their 'second birth'.

The grapevine on the thatch is also appropriate here because one of the first vines in England was planted in Blaxhall about 1532.

St Luke

To the right of Mary sits St Luke the Evangelist with pen and book, recording the scene in the stable. He has been included here for two reasons: firstly, because he was a physician, to commemorate Margaret's father who was also one, and secondly because his Gospel is the only one to tell the story of Christ's birth in the stable. Behind Luke is his symbol, a winged Ox, one of the four apocalyptic beasts referred to in Ezekiel 1:5-14 and Revelation 4:6-8 and used by artists to represent the four evangelists. On the ground where Luke is seated there are cornflowers. These are associated with Mary, an old name for them being Mary's Crown, and they are also an appropriate flower for a physician because they have many traditional medicinal uses. There are also spruce foliage and cones. Spruce is the original Christmas tree and is also, being evergreen, a symbol of everlasting life.

St Michael & St Peter

Below St Luke are St Michael and St Peter. St Peter is there because Blaxhall church is dedicated to him: in his left hand he is holding the keys of heaven, symbols of the powers which were given to him by Christ (Mathew 16:19), and over his shoulder is fishing net,

because he was formerly a fisherman. His red robe indicates that he, like Stephen, died for his faith. He is standing on stony seashore, and seagulls fly overhead. Samphire grows between the stones: its name is a corruption of 'Saint Pierre' (St Peter). St Michael is included in memory of his namesake Arthur George Michael Rope and also because Peter was the first head of the church on earth and Michael is its protector and guardian. He is a warrior angel, shown here with blue wings, wearing armour and holding a sword. The halo around his head bears the inscription 'WHO IS LIKE UNTO GOD?', the literal meaning of his (Hebrew) name. Margaret Rope's model for St Michael was her brother Frederic Michael, known as Michael, an aeronautical engineer who was to die in the R101 airship disaster in 1930. Just visible on the extreme right of the scene is a sea aster, a close relative of the Michaelmas Daisy: both come into flower around the time of the Feast of St Michael, 29th September.

St Stephen

To Mary's left is St Stephen, one of the first deacons of the Church. Over his shoulder is a martyr's palm and he is holding the stones which killed him. He was stoned to death in Jerusalem only 2 years after the Crucifixion, making him the first Christian martyr to experience a 'second birth'. The 'Feast of Stephen' (remember 'Good King Wenceslas') is celebrated by the Church on 26th December, as soon as possible after Christ's birth on 25th, to link the two events. There was a saying for St Stephen's Day in the ancient Church 'Heri natus est Christus in terris, ut hodie Stephanus nasceretur in coelis.' (Yesterday Christ was born into the world so that today Stephen would be born in heaven.) Once more there is a second, family, significance to his inclusion: he was stoned to death and is the patron saint of those with headaches, and Richard Frederic Rope died in his early twenties after diving into the River Alde and striking his head on a stone.

St John the Evangelist

Across the centre of the window runs the inscription 'AND THE **WORD**' (that is, God) 'WAS MADE FLESH & DWELT AMONG US', a quotation from the Anglican King James Bible version of John 1:14, and below St Stephen is the author, St John the Evangelist. The Holy Spirit, shown again as a dove, is perched on his shoulder and speaking in his ear, inspiring him to write his Gospel. Behind John is his symbol, an eagle (see St Luke above). John's Gospel emphasises the divinity of Christ, and it is for this reason that he appears in the window, to remind us that the child on Mary's lap is God made man. The feast day of St John is 27th December, immediately after that of St Stephen. The yellow flowers around his feet are St John's Wort (actually named after another John, St John the Baptist). Behind John across the water is the Greek island of Patmos where, in exile, he had a vision of Christ which he recorded in the book of Revelation. On the island is an olive grove. The sky is full of swallows: in paintings of the Renaissance period it was common to include these birds in depictions of the Nativity. Bird migration was not understood then, and it was thought that at the onset of winter the swallows came down from the sky to burrow into the mud of lakes and ponds and to hibernate there. A

parallel was seen between this and Christ's coming down from heaven to earth and so the swallow came to represent the incarnation of Christ, the 'Word made flesh', another reference to the theme of John's Gospel.

Hidden prayers

If you look closely at the blue circular band surrounding St Luke's winged Ox you will see an inscription. It is in Latin and reads 'REQUIEM AETERNAM DONA EIS DOMINE' (Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord). Around the hem of St John's robe is more Latin: 'LUX PERPETUA LUCEAT EIS' (Let perpetual light shine upon them). These together form a prayer from the Catholic Requiem Mass. And there's more! Around the hem of St Mary's cloak is the inscription 'DIGNARE ME LAUDARE TE VIRGO SACRATA DA MIHI VIRTUTEM CONTRA HOSTES TUOS' (Let me praise you, holy Virgin. Give me strength against your enemies), which is a prayer to Mary from the Catholic Office of Compline.

These are somewhat unusual prayers to find inscribed on an Anglican church window, and Margaret Rope seems to have made them as inconspicuous as possible by putting them in places where one would not expect to find them. Perhaps these were her private prayers, which she put here because of this window's special significance for her. The prayer to Mary also appears in her Kesgrave Catholic church window of St Mary and the Christ Child in an oval band encircling a kneeling nun, perhaps Margaret herself.

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