



The Principal Windows

The following pages of this PDF file contain all the current fact sheets produced by the Centre for School Visits, relating to the principal windows in the Minster. Each fact sheet is comprised of a double page focusing on one particular window.

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If there is a particular aspect of York Minster that you are interested in and it is not covered here get in touch and we may be able to produce a fact sheet and add it to the document. Please contact :- timol@yorkminster.org

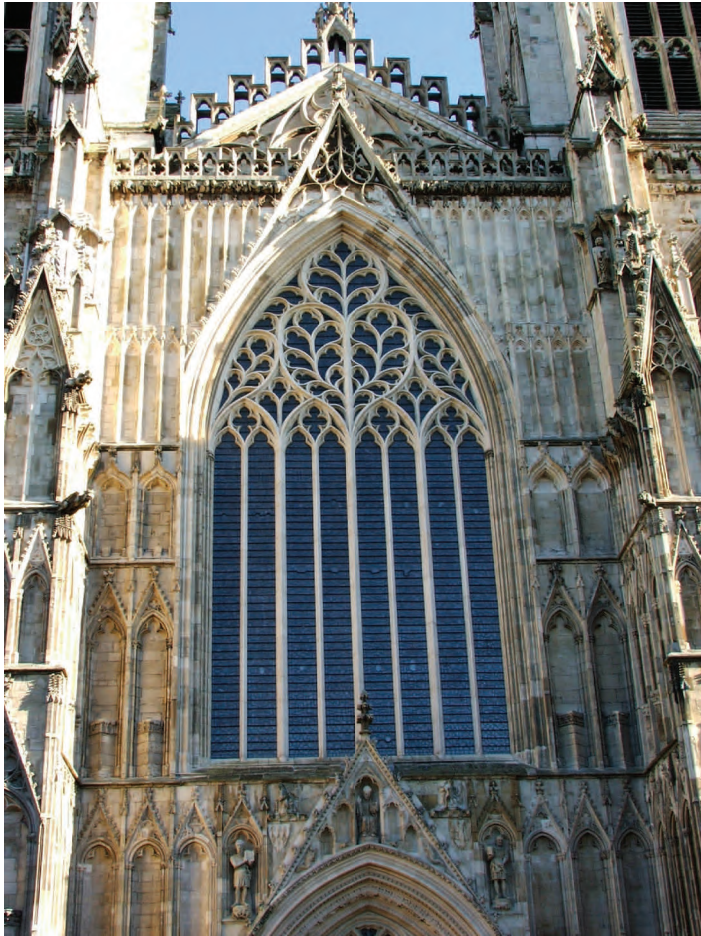
Last updated January 2007



The Great West Window

The Stonework

A visitor to the Minster can hardly fail to miss the Great West Window that dominates the western end of the Nave. Ironically though, this impressive window may have been an afterthought. It was inserted in the 1330's when a radical rethink of the design of the western facade was put into effect. Master Mason Ivo de Raghton was responsible for the stonework and tracery of the window. The glass was the product of the workshop of Master Robert (possibly Kettlebarn) and the patron for the glazing scheme was Archbishop Melton who donated 100 marks (£66) for the project.

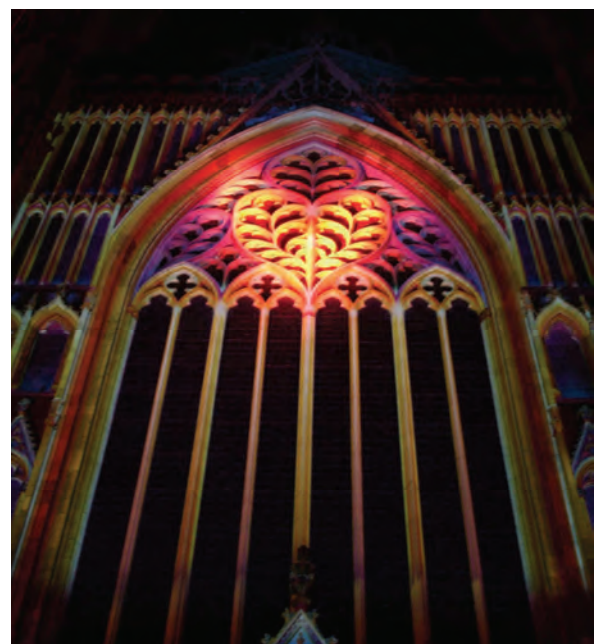


A quick glance at the smooth flowing lines of Raghton's tracery will confirm why the window has been nicknamed The Heart of Yorkshire window. Architecturally, the tracery is in the French curvilinear decorated style and marks a departure from the otherwise geometric tracery of the rest of the Nave.

In the late 1980's it was decided as part of the ongoing maintenance of the West Front that the tracery should be completely replaced. The stone work of the window as we see it today is an exact copy of the original. The 129 pieces of masonry that fit together to form the tracery were all produced on site, by our own team of Minster stone masons.

The West Front of the Minster has traditionally been a focal point in the city for the people of York. Large crowds gather outside it on New Year's Eve to wait for Great Peter to chime in the New Year.

In the Autumn of 2005 the West Front and Great West Window were literally painted with light as part of an installation by the artist Patrice Warrenner. Huge numbers of people flocked to the Minster each night for a week, to see the building as it had never been seen before.





The Great West Window

The Glass

Like any stained glass window the glass of the Great West Window requires re-leading and cleaning approximately every 120 years or so. The West Window which dates from c.1338-39 has therefore been dismantled, re-leaded and reorganised on a number of occasions.

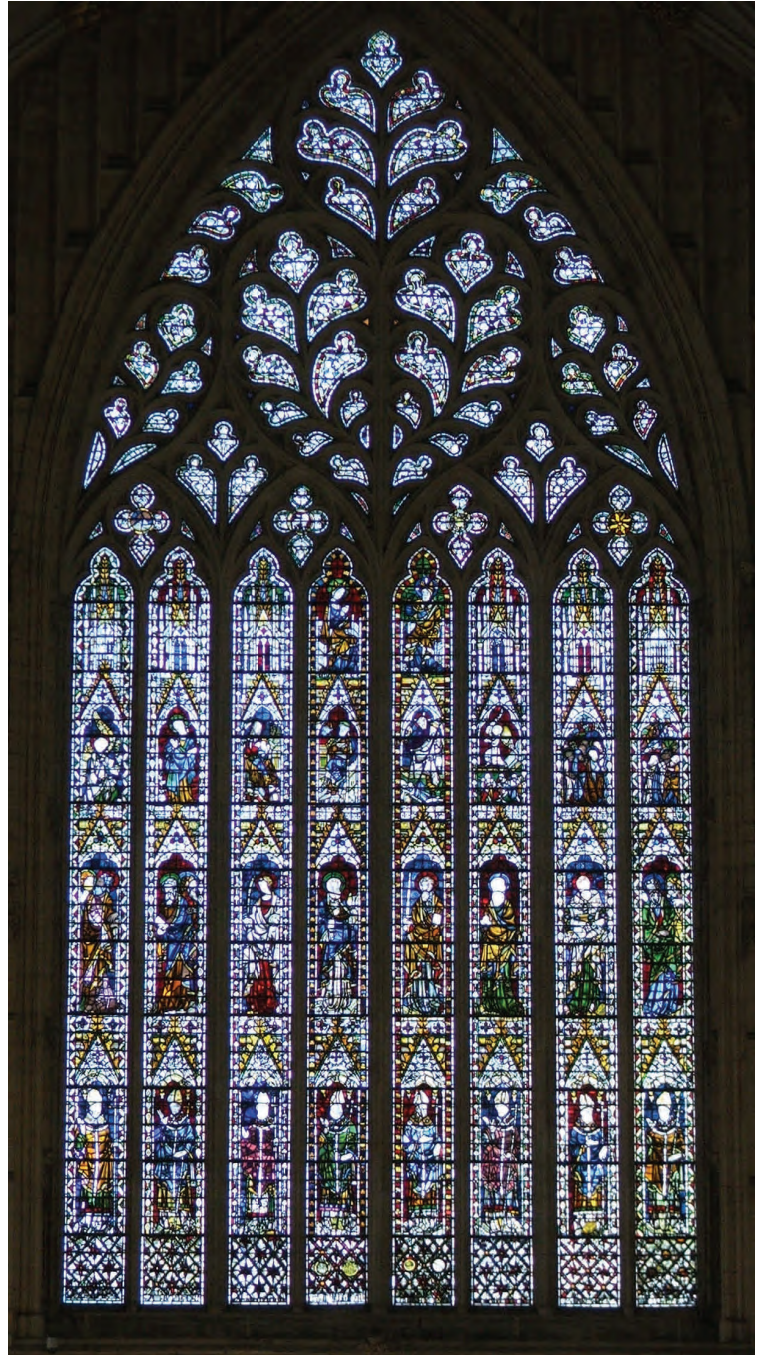
The overall glazing scheme was designed to reflect the hierarchy and legitimacy of the medieval Church.

The two panels immediately under the point of the heart show, to the left, the Coronation of the Virgin, and to the right, Christ in Majesty. The first full row of panels beneath illustrate the principal events in the life of Christ (Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection and Ascension).

Until 1746, the middle row of panels contained the twelve apostles. In that year a figure of a deacon saint was inserted replacing an original panel of two apostles, the second figure in from the right.

The bottom row of panels depicts previous Archbishops of York. The window was intended to work on two different levels; firstly it illustrated the order and structure of the Church. Secondly it linked the donor of the window, Archbishop Melton, to his predecessors by virtue of the doctrine of apostolic succession. The living Melton could claim his authority from St Peter, traditionally the first Pope.

Recent observation of the glass during the 1980's, when it had to be removed to replace the window tracery, revealed it to be in excellent condition. This must raise the question as to why William Peckitt did so much to interfere with the glazing in the mid eighteenth century.





The Great East Window

At the East End of the Minster completely dominating the Lady Chapel is the Great East Window. It contains the largest single expanse of medieval stained glass in the world. The window measures some 23.3m high and is 9.5m wide and covers an area of some 194 square metres (2088 sq ft). It contains 117 narrative panels and a similar number of tracery panels. At least this is the case until the summer of 2007, when a full height scaffold is scheduled to be built inside the Minster that will completely obscure the window for up to five years or more. This masterpiece of medieval glazing shortly to disappear from view, can be attributed to the workshop of one Master Glazier; John Thornton.



Thornton who was from Coventry was commissioned to glaze the window in 1405. A copy of the original contract has survived detailing that Thornton was to glaze the window in three years in return for £46 in wages.

If he completed within three years he would also receive a £10 bonus. Labour and materials were paid for by the Dean and Chapter so Thorntons' £56 was a magnificent sum of money. In the 1470's a craftsman was paid around 6d a day, Thornton some 65 years earlier was being paid 4 shillings or 48d a week.

The Theme of the Window.

The overall theme of the window is the beginning and the end. The three rows of panels above the walkway illustrate scenes drawn from the Book of Genesis. Below the walkway the scenes are from the Book of Revelation. The Books of Genesis and Revelation are the first and last books of the Bible. The upper 140 or so tracery panels contain images of angles, saints and martyrs. As can be seen above some panels are missing from the window; this is to assess the condition of the glass prior to the commencement of fully removing the entire window due to start mid to late 2007.



Creation of the bird and fish from the top row of the window



The Great East Window

Restoration of the Window.

As part of the restoration of the East Front of the Minster the Great East Window is to be fully cleaned and restored. This mammoth task will be undertaken by the men and women of the Glaziers Trust and looks set to cost in the region of £6 million. The glass must be removed to allow essential restoration and replacement of much the stonework of the window. Externally in places the stonework is crumbling away to dust.



The restoration of the glass will involve dismantling the panels and cleaning each individual piece of glass. Where possible broken or cracked pieces of glass will be bonded together and then backed with a 1mm plate of glass to support the bonded pieces. The pieces will all then have to be re-leaded into panels.

This technique will drastically reduce the amount of lead in the window and make the panels much clearer and easier to read. This approach has been used with stunning results on the St William Window, also by John Thornton in the North Choir Aisle.

The restoration of the East Front will take about a decade and cost an estimated £23 million. York Minster receives no state funding and must generate the funds for all restoration projects; therefore to restore the East Front and fund other long term projects the Minster has launched a campaign to raise £30 million. One possible source of income is the Heritage Lottery Fund and a bid for £10 million is in preparation (August 2006). Fund raising plans include asking individuals to sponsor a stone. Limited edition prints can be bought of newly commissioned paintings of the Minster. The Dean and Chapter has auctioned off pieces of masonry and timber which would otherwise have been thrown away for lack of storage space. There have also been a number of generous corporate and private donations. All donations big or small are greatly appreciated.

If you would like to sponsor a stone, make a donation or find out more about how you can help the Development Campaign you can visit the Minster Website www.yorkminster.org or contact the Development Campaign office on 01904 557450



The Five Sisters Window

In the North and South Transepts of York Minster stand two very different but distinctive windows. The north wall of the North Transept is filled with the imposing mixture of stone and glass that forms the Five Sisters Window. It is the oldest complete window in York Minster and dates from around the year 1260. In comparison to other windows in the building the Five Sister can appear quite dark and confusing. This is, in part, due to the excessive amount of repair leads which confuse the image, and the protective outer glazing that cuts down the amount of light entering the building from the north.

The Five Sisters is made of "grisaille" glass fashionable in the thirteenth century England. Grisaille or Cistercian glass was typically formed by painting complex foliage patterns on pieces of white or silvery grey glass. The pieces were then formed into strong geometric patterns with the skilful use of the lead comes that hold the pieces together, the lead being as integral a part of the design as the glass. Each of the magnificent lancets stands 16.3m tall and is 1.55m wide. In total the window contains over 100,000 individual pieces of glass.

Why The Five Sisters?

There are numerous theories as to how the window became known as The Five Sisters. The earliest reference to this name appears in Francis Drake's "Eboracum" published in 1736. In the same book he also refers to the window as the Jewish window. Charles Dickens, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, tells an elaborate tale of five sisters who on the death of one sister contracted a window to be made in the Minster as a memorial.



The Jewish Window.

The now obscure title the Jewish Window has a real historic provenance. A document survives in the Minster archive detailing the grant of land to the Jews of York in exchange for a lump sum and nominal annual rent. The deed was signed on behalf of the Minster by John Romanus the treasurer who controlled the fabric fund for the building of the North Transept. If the lump sum was paid into the Fabric fund it may have been earmarked for the glazing of the north wall. If so the new window may well have become known as the Jewish window.



Panel from the Five Sisters Window.



The Five Sisters Window

The Five Cistercians?

An explanation with some validity is that the name the Five Sisters is a corruption of Five Cistercians. The characteristic grisaille glass used in the window was very popular with the Cistercian Order. The Cistercians decorated their monasteries in a somewhat austere and non-figurative style, and grisaille glass is sometimes referred to as Cistercian glass. Although popular with the Cistercians, grisaille glass was not exclusive to them and York Minster was never a Cistercian monastery. The window may have become known as the Five Cistercians Window which by the time of Drake writing in the eighteenth century had been corrupted to the Five Sisters. This corruption in turn may have spawned the stories of maidens, sisters and needlework samplers.

Restoration

The window was last restored and rereaded in 1924, the funds for the restoration being raised by a woman who reported having a vision of her long-dead sisters beckoning her towards the window. As she drew nearer they faded away to be replaced by five women sitting in a garden sewing needlework samplers. After the restoration the window was dedicated as a memorial to the women of the British Empire that died during the First World War.

The lead that was used to produce the came that hold the glass together came from the roof of the great Cistercian house of Riveaux Abbey. During excavations at Riveaux in the early 1920's archaeologists discovered a cache of lead ingots under a collapsed roof. The ingots all bore the seal of King Henry VIII and must have been cast on site after the lead had been stripped from the roof during the dissolution of the monasteries. After their discovery some of the ingots were donated to the Dean and Chapter. So today in York Minster we have a window heavily influenced by Cistercian design held together with lead from one of the greatest Cistercian monasteries in England.



There is one figurative panel in the bottom of the centre light of the window that does stand out. This is a panel showing the prophet Habakkuk feeding Daniel in the lions den. This panel, although inserted, is in fact Norman in origin and pre-dates the window by at least a century. The reason for its insertion is unclear but it has been there since at least 1736 as recorded by Drake.



The Rose Window

High in the gable of the South Transept is the Rose Window which is one of the best known stained glass windows in England. The window was catapulted to fame after the devastating fire of July 1984. The convectional heat from the fire cracked the 7000 pieces of glass in the window in about 40,000 places. Although severely cracked, the window remained in one piece. This was due mainly to the fact that the window had been restored and re-leaded twelve years before.

In the aftermath of the fire the immediate concern was to remove the fire crazed glass before any further damage was sustained. Once removed the pieces of glass were painstakingly glued back together using a clear resin.

The glued pieces were then sandwiched between pieces of clear glass to give them added strength. The panels could then be re-assembled and re-leaded. This amazing piece of rescue work was completed and the window was back in place by the summer of 1987.



South Transept and Rose Window

The recent history of the window has undoubtedly provoked the huge interest, but the story of The Rose Window begins in the thirteenth century. The stonework of the window dates from the building of the South Transept c.1250.

The present glass is a mixture of sixteenth, eighteenth and twentieth century glass. This immediately begs the question as to what was in the glazing scheme prior to the early 1500's. In keeping with other surviving wheel and rose windows the glass may have had a much more religious theme.

Often the Virgin Mary or Christ crowned in majesty can be seen in the centre with Saints and Prophets radiating out around the edges. Wheel and Rose windows are deeply symbolic, reflecting medieval man's view of time and the universe, all of which were seen as God given. Such a religious scheme at York may have been included, but no re-used glass from such a scheme can be identified in any of the other windows in the Minster.



The Rose Window



The basic glazing scheme that can be seen today was conceived and produced around the year 1515 by the workshop of Master Glazier Robert Petty. The design of the outer panels contains two red Lancastrian roses, alternating with panels containing two red and white Tudor roses. This, combined with the date of the panels, would suggest that the glass was inserted to illustrate and enforce the legitimacy of the new ruling house of Tudor.



The combination of red and white roses alludes to the union of the Houses of Lancaster and York by the Marriage of Henry VII to Elizabeth of York. The window was not, as is sometimes

suggested, a wedding present from Henry VII to his new bride. The couple were in fact married in London in 1486. If the window is dated to 1515 then it places it firmly in the reign of King Henry VIII.



The inner sunflower was inserted in 1793 by the local, self-taught, glass painter William Peckitt. His work can at times appear crude in comparison with the best of medieval glass painting in the Minster. He was, however, one of the first to take an interest in the glass after the damage and excessive neglect of the Reformation and Civil War.

The name The Rose Window has become deeply ingrained into the history of York Minster but this title is quite recent. One of the earliest historians of the Minster, James Torre, writing in 1690 refers to it as the Marigold. Later writers talk of a wheel window with marigolds. The first direct reference to the roses comes in 1846 and seems to be the point at which the window becomes increasingly known as the Rose Window.

In comparison to other rose and wheel windows the glass at York is quite simple. Yet the effect of looking towards the Rose Window from the North Transept on a bright winters day can be truly memorable.