

Truro Cathedral Baptistry

By Michael Swift, Canon Philip Lambert and Judith Whitehouse



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Truro Cathedral

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE BAPTISTERY.

The baptistery area in this monograph is defined as the baptistery itself AND the adjoining Chapel of Saint Samson and Saint Boniface. This Chapel was created in the 1930's from what was termed by Pearson and Benson 'the baptistery vestibule'. This monograph shows how the iconography of these two areas must be treated as a whole, as it was originally intended by Benson and Mason.

All the window schemes in Truro Cathedral complement and develop the relationship between liturgical and architectural spaces, whilst each sequence of windows presents a multi-layered narrative on the profoundest theological themes. The iconography of the windows of the baptistery is a reflection on the themes of Baptism and of Christian Mission.

Between 1887 and 1904 the main cathedral entrance was through the south transept door. The baptistery vestibule therefore would have been reached by immediately turning left on entering the south transept door, up a flight of three steps, across the vestibule, with a further set of steps leading directly to the baptistery proper (mirroring the ascending approach to the quire and sanctuary). Since the 1930s however, the vestibule and the baptistery itself are entered directly from the south nave aisle, and the subtle links between the iconography of the windows in the two areas, the liturgy of the baptismal service, and the spatial dimension of a progression through ever smaller and more intimate spaces has been lost for many decades. The 1930's reordering of the area into a chapel effectively undermines all the original intentions of the architect and the designers of the 1887 Master scheme for the windows. Saddest of all, the reordering destroys one of Benson's most personal visions for his cathedral.

THE BAPTISTERY VESTIBULE WINDOWS. ***(The Chapel of Saint Samson and Saint Boniface)***

Donor, dedicatee and insertion.

The windows were the gift of Walter Dreeble Boger, of Antony, Tor Point, in memory of his wife Amelia Harriet Boger, and were inserted in December 1889.¹

These three lancet windows were designated in the 1887 Master scheme to be 'filled with scenes from the life of John the Baptist.'² In the two years between the publication of the 1887 Master Scheme and the insertion of these windows in 1889, a significant addition to the subject-matter was made. This was the earliest example of how the Master Scheme was subtly modified as the building of the cathedral progressed and new donors came forward. The new addition of Elijah and Noah to the John the Baptist theme turned the vestibule glazing into a typological scheme, where Old Testament figures and events are juxtaposed with New Testament events. Such schemes were very common in medieval glazing. The placing of John the Baptist between two Old Testament figures reinforced his positioning at the end of the line of Old Testament prophets. This has already been the case in the top right lancet of the great east quire window, where he is positioned as an Old Testament figure in front of Elijah. Elsewhere in the cathedral Noah and Elijah were identified in the 1887 Master Plan to be included in the northeast quire transept window (a window that was never glazed with stained glass), and, together with John the Baptist, appear as three of the six figures around the Truro pulpit.³

¹ CCRO TCM/432 *Cathedral Local Building sub committee minutes October 1889-February 1890, and CCRO TCM/1134 Residuary Chapter Minute Book 1889*, p. 87.

² TC : p. 50.

³ The 'preachers of righteousness' (TC ;, p. 20) also include Moses, Christ and St Paul.

Traditionally, the figures of Noah and Elijah have a special significance in typological schemes. In the baptistery vestibule window Noah is shown holding a model of the Ark, which functions both as a symbol of the Ark of the Covenant and as the connection between salvation by water and the sacrament of Baptism.⁴ Elijah, shown with his raven waiting for water to end the drought in the desert, was one of the prophets named in the debate about John the Baptist's identity, as well as being one of the two prophets present at Christ's Transfiguration.⁵

Each of the lancets in the baptistery vestibule is divided vertically into three panels.

(a) Elijah, Zacharias and John's birth



In the upper panel Elijah is portrayed supporting a raven on his left arm in the same manner as he appears on the side of the main pulpit and in the great east window. Below him are two scenes in the life of John the Baptist. The upper scene depicts Zacharias the priest with the Archangel Gabriel who foretold John's birth. The lower scene shows the dumb father writing his son's name, with the figure of Elizabeth lying on a bed in the background, and a nursemaid placed to the right holding the child in swaddling clothes (see left).

(b) John the Baptist in the desert and Christ's baptism

The upper panel depicts St John the Baptist as a prophet in the desert. The central scene shows John preaching in the wilderness surrounded by three other figures, whilst the lower scene depicts John baptizing Christ, who stands with his head bowed in the river Jordan. Placed above in the central canopy tracery is a dove with rays.



The central position of this lancet emphasises its significance within the narrative, and the scene of John baptizing Christ is positioned at eye-level as the key event of the whole sequence. In normal baptistery iconography this scene alone would suffice, but in the Truro scheme it is the central event in a series of six narrative panels. These elaborate the significance of the events in the life of John the Baptist, drawing on themes of annunciation, naming, teaching, prophetic conflict with authority and martyrdom, all within the typological context of Old Testament precedents.

(c) Noah, John the Baptist and his martyrdom



The upper panel shows Noah with his left hand holding up a dove and his right hand supporting a model of the ark. The central panel shows John rebuking King Herod, whilst behind him is the richly dressed figure of Herodias. The lower panel depicts the execution of John with an executioner standing behind him raising a sword. Like the similar scene in the northwest window of the retroquire of Stephen's martyrdom, this is a rather stiff and unconvincing design, and is in marked contrast to the vigour and detail of the previous five panels of John's narrative.

This final lancet draws together the role of John the Baptist, isolated and at odds with society and authority, leading to his martyrdom. Within the larger context of the cathedral's windows, this sequence also links with the two lancets at the end of the Quire aisles, where the figures of St John and St Stephen establish the

⁴ Genesis 6, vs. 14-22 and I Peter 3, vs. 20-21.

⁵ I Kings 17, vs. 1-6: Luke 3, vs. 1-17: and Mark 9, vvs.2-13.

themes of teaching and martyrdom both as the summation of the great east window and as the start of the Christian history sequence. The narrative of John the Baptist enlarges on these themes, and at the same time develops the typological scheme of baptism.

The tour now goes up from the vestibule to the baptistery itself, passing beneath the carved roundel of a mounted St Martin of Tours shown dividing his cloak with a sword. The significance of its position here is that this act took place whilst Martin was still a soldier and before he became baptised. This also had a personal significance for Bishop Benson, as it is a memorial marking the death of Martin, his eldest son, in 1878.⁶

THE BAPTISTERY WINDOWS.

Donor, dedicatee and insertion.

The first two baptistery lancets were donated by the Deanery of Penwith in response to the Internal Fittings Appeal, and each lancet cost £40. The third lancet was donated by the Misses Frances Gidley Pedlar and Ann Pedlar, whilst the last was the gift of Mrs Mary Rogers, at a cost of £50. Once the donations were confirmed, the designs were ordered in April 1887.⁷ All four lancets were inserted in time for the consecration of the cathedral in November 1887.⁸

It is obvious that something new for the themes for the baptistery windows was needed, as all the orthodox baptism iconography had already been used in the windows of the vestibule. A typical example of a typological baptistery window is to be found in Mason's later design for the baptistery area in St Mary's aisle. Mason's radical solution to the subject matter for the cathedral baptistery windows is one of the most imaginative in the whole building.

The baptistery windows continue the ideas of the vestibule in that they form a kind of typological juxtaposition where figural types from an earlier age are set against antetype events from a later age. However, it is not the customary Old and New Testament typology that Mason used in this baptistery, but a specifically Cornish set of references. This integration of Cornish Christianity with the general narratives of Church history will reappear more and more frequently in the later sequences of the north transept and nave aisles.

The 1887 Master Scheme identified the life of Henry Martyn as the main subject for the four baptistery windows.⁹ Each lancet contains two episodes from the life of this early 19th century missionary. Born in Truro in 1781, he was the third son of a Gwennap miner. He was educated at Truro Grammar School and St John's College Cambridge before embarking on his missionary career to India, Persia and Armenia. He died in 1812. His local significance was emphasised in a contemporary description of the new cathedral's exterior (when viewed from Cathedral Lane):

*'to the west is seen the circular roof, the tapering pinnacles and open parapets and narrow lancets of the Baptistery. The portion of the building not only gives variety and character to the architectural design, but from the point of view of its being a memorial to Henry Martyn, the devoted missionary, a native of Truro, will always recall and link the Cathedral with the sacred memories of the missionary work of the Church.'*¹⁰

⁶ Inscription (in Latin) to 'Martin White Benson, died 9th February 1878, aged 16 years'.

⁷ CCRO TCM/435 Minutes of the Executive Committee 26th April 1887.

⁸ *The Church in the West*, 5th November 1887

⁹ TC : p.50.

¹⁰ TC : p. 14.

There is much evidence that this was a subject close to the heart of Canon Mason, the first Canon Missioner.¹¹

What makes this subject so appropriate for the baptistery of Cornwall's first cathedral for over nine hundred years is the manner in which the Martyn theme is linked to the Celtic saints who originally established Christianity in Cornwall. One can sense Mason's hope that each baptism would be the admission of a new member of the Christian church who might hopefully be inspired by the earlier examples of mission portrayed in the windows.

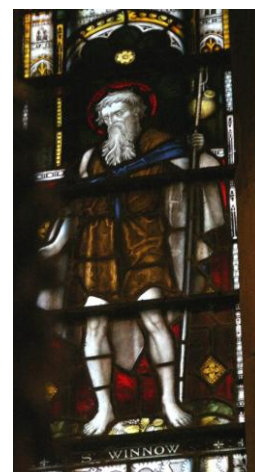
The Cornish Saints in the upper panels

(a) St Pol de Leon, labelled St Paul, is portrayed vested as a Bishop, with his left hand holding a crozier and his right a model of St Paul parish church in Penwith.

(b) St Cubi appears as a fully robed monk holding a copy of the Gospels.

(c) St Constantine is shown clothed as a monarch including crown, royal robes with furred collar. His left hand holds a sceptre while his right supports an orb, and he stands before a seated stag. Whilst it is appreciated that very little for certain is known of the actual lives of any of the Cornish saints,¹² the stag usually is the attribute for St Petroc, who was traditionally supposed to have converted Constantine.¹³

(d) The final Cornish saint is St Winnow, clothed in a short tunic and cloak, with a pastoral staff in his right hand.



One of the most striking aspects of this selection of Cornish saints is the way they emphasise certain functions of their mission. St Winnow looks suspiciously like a version of St John the Baptist, and it can be no coincidence that he would be the first of the Cornish saints to be seen if one approached, as originally intended, via the baptistery vestibule, with its themed windows of St John the Baptist. In addition to the function of preacher, the other Celtic saints represent the church, mission and royalty.

¹¹ NCA DD/716/69/4 Diaries of Canon Mason 1880-1884, 16th February, 1881 'Preached on the occasion of the centenary of Henry Martyn'.

¹² Nicholas Orme *Cornwall and the Cross: Christianity 500-1560* (Chichester, 2007), p.5.

¹³ Catherine Rachel John *The Saints of Cornwall*, (Padstow, 2001), p.67. Henry Martyn was a very popular figure to the Victorians, and only two months before the consecration of Truro Cathedral, Henry Martyn Hall, the official inter-collegiate Christian Union headquarters, was opened in Cambridge.

²⁰⁶ TC : p.50.

The Henry Martyn scenes

As a parallel to the John the Baptist narrative sequence in the vestibule, the panels encompass Martyn's early life, travel and preaching, challenge to the authority of other faiths, and finally death. Two things stand out about these eight panels. The first is that large number of scenes has been allocated to the life of someone who might be viewed as being of only local importance. Incidentally, he also appears as the main figure in the 19th Century section of the Church History sequence in the north nave aisle. The second impressive feature is the care and skill that Clayton and Bell lavished on the wealth of intimate detail shown in each panel.



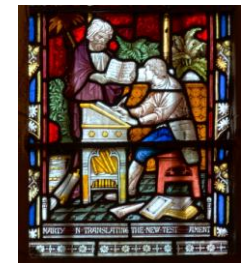
- (a) the upper scene depicts Martyn in a group of six students at Truro Grammar School, a building that is only a few hundred yards from the cathedral. The lower scene depicts Martyn praying by Lamorran Creek¹⁴ (inscription reads 'meditating in Lammoran woods'). The foliage and river richly evoke the Cornish scene, whilst the rising sun symbolically creates his sense of awakening mission in the East.



- (b) Martyn is depicted in the upper panel embarking from Falmouth docks, whilst the lower panel shows his first encounter with heathenism, where two half-naked natives are shown worshipping an idol in a shrine.



- (c) develops the theme of mission with a scene of Martyn preaching at Cawnpore surrounded by a circle of seated natives. The lower scene depicts Martyn seated at a writing desk translating the New Testament, whilst behind stands a dark-skinned man clothed in turban and cloak and holding up a book.



- (d) The narrative concludes in with Martyn disputing with Persian Doctors. The lower scene depicts Martyn's burial at Tokat, where he died of consumption. Standing beyond the grave an Armenian priest reads the burial service.



¹⁴ TC : p.50

TO FINISH WITH

There is something very effective about this whole sequence in its architectural and liturgical context. The architecture of the baptistery is regarded by many as one of Pearson's masterpieces; truly Gothic in its execution, with the wealth of architectural and decorative detail that is such a feature of the other sacramental area, the quire. Yet it is also intensely intimate in its scale. It is separate from the vast spaces of the main cathedral, and its scale is entirely fitting for the baptismal sacrament enacted there between a priest and a family. It should also be noted that there are 8 pillars supporting the font and the shape of the baptistery itself is octagonal. This number is associated in the Bible with the day of circumcision,¹⁵ the sign that a male child was a member of Israel and in Christian Tradition with the Day of Christ's Resurrection and the Last Day, the subject of the great East Window. The number 8 refers then to belonging, resurrection from the dead and the hope of future glory.¹⁶ Elsewhere, all the cathedral's window schemes are on the largest and most ambitious scale, but in progressing through the vestibule and baptistery we encounter early typological figures from the Old Testament and Cornwall's Celtic history. We also have the detailed narrative of two prophets and missionaries, one central to the Gospel story and the other local and (in 1887) reasonably contemporary. For these reasons, the iconography of the baptistery area must rank as some of the most imaginative and successful in the building.

¹⁵ Leviticus chapter 12 verse 3

¹⁶ See Gregory of Nazianzus, Theological Oration 44:5

