

# The Medieval Stained Glass of Wells Cathedral

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*Wells Cathedral contains one of the most substantial collections of medieval stained glass in England. In 2004 the British Academy published, in a handsome two-volume set, the first fully illustrated study of this exceptional glass. It forms the next part of the British contribution to the international Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi series (Catalogue of Medieval Window Glass). Author Dr Tim Ayers, Secretary of the British CVMA committee, here discusses two particular windows.*

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Below is one of a striking group of bust-length patriarchs and prelates in the window tracery of the octagonal Lady Chapel in Wells Cathedral. The building was finished by spring 1326. Dunstan, the tenth-century reformer of the English Church, was born near Glastonbury and rose to become its abbot, as well as Archbishop of Canterbury. The abbey claimed his relics, and large gifts were made towards the shrine by Abbots Sodbury (1323–1334) and Breinton (1334–1342). At Wells, which lies just ten miles from the great Benedictine foundation, Dunstan enjoyed a high grading in the calendar by the mid-eleventh century, and there is evidence of continuing and regular interest. The Communar's Accounts, beginning in 1327–28, record payments for the collection of 'Dunstan's gift', which in 1178 was described as two loaves, two barrels of mead and

two kids or pigs, 'yearly rendered by the monastery of Glastonbury from the time of St Dunstan, by his institution.' By 1343–44, one of the cathedral's bells bore his name, a constant and speaking reminder. Dunstan's relatively prominent presence in the Lady Chapel glass honours the local saint, but may not have been an open-handed tribute to Glastonbury, with which relations were often difficult. He is shown in this window within the hierarchy of the secular church.

*sII C2. St Dunstan, in trefoil, frontal bust of the archbishop, white chasuble and amice, with murrey apparel, flesh in pink, hair, beard and separately leaded eyes in white, yellow jewelled mitre, blue ground with white oak leaves and acorns, lion border, yellow Lombardic inscription at lower edge 'S(ANCTUS): DV/[NST]/AN'; c.1325–30. Inserts. Pitting and corrosion, especially to pink, murrey and yellow mitre. Trefoil h c.0.55m.*



On the right is one of a number of French stained glass panels that were acquired by Wells Cathedral in the early nineteenth century, when many English buyers were taking advantage of the large quantities of continental glass that were coming onto the market, in the wake of Napoleonic secularization and conquest. English churches are still remarkably rich in Belgian, French and German glass, especially of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as a result. The Wells panels almost certainly originated in Rouen and this is one of five that were rumoured to come from the church of Saint-Jean (now destroyed). Other panels from the same series, all showing scenes from the Apocryphal life of St John the Evangelist, taken from the Golden Legend, are now in Ely Cathedral and the Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Male donor figures in the Glasgow panels wear armour and tabards bearing arms, indicating that the whole series was the gift of the family of Bigars de la Londe.

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The British contribution to the international *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi* project is a British Academy Research Project ([www.cvma.ac.uk](http://www.cvma.ac.uk)).

*The Medieval Stained Glass of Wells Cathedral (Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, Great Britain, volume IV)*, by Tim Ayers, was published by the British Academy in 2004. Details can be found on the web site via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

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*sVII 2b–4b. St John the Evangelist prays and an idol falls, to the left, the Apostle is on one knee, hands clasped, in a plum-coloured gown, under a white cloak with an ornamental hem and blue lining, foot, hands and face in white glass, with sanguine and silver stain for hair, pot yellow patterned halo; before a column, the base with classical ornament (confronted beasts), the shaft in pink with a yellow base and capital, from which a broken silver-stained idol holding a pennoned shaft and buckler is falling; behind John, the high priest watches and turns away, in ruby gown with green sash, white collar and silver-stained headdress bearing a crescent moon, other male and female figures behind, their hands clasped in prayer, before the entrance to the temple of Diana, painted on white with some sanguine, on an emerald green ground with tufts of plants, and two birds painted at John's feet, in white with sanguine and with silver-stained claws, Rouen, c.1510–30. h 1.95m, w 0.58m.*