

## SHREWSBURY: THE GREAT WEST WINDOW

Margaret Rope's first major commission, which she designed and painted at The Priory, her home in Shrewsbury (reputedly on the kitchen table!), was the Cathedral's Great West Window. It commemorates Bishop Samuel Webster Allen, 4<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Shrewsbury, who died in 1908 aged 64, and was unveiled at High Mass on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> February 1910 by his successor Bishop Hugh Singleton. According to the detailed account of the occasion in the Catholic journal *The Tablet* the Bishop 'drew the cords of the veil and revealed the window through which the sunlight was streaming'<sup>1</sup>. Margaret was very self-effacing: according to her brother Father Henry Rope at the unveiling she 'contrived to find a place hidden from view behind the organ'<sup>2</sup>.

First a note about the window's name. Because of the restricted size and shape of its site the Cathedral was built on a north-south axis instead of having the usual east-west orientation. For liturgical purposes, however, we regard the main altar as being at the east end of the building and this convention was adopted in naming this window, which is at the opposite end to the altar. Geographically speaking it should be the Great South Window! The unusual orientation has the advantage of allowing it to be appreciated in all its glory for much more of the day than it could be if it was really facing west and only catching the evening sun.

**The six main lights** are a picture gallery of British martyrs from the Romans to the Reformation. From left to right they show

### 1. St Alban & St Edmund

**Alban** (3rd century), in the blue robe, was the first recorded British martyr, and links England with the Church of the late Roman Empire. He was a citizen of the town of Verulamium who, during one of Rome's periodic persecutions of Christians, gave shelter to a fugitive priest and was converted and baptised by him. Soldiers came to search his house and Alban exchanged clothes with his guest so that the priest could escape. The soldiers arrested Alban and when he refused to offer sacrifice to pagan deities he was condemned to death and taken to the amphitheatre outside the town to be beheaded. It is said that his appointed executioner was converted and refused to carry out his task: Alban was beheaded by another, whose eyes promptly fell out. The martyr was buried nearby and around his tomb the town of St Albans later grew up. Alban is shown carrying a martyr's palm. His feast-day is 20<sup>th</sup> June.

**Edmund** (841-869) was King of East Anglia, and a devout Christian. His kingdom was invaded by pagan Danes: he led his army against them but was defeated and captured. He refused to accept terms which were prejudicial to his faith and to the justice which he owed to his people, so his captors tied him to a tree, shot at him until he bristled with arrows, and then beheaded him. His body was enshrined at Beodricsworth (later renamed Bury St Edmunds). Edmund is shown wearing his crown and holding the arrows which killed him. His feast-day is 20<sup>th</sup> November.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Tablet* 5 March 1910 p. 380.

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished memoir on her life in the archives of the Carmelite Monastery, Quidenham, Norfolk.

In the background above the figures are woods and fields, and a small, solitary figure: a sower, scattering seed. He is there to remind us of the saying ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.’<sup>3</sup>

**Below** we see St Edmund tied to the tree, his shield, cloak and crown on the ground. His body has already been pierced by two arrows and the bowmen are taking aim again. In the background other Danish soldiers watch.

## 2. St Oswald & St Winefride

These two saints have Shropshire connections.

**Oswald** (about 605-642) King of Northumbria lived in turbulent times. His father had also been king, but he lost his kingdom and his life in battle and Oswald was forced to flee to Scotland, where he was converted to Christianity by the monks of Iona. Eventually he returned to Northumbria, regaining the kingdom by defeating a much larger army after erecting a wooden cross on the battlefield and praying for victory before it. He fetched St Aidan from Iona to spread the Gospel in his kingdom and to found the monastery of Lindisfarne. Aidan’s native tongue was Gaelic and he was not fluent in English, but Oswald had learnt Gaelic during his exile and so was able to help to interpret Aidan’s homilies. After an eight year reign Oswald was killed in battle at Oswestry (Oswald’s Tree), Shropshire, by the pagan king Penda of Mercia. Oswald is shown wearing his crown and holding a spear, symbol of a warrior – he won his kingdom by force and lost his life in battle. His feast-day is 9<sup>th</sup> August.

**Winefride**, or Gwenfrewi in her native Welsh, (7<sup>th</sup> century), is the patron saint of Shrewsbury and secondary patron of Shrewsbury Diocese, which originally included North Wales. According to legend, one Sunday her uncle St Bueno was in his chapel with her parents, and she was at home preparing to join them for Mass, when Caradoc, a prince’s son out hunting, called at her house seeking refreshment. Finding Winefride alone, he tried to seduce her, but she rejected his advances and fled towards the chapel. Caradoc pursued her and beheaded her with his sword. Bueno came out and cursed Caradoc, whereupon the earth opened up and swallowed the murderer. Then he replaced Winefride’s head and prayed that she might be restored to life. His prayer was answered: she lived for a further fifteen years, first as a recluse, and then as a nun at Gwytherin, where she became abbess, died again and was buried. A spring welled up where her head had fallen: it became and remains a place of pilgrimage and the scene of many miracles. The town of Holywell (Treffynnon) has grown up around it. Her body was translated to Shrewsbury Abbey in 1138: thereafter this, too, was a place of pilgrimage, until the Reformation, when her shrine was destroyed. Winefride’s feast-day is 3<sup>rd</sup> November.

Above in the background we can see the walls and spires of Shrewsbury, the English Bridge and the tower of the Abbey. The Cathedral (and this window!) is visible above the walls to the left.

**Below** St Winefride lies dead, water springing from the ground by her severed head. Caradoc is resheathing his sword. In the background is St Bueno’s chapel.

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian *Apologeticus* (197 AD) Chapter 50

### 3. St Thomas of Canterbury

**Thomas of Canterbury** (Thomas Becket) (1118-1170) was a man of great ability and learning. King Henry II made him chancellor, and the two became close friends. For seven years Thomas served Henry faithfully and well, supporting him even against the Church, and lived an extravagant, worldly life. Then Henry arranged for Thomas to be appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, presumably expecting their relationship to continue unchanged, but Thomas did change: he resigned the chancellorship and adopted an austere lifestyle, and now he served the Church as faithfully as once he had served the king. Soon the two men were in conflict over a number of issues. A long and bitter struggle followed, and eventually Thomas fled to France. Six years later they seemed reconciled and Thomas returned, but their quarrel resumed almost immediately and Henry, exasperated, is said to have exclaimed 'Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest!' Four knights who heard him hurried to Canterbury, hunted Thomas down in his Cathedral and killed him. His last words were 'Willingly I die for the name of Jesus and in defence of the Church.' The murder caused outrage throughout the Christian world. Thomas was acclaimed a martyr, and three years later he was canonised. His shrine at Canterbury became one of the most important in Europe. Thomas is shown wearing his archbishop's mitre and robes, holding his archiepiscopal cross and carrying a sword, symbol of his martyrdom. To the left of his head are the arms of the Archdiocese of Canterbury, and above in the background is his cathedral. His feast-day is 29<sup>th</sup> December.

**Below** St Thomas is cut down near St Benedict's altar. An attendant, Edward Grim, tries to shield him with his arm. You will see that only three knights are shown attacking him – this is because the fourth one struck no blow. He is just visible to the left behind the others.

The remaining martyrs all died for their faith during the Reformation. When Margaret Rope made this window they were all Beati ('Blesseds'): since then four of the six have been canonised.

### 4. Blessed Margaret Pole and St John Fisher

**Margaret Pole** (1473-1541), niece of kings and the last of the Plantagenets, was lady in waiting to Catherine of Aragon at Ludlow Castle during Catherine's brief first marriage to Arthur, Prince of Wales. Arthur died, Catherine married his brother Henry VIII, and Margaret was godmother to their daughter Mary and later her governess at Ludlow. Henry considered Margaret to be the saintliest woman in England, and there were plans for Mary to marry Margaret's son Reginald. Then everything changed: Henry 'divorced' Catherine, married Anne Boleyn, declared Mary illegitimate and appointed himself head of the English Church (his 'divorce' was actually a declaration that his marriage with Catherine had been invalid). Reginald, who was in Italy, published a treatise denouncing Henry's actions: the Pope made Reginald a cardinal. Henry tried to have Cardinal Pole assassinated and when this failed he turned his anger on the rest of the family. Reginald's two brothers were arrested on a charge of treason and one of them was executed, and Margaret herself was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London for two years without trial. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1541, after praying for the King, Queen, Prince of Wales and Princess Mary, the 67-year-old Margaret was beheaded at the Tower by a clumsy novice executioner. It took several strokes of the axe to kill her. (Later, when Mary was Queen and England had returned briefly to Catholicism, Reginald Pole became the last Catholic Archbishop of Canterbury. His arms are in the

window in the Cathedral porch. He and Mary died within a few hours of one another in November 1558). Blessed Margaret Pole and the other English Beati and Saints martyred during the Reformation are remembered at the Feast of the English Martyrs on 4<sup>th</sup> May.

**John Fisher** (1469-1535) was Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of Cambridge University. He had been confessor to Henry VII's mother Margaret Beaufort, and Henry VIII considered that no other prince or kingdom had such a distinguished prelate. But John opposed Henry's 'divorce' and, unlike the other English bishops, refused to take an oath acknowledging that the King was supreme head of the English Church. He was imprisoned in the Tower for treason and while he was there the Pope made him a cardinal. This made Henry furious – he is reported to have said that the Pope might send John a Cardinal's hat but he would have no head to wear it on. John was beheaded on Tower Hill on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1535 aged 66. Before putting his head on the block he declared to the watching crowd that he was dying for the Faith of Christ's Holy Catholic Church. John is shown wearing his red cardinal's hat and robe, carrying his New Testament, as he did on his way to the scaffold, and holding the executioner's axe. His appearance is based on a portrait drawing of about 1532-4 by Hans Holbein.<sup>4</sup> Above him are the arms of his diocese and, to the left, his cathedral. His feast-day (with Thomas More) is 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

**Below** St John Fisher climbs up onto the scaffold on Tower Hill wearing a fur scarf to keep warm and carrying his New Testament. The executioner waits: the crowd watch. The sun breaks through the clouds and shines on John's face, bringing to his mind a verse from Psalm 33/34, ACCEDITE AD EUM ET ILLUMINAMINI ET FACIES VESTRAE NON CONFUNDENTUR (They looked to him, and were radiant. Their faces shall never be covered with shame). This psalm is a song for martyrs: the previous verse reads 'I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.' The Tower and the London skyline are visible in the background.

Margaret Rope also depicted St John Fisher (with St Thomas More – see below) in windows at Our Lady's, Latchford, Warrington and St Michael & the Holy Family, Kesgrave, Suffolk.

**In front of the two saints in this light** Bishop Samuel Allen kneels in prayer. Beside him are his arms and the motto LOQUERE DOMINE AUDIT SERVUS TUUS (Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening), recalling the Prophet Samuel's words when he was called by God.<sup>5</sup> Over his head is the inscription ORATE PRO ME (Pray for me).

## **5. St John Houghton & St Thomas More**

**John Houghton** (1487-1535), in the white habit, was the first martyr of the Reformation in England. He was a Carthusian monk and prior of the London Charterhouse. In 1535 John and the priors of Beauvale and Axholme, Robert Lawrence and Augustine Webster, refused to swear the Oath of Supremacy and were committed to the Tower. They were tried and found guilty of treason, and on 4<sup>th</sup> May were dragged on hurdles, wearing their Carthusian habits, through the streets of London to Tyburn. At the foot of the gallows they were offered a pardon if they would recant, but they refused and were hanged, drawn and quartered, John

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<sup>4</sup> In the Royal Collection.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 3:9

suffering first. As his body was ripped open he was heard to pray 'Most Holy Jesus, have mercy on me in this hour.' John is shown wearing the noose from the gallows around his neck and holding the ripping knife.

**Thomas More** (1478-1535) was, like Thomas of Canterbury, chancellor and close friend to a king. A wise and witty scholar, he had considered becoming a priest or religious, but decided instead to marry and pursue a career in the law. In dispensing justice he was fair, incorruptible and swift. His glittering career came to an end when Henry VIII decided to 'divorce' Katherine of Aragon. Thomas believed their marriage to be valid and indissoluble, and resigned as chancellor. When he refused to take the oath acknowledging the king as supreme head of the English Church he was committed to the Tower of London. From his prison a year later Thomas watched as John Houghton and his fellow Carthusians went on their way to the gallows 'like men going off to a wedding party': a few weeks later his friend John Fisher went to the block. Then, after fifteen months in prison, Thomas was tried and found guilty of treason. He was beheaded on Tower Hill on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1535, having told the watching crowd that he died 'the king's good servant – but God's first.' The artist has based Thomas's appearance on Hans Holbein's 1572 portrait<sup>6</sup>: he is wearing the gold 'collar of esses', his reward for exceptional service, and holding a small wooden cross, as he did when he walked from his prison cell to the scaffold. His feast-day (with John Fisher) is 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

**Below** St Thomas More is being helped up the ladder onto the scaffold. As described in contemporary sources he is bearded and dressed in his best clothes. He has said to his helper 'I pray you, sir, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself'. In the background is the Tower of London, scene of his imprisonment.

## 6. Blessed John Forest & St Edmund Campion

**John Forest** (1471-1538), in the brown habit, was a Franciscan monk and Queen Catherine's confessor. His Order opposed the King's 'divorce' and was suppressed. John was arrested but released almost immediately so he probably swore some sort of qualified oath acknowledging the King's supremacy over the English Church – 'as far as the law of God allows', perhaps – but after much prayer and study he wrote a treatise condemning the King's actions beginning with the text 'Nobody takes this honour on himself, but he is called by God, just like Aaron was.' (Hebrews 5:4). He was arrested again, refused to recant and on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1538 was taken to Smithfield, suspended from a gibbet over a bonfire, and slowly burnt to death.

**Edmund Campion** (1540-1581) was a brilliant scholar, thinker and writer. He studied at Oxford University and was ordained a deacon of the Church of England after swearing the Oath of Supremacy, but following a change of heart he went abroad, attended the seminary at Douai, rejoined the Catholic Church, became a Jesuit and was ordained priest. In 1579 he was chosen to help start a Jesuit mission in England, crossed the Channel and landed at Dover disguised as a jewel merchant. He ministered to Catholics in the Midlands and the North, preaching and writing and printing pamphlets. Eventually he was caught and imprisoned in the Tower. He was severely tortured on the rack, but remained steadfast in the Faith and refused to betray any of his friends. On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1581 Edmund and a number of others were tried and found guilty of plotting rebellion. He said to the court 'In condemning us you condemn all your ancestors, all the ancient

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<sup>6</sup> In the Frick Collection, New York: later copy in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

bishops and kings, all that was once the glory of England.’ On 1<sup>st</sup> December he and two fellow priests were hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Before he suffered Edmund prayed aloud for Queen Elizabeth, ‘your queen and my queen, unto whom I wish a long reign with all prosperity.’ Edmund is shown with the rope from the gallows over his arm and holding the ripping knife. Beside him is the Jesuit badge: the letters IHS, which are an abbreviation of the Greek ΙΗΣΟΥΣ (Jesus), and the three nails from the Cross, which here represent the threefold vow of poverty, chastity and obedience.

**Below** A horse is dragging St Edmund Campion on a hurdle towards the infamous triangular gallows at Tyburn. A woman is comforting him and behind her a boy holds a cloth to wipe the dirt from Edmund’s face. Under the gallows another horse, harnessed to a cart, is waiting. Edmund was made to stand in the cart, a noose was placed around his neck and, after he had prayed, protested his innocence and wished the Queen ‘a long reign with all prosperity’ the cart was pulled away. Then he was cut down, disembowelled, beheaded and quartered: apparently, unlike most of his fellow martyrs, he was allowed to die before being cut down. In front of the gallows we can see the cauldron of molten pitch into which his remains would be dipped to preserve them for public display as a warning to others. There is more about Douai, Edmund and other priests who died for the Faith in the Cathedral’s Seminary Martyrs Window.

Look again at the whole **background to the martyrs**. We have already seen how behind some of them the artist has depicted places associated with those particular martyrs: now we can also see how the background across all six lights forms one continuous panorama of the fields, hills and woods of the land in which they lived and died. This was the scene of their earthly sufferings: the **upper part of the window** shows the heavenly glory awaiting them, using imagery from the Book of Revelation. **Above the six main lights** are five red-winged angels. The central one holds a martyr’s crown and two more are holding white robes, the martyrs’ heavenly garments, whilst the other two sound trumpets to welcome them. **Above these** stretches the vault of heaven, containing sun, moon and stars. **Beyond the vault of heaven** is the City of God and, flowing from it, the River of Life with the Trees of Life on either side, the whole illuminated by the Light shining from the victorious Lamb of God **at the apex** – the Light of Christ, who conquered death.

This is a large window, but it contains little of the complex symbolism found in much of the artist’s later work. The birds appearing in various parts of the main lights and the tracery, for example, do not appear to have specific meanings, but they please the eye and bring an added dynamism to the window.