

## **LATCHFORD, Warrington : Our Lady of the Assumption**

### **The Blessed John Finch and Blessed James Bell Window**

This window illustrates the stories of two more Catholic martyrs, both from Lancashire (Warrington was in Lancashire then). John Finch was a layman and James Bell was a priest: both were executed in Lancaster on the same day in 1584 for upholding the Catholic faith.

#### **Historical Background**

Henry VIII died, and was succeeded in turn by each of his three children. First came Edward, his young son by his third wife Jane Seymour: during his short reign religious reforms continued. Catherine of Aragon's daughter Mary, a Catholic, came next: she restored papal supremacy and persecuted Protestants. After an equally short reign she was followed by Anne Boleyn's daughter Elizabeth, a Protestant, who reversed Mary's changes and reinstated her father's reforms. In the early years of Elizabeth's reign Catholics were tolerated as long as they were loyal and discrete. They were fined for not attending Anglican church services, and celebration of the Catholic Mass was made illegal: she hoped that this would be sufficient to cause the old faith gradually to die out. Then, in 1570, the Pope issued a Bull (a letter to all Catholics carrying a 'bulla' or lead seal to authenticate it) describing Elizabeth as 'pretended queen of England and servant of crime' and excommunicated her. The bull also instructed English Catholics to obey him and not her- if they did not, then they, too, would be excommunicated. Now, in Elizabeth's eyes, Catholic priests and those who helped them were enemies of the State, to be hunted down, and a network of priest catchers, informants and double agents was employed to trap them.

#### **Tracery light**

Here are the triple tiara of the Pope and the keys of St Peter, symbols of papal supremacy, the principle for which these men died.

#### **Left hand light**

In this light we see John Finch, a yeoman farmer born in Eccleston, Lancashire, raised as a Protestant then later a convert to Catholicism. He is dressed as a gentleman, complete with sword (no-one below the rank of gentleman wore a sword). At first this seems wrong for a farmer, but this is how he might have dressed in his main role in the Catholic underground movement: he made it his business to guide undercover priests from one safe house to another. At this time one's position in society could be deduced from what one was wearing, a fact used to advantage by Catholics: travelling priests sometimes disguised themselves as gentlemen to avoid suspicion, and, if a priest had a local guide, what would look more natural than two gentlemen riding together? If James Bell (see right hand light) had been able to make use of John Finch's services then he would not have been caught when he was. The vessels in John Finch's hands are the cruets of wine and water which he would have held when acting as server to the priest during Mass, another of the tasks he undertook for the Church. He also helped to spread the Catholic faith by teaching its principles. Above his head are his name (the 'B'

stands for 'Blessed') and a floral garland with a goldfinch (a reference to his surname – unlike Fisher and More he had no heraldic arms) and a martyr's palm.

Eventually he was lured into a trap. A pretended Catholic asked him to bring a priest to a house to say Mass, and when they arrived they were arrested. He readily admitted that he was a practising Catholic, but resisted all attempts to persuade him to divulge the names of any priests whom he knew, or of any places where he had heard Mass. He was imprisoned and harshly treated for the next three years, and then brought to trial. Under examination he stated that he was the Queen's subject but that the Pope, and not the Queen, was head of the English Church. He was asked what was known as the 'Bloody Question': if the Pope sent an army to restore Catholicism to England, would he support the Queen or the Pope? He answered that he would take the Pope's side, and for that he was found guilty of high treason and condemned to be hanged, drawn and quartered. His words on receiving his sentence appear under his image:

BENEDICAM DOMINUM IN OMNI TEMPORE

the quotation being continued in the small scroll just below:

SEMPER LAUS EIUS IN ORE MEO

These are the first two verses of Psalm 33: 'I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall be always in my mouth.'

John Finch's martyrdom at the age of 36 in Lancaster on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1584 is illustrated graphically at the bottom of the light in a scene which spans the whole window. Having refused the offices of an Anglican clergyman sent to persuade him to renounce his faith he has been dragged to the gallows on a hurdle, hanged, cut down while still alive and revived. Now, as shown here, the masked hangman is disembowelling him. James Bell (see right hand light), who had spent the previous night in a prison cell with him in prayer and meditation, is being forced to watch the whole process: he will be next. Finally John Finch will be beheaded and his body will be cut into quarters. The cauldron of pitch boiling in the foreground will be used to preserve the victim's head and quarters so that they can be displayed as a warning to others. At the bottom of the picture is the hurdle.

### **Right hand light**

Here we see the priest James Bell. He was born in Warrington (hence his particular significance to this parish), educated at Oxford and ordained as a Catholic priest during the reign of Queen Mary. Soon after Elizabeth came to the throne he adopted the change in religion and served for 20 years as a Church of England clergyman, but then a Catholic gentlewoman persuaded him to turn back to the Catholic faith and at the age of about 60 he began working in Lancashire as an undercover priest. Here he is celebrating Mass, displaying a consecrated host (altar bread) bearing the image of Christ crucified before distributing Holy Communion: the hosts for the communicants are in the ciborium in his other hand. Above his figure are his name and a floral garland with a bell and martyr's palm.

One day, about two years after resuming his Catholic ministry, James Bell was travelling alone on foot between safe houses and asked a stranger for directions. The stranger asked what he was and he said he was a priest. He was then guided

straight to a justice of the peace, arrested and imprisoned, tried at the same assize as John Finch, and, like him, found guilty of high treason and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. On the morning of his martyrdom he rejoiced and thanked God, saying that it was, in the words of the inscription below his image:

O THE FAYREST DAY THAT EVER I SAW IN MY LIFE

On reaching the foot of the gallows James Bell was forced to watch John Finch being disembowelled: note the sheriff (in blue) pointing. Behind the sheriff is an Anglican clergyman wearing one of the tall hats fashionable at the time, eyes lowered and hand raised in prayer, holding a bible or prayerbook. James Bell's words are in a scroll: unfortunately two of the sections have been transposed, and it should read:

WHY DO I TARRY SO LONG AFTER MY SWEET BROTHER, LET ME MAKE HASTE AFTER HIM

Then he climbed up the ladder and his ordeal began.

I am not sure that the soldiers in scarlet uniforms bearing the royal cipher 'ER' would have been present at executions in Lancaster, but they are a reminder that these men died because they were regarded as enemies of the Queen.

The date of the martyrs' execution is shown across the two lights behind their figures. The background is leaded in a diamond grid in Tudor style as is the other window.

Blessed John Finch and Blessed James Bell were beatified in 1929. They are remembered and honoured, along with many others who died for their faith during the Reformation, on 4<sup>th</sup> May, the Feast of the English Martyrs.

Roger Hall