

Oxton, Birkenhead: Holy Name Church: English Martyrs Window

By his will, retired Oxton plumbing and painting contractor John Lindon, already in his lifetime a major benefactor of Holy Name Church, left £900 to the Bishop of Shrewsbury for the creation of this window in substitution for the then existing plain one in the Lady Chapel of the church. John Lindon died in 1927 and the Bishop commissioned Margaret Rope to design and make the window. She had already, some years earlier, made the window above the Lady Chapel altar depicting Our Lady, Saint Elizabeth and Saint John the Baptist, which commemorates John Lindon's wife, who had died in 1916.

The English Martyrs Window, also known as the John Lindon Memorial Window, was completed in 1929. It illustrates the stories of nine Catholic martyrs who died for their faith and who were connected with the area now covered by the Diocese of Shrewsbury (the historic counties of Shropshire and Cheshire), but there is more to it than that. First the martyrs:

Background

Elizabeth I did her best to stamp out Roman Catholicism in this country. She saw Catholics, loyal to the Pope in Rome, as a real threat to her authority and even to her life. Seminaries had been established on the continent so that men from England and Wales could be trained there as priests and then sent back across the Channel on the English Mission, a mission to keep the Catholic faith alive here in the hope of ultimately reconverting the country. Once back in England they had to minister in secret, moving from place to place to avoid detection, but many were caught and suffered imprisonment, torture and a horrendous death. Any who helped them risked facing the same penalties. Eight of our martyrs died during Elizabeth's reign, but the other was a victim of a much later upsurge of persecution, the fictitious 'Popish Plot' of 1678, a claim that Catholics planned to assassinate King Charles II.

In the main lights (left to right):

Saint Margaret Ward & Blessed Richard Martin

Unlike the other seven these two martyrs were laypeople.

Margaret Ward was born in Congleton, Cheshire. Whilst in the service of a gentlewoman in London she helped a priest to escape from Bridewell Prison by supplying him with a rope which she had concealed from the guards by wrapping it in a clean shirt which she was taking to him. He escaped and she was arrested. In prison she was flogged, and tortured by being hung for long periods from her wrists so that only the tips of her toes touched the ground. At her trial she freely admitted supplying the rope and was unrepentant, saying that she was prepared to die rather than to act against her duty to God and his holy religion. She was condemned to death and hanged at Tyburn on 30 August 1588.

She is depicted here standing with hands together in prayer. Over her arm is the rope which led to her martyrdom. Her dress is interesting: as usual Margaret Rope has created a thing of beauty, but she has put more into this dress than just a pleasing design. Close inspection reveals a grapevine, symbolising Christ ('I am the vine': John 15:5), oak sprigs, symbolising strength of faith and endurance against adversity, the Holy Spirit as a haloed dove, and drops of blood. Perhaps as Margaret Rope worked on this window she identified with her namesake and with what she was prepared to do for her faith. To Margaret Ward's left, indicating her county of birth, are the arms of the Earldom of Cheshire, used as the county's arms until 1938, 3 gold wheat sheaves on a blue background, and in the roundel to the left of her head we see her under torture in her prison cell.

Richard Martin was a Shropshire man educated at Broadgates Hall, Oxford (now Pembroke College). He was arrested in the company of a priest and was condemned to death because he had paid for the priest's supper. He, too, was hanged at Tyburn on 30 August 1588.

He is depicted here wearing a red cloak, the colour of martyrdom. He is reaching into his purse, a reminder of the 'crime' for which he was to die. To his right, just below his purse, are the arms of Shropshire, his birthplace (you can see these more clearly in the next light), and in the roundel to the right of his head the priest whom he has fed is making the sign of the cross as he says grace before eating his meal.

Behind Margaret Ward is an oak tree, again a sign of strength and endurance, and around her feet are marguerite daisies. These have a double significance: the name 'marguerite', meaning pearl, has the same root as her name Margaret, and daisies symbolise innocence. By Richard Martin's feet is a purple clover, its 3 leaflets symbolising the Holy Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Behind is wheat, used to make bread. This and the grapes, used to make wine, on Margaret Ward's dress, symbolise the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

The lower part of the light shows Margaret's visit to the imprisoned priest. He has a straw bed, and there is simple food and drink on the floor. Margaret has a basket over her arm from which she has taken the shirt - the coiled rope is visible. Above in a small diamond the priest can be seen climbing down the outside of the prison wall.

At the head of the light is the infamous Tyburn gallows where these two martyrs were hanged, and the date of their martyrdom, 30 August 1588. Hanging from the gallows are the remains of the two ropes used to hang them. On the ground under the gallows are bones, symbolising death, the end of earthly life, but perched on the gallows and flying above and to the right are swallows, symbolising resurrection and the beginning of the martyrs' heavenly lives.

These two martyrs were beatified in 1929 and Margaret Ward was canonized (as one of the Forty Martyrs of England & Wales) in 1970.

Blessed Edward Campion & Blessed Robert Wilcock

These and all the remaining martyrs depicted here were priests.

Edward Campion's original surname was Edwards. He was born in Ludlow, Shropshire, brought up as a protestant, attended Whitehall (later Jesus College), Oxford, then entered service with a noble family. He converted to Catholicism and trained for the priesthood at Douai College, France. It was at Douai that he assumed the name Edward Campion (he was an admirer of Edmund Campion (now a saint), who had been martyred 5 years earlier). After ordination he returned to England to exercise his ministry but was within a month arrested and imprisoned. After about 16 months in Newgate and Marshalsea prisons he was sent to Canterbury for trial.

Robert Wilcock was born in Cheshire. He, also, trained for the priesthood at Douai College, was ordained, returned to England and was soon arrested. He was held for two years in Marshalsea prison, Southwark then, like Edward Campion, tried in Canterbury.

Both men were found guilty of treason and were hanged, drawn and quartered there on 1 October 1588.

At the apex of the light are a chalice and a host (circular wafer of bread). These are a symbol of the Eucharist, celebration of which is one of the principal duties of a Catholic priest, and one which only a priest can perform. During the celebration the wine in the chalice and the host are consecrated and become, Catholics believe, the body and blood of Christ.

Edward Campion and Robert Wilcock are depicted walking together, dressed as gentlemen. They would have dressed like this to avoid suspicion and to minimise their chances of being caught as they travelled about ministering to the Catholic faithful. The ropes around their necks are a reminder of the risks which they knew they were taking. Behind Edward Campion is his birthplace Ludlow, with its castle and bridge and the tower of St Laurence's church. To his left are the arms of his college, Jesus (3 stags), and above him are the arms of his native Shropshire (3 leopards' faces). Robert Wilcock is pointing heavenward as he will immediately before his martyrdom (see below). Above him are the Cheshire arms, and in the centre above the two martyrs are the arms of Cardinal Allen, founder of Douai, where they trained for the priesthood (3 hares). Flowers around them include pink herb robert and campion, references to their names, Canterbury bells, indicating their place of martyrdom, daisy for innocence and clover for the Holy Trinity.

The lower part of the light shows the scene at Oaten Hill, Canterbury on 1 October 1588. Robert Wilcock is the first to ascend the ladder, held by the masked executioner, to the gallows. Three others wait to follow him: Edward Campion, Christopher Buxton, a priest from Derbyshire, and Robert Widmerpool, a Nottinghamshire layman. Robert Wilcock is pointing heavenward and saying 'I am going to heaven before you where I will carry the

tidings of your coming after me.' In the background we see Bell Harry Tower, the great tower of Canterbury Cathedral, and the round Corona Tower at the Cathedral's east end, the latter a reminder of an earlier martyr, for the Corona was built to house the crown of the head of Thomas Becket, martyred in 1170.

Edward Campion and Robert Wilcock were beatified in 1929.

Saint John Plessington

John (sometimes known as William) Plessington was born about 1637 in Lancashire to a Catholic family. He studied at the English College (the Royal College of St Alban), Valladolid, Spain, was ordained priest in 1662 and returned to England the following year. At first he ministered to Catholics at Holywell, Flintshire (now Clwyd), where St Winefride's Well was a centre of recusant activity, and then, from 1670, at Puddington Hall, Burton, Cheshire. Puddington Hall was the home of the Catholic Massey family: John Plessington acted as tutor to the Massey children, but his real function there was to celebrate Mass for local Catholics. He became one of the victims of Titus Oates' fabricated 'Popish Plot' to assassinate King Charles II, being hanged, drawn and quartered at Chester on 19th July 1679 for being a priest. Before his execution he addressed the assembled crowd, telling them that he was being executed simply for being a priest, when priesthood was the basis of religion - 'No priest, no religion'. According to tradition his remains were buried in the churchyard of St Nicholas church, Burton.

John Plessington is shown wearing his priestly vestments and raising a chalice of wine as he would during the Eucharist at the moment of consecration. At the apex of the light is the martyr's crown which awaits him, symbol of the glory and reward he will receive in heaven. Behind his head is the hangman's noose and to the right is the cauldron of boiling pitch which will be used to preserve his body parts after quartering so that they can be displayed as a warning to others. The light contains roundels showing places associated with his story: St Winefride's Well, Chester and Burton churchyard (see previous paragraph). There is also a shield containing an image of St Alban (in Roman dress), referring to his training at Valladolid. Inscriptions read 'M [=martyred] JULY 15TH 1679' and 'NO PRIEST NO RELIGION', the latter referring to his speech to the crowd before execution. The artist has framed him with climbing roses which are pink and red, the colour of martyrdom. Around his feet are yellow St John's Wort and pink and red Sweet William, references to his names, and daisy, symbolising innocence.

The lower part of the light shows him celebrating Mass in secret at Puddington Hall. He is giving Holy Communion to the local Catholics. Behind him is the altar, with crucifix and candles and the missal, the book containing the text used for the service. A servant is listening out for any unexpected visitors - they need to be careful. In a small diamond above John is sitting on an upturned log in his prison cell, ankles chained, awaiting execution. He is praying the Rosary, a series of prayers said whilst meditating on events in the lives of Jesus and Mary: the rosary beads which he is holding are a counting aid

towards saying the prayers in the correct sequence.

John Plessington was beatified in 1929 and canonized (as one of the Forty Martyrs of England & Wales) in 1970.

Blessed Robert Johnson & Blessed John Shert

Robert Johnson was born in Shropshire. After service with a gentleman's family he crossed to the continent to train as a priest. He was ordained in 1576, then returned to England and here ministered in secret. Three years later he made a pilgrimage to Rome, and on his way back he was joined by one Sledd, who pretended to be a fellow pilgrim but was in fact an English government spy and informer. Robert resumed his ministry, but in the summer of 1580 he was recognised by Sledd in London as he was on his way to a secret meeting of fellow Catholics. Sledd found a constable and asked him to follow Robert, hoping that he would lead them to other priests. The constable, however, having some sympathy with Catholics, arrested Robert before he reached his destination and made sure that Sledd was seen with him when he did so, thereby saving the other Catholics and revealing Sledd to be an informer. Robert was imprisoned in the Tower, where he was severely racked, and sent for trial.

John Shert was born near Macclesfield, Cheshire. He attended Brasenose College, graduating with a BA in 1566. At first he worked as a schoolmaster in London but then studied for the priesthood at Douai, and the English College, Rome. In 1579 after ordination he returned to England. Two years later he was arrested, imprisoned, racked and tortured in the Tower, and tried for treason.

Robert Johnson and John Shert were found guilty of treason and hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn on 28 May 1582.

At the apex of the light are the chalice and host, symbol of the Eucharist and priesthood. The two martyrs are shown standing side by side, hands held together in prayer. Above their heads are the arms of their counties of birth and between these the Douai arms. To the right of John Shert are the Brasenose arms. Behind Robert Johnson is the skyline of Shrewsbury and lower down behind both men is a river on which a man paddles a coracle, the traditional boat used on the Severn and the Dee, rivers of Shropshire and Cheshire. Many of the flowers in the background have connections with May, the month of their martyrdom: hawthorn (may) blossom on the bushes behind them, and around their feet gold marsh marigolds and white lady's smock. The latter two are named after the Virgin Mary (Mary gold and Our Lady's smock), and Catholics pay particular homage to Mary during May. Also visible to the left is the pink herb robert, a reference to Robert's name.

The lower part of the light shows the scene at Tyburn on the morning of 28 May 1582. Robert Johnson and John Shert, together with a Devonshire priest Thomas Forde, have been dragged on hurdles from the Tower through the streets to the Tyburn gallows. Thomas Forde has been the first to suffer: John Shert, standing in the cart under the

triangular gallows with a noose round his neck, is being forced by the executioner to watch Thomas being disembowelled and beheaded. Robert Johnson lies in the foreground tied to a hurdle awaiting his turn. Sheriff Richard Martin stands to the left, leaning on his staff of office. In the background a large crowd is watching. John is speaking: his words appear above the gallows: 'O HAPPY THOMAS THY BLESSED SOUL PRAY FOR ME'. A minister, standing in the cart beside John, is shocked at hearing John praying to the dead, a practice condemned by Protestants at the time.

These two martyrs were beatified in 1886.

In the upper lights (far left & far right):

Blessed Ralph Crocket

Ralph Crocket was born in Cheshire. He was educated at Christ's College, Cambridge and at Douai, and was ordained priest at Reims in 1585. He and three other priests were captured on board ship at Littlehampton, Sussex, in 1586. He was imprisoned in London for 2 years then tried for treason at Chichester, found guilty, and hanged, drawn and quartered there with two other priests on 1 October 1588. He was beatified in 1929.

Ralph Crocket is wearing a white robe, symbolising purity, and a red cloak, a sign that he is willing to shed his blood for Christ. He is holding up a consecrated host and genuflecting (bending the knee) in reverence. Above his head hang the executioner's noose and knife which await him, and behind him is a roundel showing Chichester with its cathedral from Broyle Heath, the site of his martyrdom, just outside the city walls. Below and to the right are the arms of William Cardinal Allen, the founder of Douai College (3 rabbits) and Cambridge University (red with lions and a white cross) representing his places of education, and Chester (3 wheat sheaves) representing his birthplace. The red roses behind him are another symbol of martyrdom. The lilac coloured flowers on the right are probably Michaelmas daisies, which would have been in bloom on the day of his martyrdom (Michaelmas is on 29th September). The white daisy-type flowers symbolise innocence.

Blessed Thomas Holford

Thomas Holford was born near Nantwich, Cheshire, about 1541. He became a Catholic while working as a tutor to the children of the Catholic Scudamore family of Holme Lacy, Herefordshire, trained at the English College in Rheims and was ordained priest in 1583. The same year he returned to England, and during the following four years of his ministry he twice narrowly escaped raids on Catholic houses by priest hunters and was once arrested but managed to escape when the guards escorting him from Chester to trial in London were nursing hangovers. On that occasion he made his way barefoot over gravel and through brambles to a friend's house. Before his escape he had been questioned by the Anglican Bishop of Chester, who has left us a description of him as a tall, fat, strong man with black hair, a bald crown and a moustache, wearing a straw-coloured doublet trimmed in red, grey breeches underlaid with black taffeta, and

yellow knitted socks. Thomas Holford was finally arrested in 1588 after celebrating Mass in Holborn and was hanged at Clerkenwell on 28th Aug 1588 'for treasonably coming into the realm as a priest'. He was beatified in 1896.

Thomas Holford is depicted here kneeling in prayer, his hat on the ground. The artist has shown his appearance and dress exactly as described by the Bishop of Chester. His head is circled by the executioner's rope. The chalice and host at the head of the light again symbolise Eucharist and priesthood, and the arms of Cheshire and Cardinal Allen again refer to his birthplace and education. There is a vignette showing his barefoot escape. Behind him are martyr's roses, and in the grass is clover, its 3 leaves symbolising the Holy Trinity, and crocuses, which symbolise the renewal of life in the spring, and hence the heavenly rebirth of the martyr.

Now look at the **two central upper lights**. In the **right hand one** we see **Jesus Christ, King of Martyrs**. He is wearing a king's crown and his head is surrounded by a cruciform halo (a cross within a circle) indicating that he is one of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His outer robe is red, the colour of blood, a reference to his martyrdom. The inscription around him reads REGEM MARTYRUM DOMINUM VENITE ADOREMUS ('Come let us worship the Lord (*i.e. Christ*) King of Martyrs'), an antiphon from the Office of Matins, and there is also the monogram IHS, the first three letters of 'Jesus' in Greek. Below his feet are angels and behind him are the martyrs in heaven, shown as the shining lights which they were when on earth, beacons guiding others to God ('You are light for the world ... Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.' Matthew 5:14-16).

In the **left hand light** is **Mary, Queen of Martyrs**. She, too, is wearing a crown, and is dressed in colours traditionally associated with Our Lady, the red of her robe also being associated with martyrs. She is regarded as Queen of Martyrs because of the pain she suffered in her soul when she saw the Passion and Crucifixion of her son. Her suffering is represented in the picture by a heart pierced by a sword, a reference to Simeon's prophecy that a sword would pierce her soul (Luke 7:11). The seven stars in her halo refer to her Seven Sorrows: Simeon's prophecy, the Flight into Egypt, the loss of the child Jesus in Jerusalem for 3 days, seeing Jesus carrying his cross, his crucifixion, taking him down from the cross and his burial. The outer circle of stars and the crescent moon at the bottom of the light (below the inscription) are a reference to Revelation 12:1 'A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars'. The inscription around her reads REGINA MARTYRUM ORA PRO ANGLIA DOTE TUA ('Queen of Martyrs, pray for England your dowry'). England has been regarded by Catholics as the 'Dowry of Mary' ever since the Middle Ages, when devotion to her was particularly strong here. The concept that England enjoyed a special relationship with Mary became especially important to Catholics during the period of persecution after the Reformation, hence its relevance in this window. Behind Mary is a rosebush: it is said that there were roses in the Garden of Eden which originally had no thorns, but which grew them after Adam and Eve

disobeyed God - the 'original sin', inherited by all humankind after them - so thorns came to symbolise original sin. Mary is considered by the Catholic Church to have been free from original sin and is therefore sometimes known as 'The Rose without a Thorn.'

But these two central upper lights are not just depictions of the King and Queen of Martyrs: they are also the key to the window's deeper meaning.

Catholics believe that at the moment of death everyone experiences judgement by Christ and is rewarded with life in Heaven or eternal damnation in Hell. Most of those destined for the joys of Heaven are not sinless enough to go there immediately: first they need to be cleansed in Purgatory. For these souls in Purgatory the faithful pray, both directly to God 'that they might be released from their sin' (2 Maccabees 12:46), and also to Our Lady, that she might intercede with Christ for them. All over the window are trails of blue smoke, rising heavenward. These are incense, representing these prayers of the faithful for the dead.

Now look at Christ and Mary again. Christ is seated in judgement on a rainbow throne, displaying the wounds in his hands which were made by the nails at his crucifixion. His hands are also indicating the other martyrs in the window. By these signs he is reminding us that he gave his life for our sake and inviting us to think about the lives and deaths of the martyrs and to consider how our lives measure up to the Christian ideal and how we might fare when he judges us. Over his outer robe he is wearing a pallium, a white scarf-like vestment decorated with crosses, a symbol of his authority¹. The rainbow is a sign that his judgement will be merciful, in accordance with the covenant which God made with mankind after the Flood, which he marked by setting a rainbow in the sky (Genesis 9). Mary is looking towards Christ, her son, hands together in prayer. She has heard the prayers of the faithful for the dead and is asking Christ to show them mercy.

The Feast of the English Martyrs, remembering all the English men and women martyred for the Catholic Faith during penal times and since canonised or beatified is celebrated each year on 4th May.

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¹ The Pope and some bishops wear a pallium.