

# THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY GLASS AT LAUNDE PRIORY

by

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The difficulties in making satisfactory record, either by drawing or photographs, of painted glass *in situ* are well known, but happily the opportunity presented itself of examining Launde Priory painted glass under favourable circumstances in the autumn of last year, for it became known to the writer that the glass, urgently in need of re-leading, had temporarily been removed to Leicester.

The Launde glass occupies the three lights and the traceried head of the east window of the fifteenth-century chapel (Fig. 1). The width of each light is approximately 1 ft. 8 in. and the total height including the canopy and pinnacle work in the cusped head of the lower lights is approximately 6 ft.

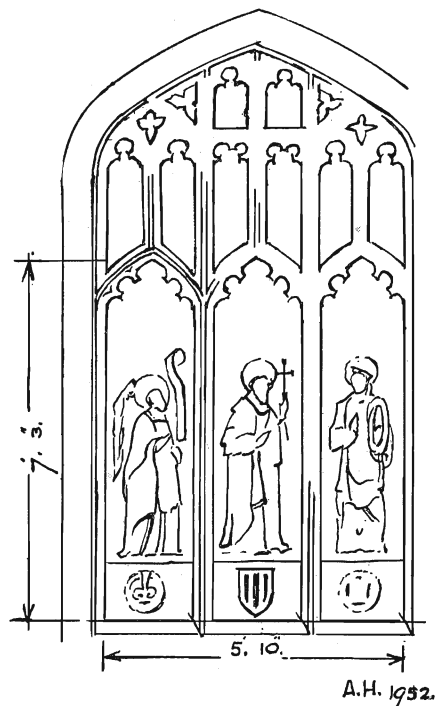


Fig. 1

Figures occupy the lights, armorial and other devices being set at the foot of each of these. The northernmost light (Fig. 2) has the angel Gabriel holding in the left hand a short mace terminating with lily flowers; to his

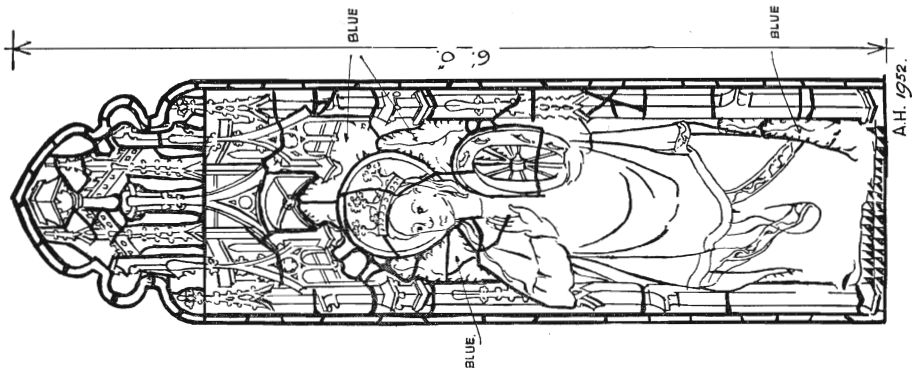


Fig. 2

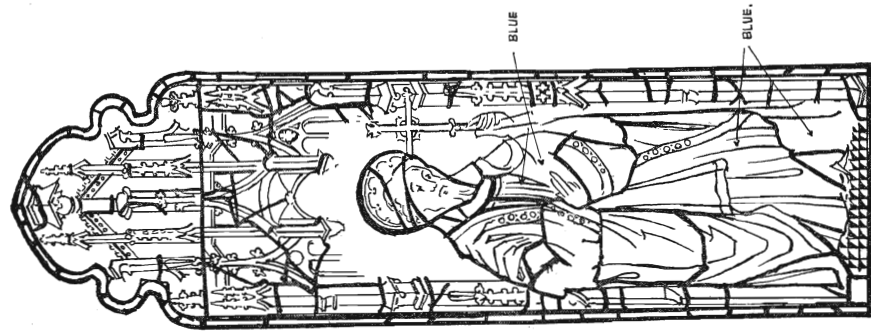


Fig. 3

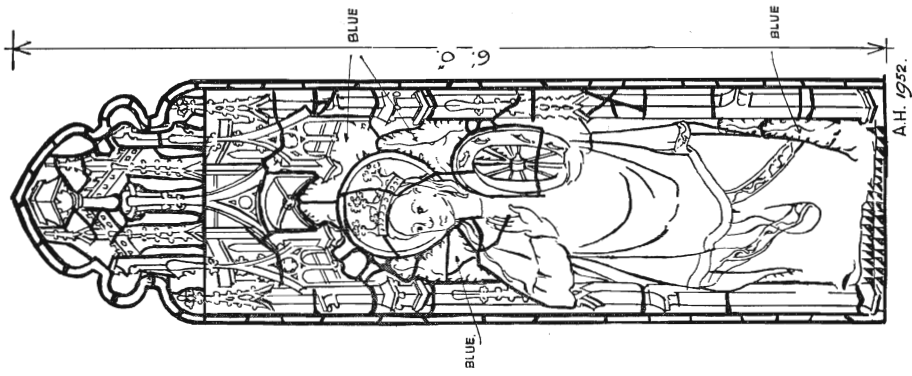


Fig. 4

*Portions only of the leading are shown*

left is a scroll. A circular wreath enclosing a fleur-de-lys occupies the space below. The centre light (Fig. 3) depicts a priest carrying a cross in his left hand. His right indicates the Western sign of blessing. An heraldic shield is at the foot.

In the southernmost light is St. Catherine of Alexandria—a third-century Saint (Figs. 4, 5). The rim of her wheel is not studded with the usual sword-points but with a series of upturned flaying knives on the circumference.



Fig. 5

St. Catherine, as is well known, is the most highly venerated of all women Saints, after St. Mary Magdalene. She was doomed to death, legend has it, and her persecutors wished to torture her by means of an armoured wheel, but it is recorded that in answer to her prayers the wheel was broken by Divine interposition and eventually she suffered death by an axe.<sup>1</sup> Underneath the figure of St. Catherine is another wreath containing a highly detailed crest. The bird stands on a floral group above a towerlike feature. This wreath with armorial enrichment is, as in the case of the lower portions of Figs. 2 and 3, a later insertion.

<sup>1</sup> There are two St. Catherines depicted in the great nine-light west window at Malvern, one, the larger one, on the northern side—reminiscent of the Launde example—and another on the southern side who carries the wheel on her right shoulder!

It is notable that there is a remarkably close resemblance, in many of the details, between the glass at Launde Priory and that at Malvern Priory.<sup>2</sup> Take for instance the St. Wulfstan, Bishop of Worcester, on the north side of the quire at the latter. The design of the nimbus, the ornamental border of the chasuble, the small ball features in the upright shaftings, the ornament with a flowing stem and serrated edges—both incidentally on grey-blue glass—are practically identical. These could scarcely have been devised without the knowledge of the other work. This seems to postulate a common source as it would appear that access was had in each case to the same cartoons so similar are certain elements in the designs.

Then in the matter of the floor pavings the design incorporating triangular forms is on similar lines.

The date assigned to the bulk of the Malvern glass is *circa* 1445, and it may be assumed that a date approximating to this undoubtedly applies also to Launde.

The scroll on the right of the angel bears the following legend AVE GRAT PLENA DNS TECU, which is taken from the Salutation of St. Gabriel to the Virgin and may be extended into AVE GRAT(IE) PLENA D(OMI)N(U)S TECU(M). (Hail, thou full of grace! The Lord is with thee.)

The family crest enclosed in an elaborately detailed wreath under the figure of St. Catherine, with its almost microscopic floral base, was obviously inserted in the eighteenth century.

Taken as a whole the colouring is rich and although the trappings and subsidiary geometrical canopy and pinnacle features are somewhat crude in drawing, the window is a good typical fifteenth-century example of English glass-painting. It constitutes a notable example of medieval glass of which the county should be proud.

The delicate lemon-to-orange shades of the heads and the nimbuses are noticeably similar in the work of the two above-mentioned Priors. They were obtained by the use of nitrate of silver—a discovery made in the previous (the fourteenth) century.

It was not found necessary to remove and re-lead the painted glass in the eight sub-divisions in the traceried head of the Launde window, and consequently detailed drawings were not made. The subjects occupying these narrow lights include St. Gabriel, Our Lady, two bishops, an abbess with wimple and a pilgrim (? Tobit) with dog—but the whole are of a comparatively modern date and devoid of any particular merit. They may possibly perpetuate elements in the original design. Examination of the two windows in the south wall of the chapel reveals fifteenth-century glass in the traceried heads which may well have occupied a position originally in the east window.

Glass of this mid-fifteenth-century period already has the seeds of decadence, and only a short time elapses before "Renaissance" elements tend to destroy the consistency and charm met with in earlier work. Renaissance is scarcely the appropriate term to use in the present connexion.

To set against the many points of remarkable similarity of the glass of the two Priors, it must be admitted that in the Leicestershire case there is

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. McN. Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery as illustrated by the painted Windows of Great Malvern Priory Church* (1936).

a relatively larger portion of area of the deep colourings than in that at Malvern.<sup>3</sup>

One only has to recall what has occurred to the glass at Stanford-on-Avon, and indeed other places, and take genuine satisfaction in the fact that the glass at Launde still remains a coherent work of art. It is greatly to the credit of the present owner of the Priory, Anthony E. Lillie, Esq., that the repairs and re-leading of the three lights have been carried out in a conservative and craftsmanlike manner—so preserving this relic for centuries.

It may be added that the external surface of much of the glass, as would be expected, is deeply pitted and patenated.

Similarities in design and parallels are only to be expected in the study of the fascinating subject of painted glass. A very remarkable instance of this is the "Caleb and Joshua" hemicycle in Becket's Crown of Canterbury Cathedral, which the writer noted after contributing the short monograph on the Twycross glass to these *Transactions*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Priory at Launde, Leicestershire, was founded about 1119 for the Black Canons of the Augustinian Order, by Richard Bassett and his wife, Maude Revel. The Benedictine Priory of Great Malvern, dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin and St. Michael, was founded about 1085.

<sup>4</sup> *Trans.* xxi (1939-41), 115-18.