

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

### **The St John Fisher & St Thomas More Window**

This window illustrates the stories of the two Catholic martyrs St John Fisher and St Thomas More, both beheaded in 1535 during the reign of King Henry VIII because they refused to accept that he, and not the Pope, was supreme head of the Church in England.

#### **Historical Background**

When Henry VIII became king in 1509, England was a Catholic country and the Pope was head of the English Church. Within two months of Henry's accession to the throne he married Catherine of Aragon, his elder brother Arthur's widow. Such a marriage would normally have been unlawful, but the Pope had issued a dispensation to allow it. For some years relations between Henry and the Church were good, in fact in 1521 the Pope awarded Henry the title 'Fidei Defensor' ('Defender of the Faith') for his treatise 'Assertio Septem Sacramentorum' ('Defence of the Seven Sacraments'), which attacked the teachings of the German reformer Martin Luther. But by about 1527 things had changed: Henry and Catherine had a daughter, Mary, but five other children, including three sons, had been stillborn or had died in infancy. Henry had no male heir, and had become convinced that he was being punished by God for marrying his brother's widow: he had read in Leviticus 20:21 that 'If a man takes his brother's wife, it is an impurity ... they shall be childless'. He wanted to marry Anne Boleyn instead, and sought from the Pope an annulment of his marriage to Catherine on the grounds that, despite the dispensation, it had been unlawful, but the Pope would not grant one. Henry was determined to get his own way, and the Pope's unwillingness to give him what he wanted was the first in a chain of events which led to the martyrdoms of John Fisher, Thomas More and many others, and ultimately to a complete split between the English Church and Rome.

#### **Tracery light**

The scene in the tracery light at the head of the window may be small, but it is full of meaning. St Peter, the first leader of the Church, is standing on the steps of the imperial palace in Rome: he is dressed in the simple tunic and wooden sandals of an apostle, but is displaying the keys of heaven (Mathew 16:19), symbols of the powers which Catholic Christians believe were given to him by Christ himself and handed on to his successors, the popes. Now look at the colours: the yellow and white of Peter's tunic are the papal colours. His outer garment is red, signifying that he is ready to shed his blood for Christ. Beneath his feet is a cloth of purple, the colour worn by the emperor: to stand on the imperial purple is a sign of superiority over it, a symbol of the power of Christ, through His Church, over earthly rulers. It was for this principle that John Fisher and Thomas More were prepared, like Peter, to shed their blood.

#### **Left hand light**

At the top of the left hand light are the heraldic arms of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. The dolphin and three

ears of wheat are a pun on his surname ('fish-ear'): the crest is a bishop's mitre. Behind the arms is a martyr's palm. Below is Fisher himself: the upper part of his image seems to be based on a Holbein sketch. He is wearing a red vestment, an ermine cape and a crucifix, and carrying his bishop's crozier: the severed head on a dish I will deal with later. His crozier is decorated with a 'Lamb of God' (Agnus Dei), a symbol of Christ and also a reminder of a bishop's role as shepherd to his flock. His red vestment shows that he has been made a cardinal: cardinals would normally have a red biretta (hat) too, but he does not because he was raised to that office only a month before his execution and never received his red hat from the Pope. Behind his right elbow (i.e. to the left side of the window) can be seen the edge of a shield bearing the arms of Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, mother of Henry VII and grandmother of Henry VIII: just visible are the silver and blue border, the three lions of England and the fleurs-de-lys of France. Fisher was her confessor and chaplain and she was his patron, helping to further his interests whenever she could (in other words she was behind him, like the shield!). The King consulted her for her opinion and approval before offering Fisher the Bishopric of Rochester. Also behind him further down the window can be seen a river full of fish. Rochester is on the River Medway, and there were many fishermen among its inhabitants – another pun on his surname.

John Fisher is contemplating the severed head of John the Baptist on a dish: the two men had a lot more in common than just their name.

When John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness, Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee and Perea. Herod was married to Phasaelis, but had fallen in love with his half-brother's wife Herodias. She felt the same about him, and they each divorced their respective spouses and married. John condemned their marriage as contrary to God's law: this made Herodias furious, and Herod had John arrested and imprisoned. At a banquet on Herod's birthday Herodias's daughter Salome danced before the king, delighting him so much that he promised her anything she asked for. Prompted by her mother she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a dish, so Herod had him beheaded and presented the head to Salome, who gave it to her mother.

Now we move forward in time about 1500 years: Henry VIII is on the throne of England, and John Fisher is Bishop of Rochester. Henry wants his marriage with Catherine of Aragon to be annulled, but the Pope will not do it. Fisher was Catherine's chief supporter: he appeared in court on her behalf and declared that, like John the Baptist, he was prepared to die in defence of the indissolubility of marriage. Henry's parliament passed the 1534 Act of Succession, which declared his marriage to Catherine of Aragon to be against the law of God and annulled it: when Fisher was required to swear acceptance of the Act he refused because the Pope had ruled the marriage valid, and for this he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. There followed the 1534 Act of Supremacy, making Henry Supreme Head of the Church in England. Again Fisher's support for Rome made it impossible for him to accept it. On 20th May 1535, at a Conclave in Rome, the Pope made him a cardinal, much to the king's fury. Henry is reported to have said that the Pope might send him a cardinal's hat but he would have no head on which to wear it. On

17th June, after 14 months in prison, Fisher was tried and found guilty of treason by a jury who were too frightened of the king to come to any other verdict, and condemned to death. Originally he was to be hanged, drawn and quartered, but because he was elderly (66) and frail, and unlikely to survive being dragged on a hurdle to Tyburn, his sentence was commuted to beheading on Tower Hill.

So both John the Baptist and John Fisher were beheaded on a king's orders and died in defence of the sacrament of marriage.

On the morning of his execution, 22nd June 1535, when the Lieutenant of the Tower fetched him from his prison cell, Fisher brought with him a small New Testament. At the gate of the Tower, while waiting to be led to the scaffold, he prayed that he might open the book at an appropriate place: it opened at the page containing the passage below Fisher's image:

EGO TE CLARIFICAUI SUPER TERRAM OPUS CONSUMMAUI QUOD DEDISTI MIHI UT FACIAM

[‘I glorified you on the earth. I have accomplished the work which you have given me to do.’: John 17:4 (part of Christ's prayer to God the Father after the Last Supper)]. Fisher read this, then closed the book and went to his death.

At the bottom of the light we are in the crowd in front of the scaffold. Fisher is blessing the executioner, who has knelt and asked his forgiveness, as was the custom. One of King Henry's men (note the 'HR' [Henricus Rex = King Henry] and the crowned Tudor Rose on their red uniforms) is removing Fisher's tippet (fur scarf) and gown: two more stand guard with poleaxes. A shaft of sunlight illuminates Fisher's face.

### **Right hand light**

The right hand light is dominated by the figure of Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, a wise and witty scholar, lawyer and author, friend and advisor to King Henry VIII. He is dressed in fine robes and is at the peak of his career in public office. The detail of the upper part of his image seems to be based on Holbein's portrait of 1527, painted two years before More was made Chancellor. Holbein shows the gold 'collar of esses' with Tudor rose pendant, which was presented by the king to a few chosen men as a reward for exceptional service. We can tell that More is Chancellor in Margaret Rope's depiction from the tasselled purse embroidered with the royal arms which is hanging from his left arm. This purse held the silver moulds used to make the Great Seal of England, which was affixed to important documents issued by the king, and the Chancellor was its Keeper.

Above are More's arms, with a martyr's palm behind. The crest on the arms is described in the blazon as 'a Moor's head', a pun on the family name, and another pun is the inclusion of the birds, described as 'moorcocks'.

More holds a statuette of St Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury - note Becket's sword, instrument of his martyrdom (partially obscured by a window armature). The statuette is a sign of things to come: Becket, too, was Chancellor

and friend to his king but lost favour by supporting the Church against the monarch, and for that he was persecuted and killed. The same was to happen to More.

In 1532, unable to support the king in his conflict with Rome, More resigned his chancellorship. As with Fisher, More's refusal to swear acceptance of the Act of Succession and the Act of Supremacy led to his imprisonment in the Tower and laid him open to a charge of treason. Below More's image is a quotation from a letter which he wrote at this time from his prison to his daughter Margaret explaining how he might be unjustly put to death for doing right by following his conscience:

IT IS A CASE IN WHICH A MAN MAY LOSE HIS HEAD & YET HAVE NONE HARM  
BUT INSTEAD INESTIMABLE GOOD AT THE HAND OF GOD

Soon afterwards he was tried, found guilty, and condemned to death. As with Fisher, he was originally sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered, but this was commuted to beheading.

Below this inscription we see the scene of his execution at Tower Hill. It is 6th July 1535, a fortnight after Fisher's execution, and 57 year- old Thomas More is ascending the rather precarious ladder to the scaffold. His sense of humour did not desert him even at the end: included in the scene are his words to the Lieutenant of the Tower, who is assisting him:

PRITHEE SEE ME SAFE UP & COMING DOWN I WILL SHIFT FOR MYSELF

Two of the king's men stand guard. The masked executioner waits with his axe. The block can be seen on the extreme right. More's last words to the watching crowd were 'I die the King's good servant, but God's first'.

The dates of the saints' martyrdoms are shown on the window, the year, split between the two main lights, above their heads, and the months and days in a band behind their figures. The diamond grid leading of the backgrounds is in the style of the lattice windows of the Tudor era: the grid is decorated with elements from the heraldic arms and with roses. The roses are a reminder of the Tudor rose.

St John Fisher and St Thomas More were beatified in 1886 and canonised in 1935. Their Feast Day is 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

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