

Discovering Stained Glass, Harries and Hicks,
Shire Publications Ltd., ISBN 0 7478 0205 X

Stained Glass in England During the Middle Ages,
Richard Marks
University of Toronto Press, ISBN 0-8020-0592-6

Review by Deward Hastings

Although Tudor times were "poor" by many of our modern standards, in some ways even the poorest Elizabethans were as "rich", or perhaps even richer, than are we today. Where we live in a world often dominated by the unrelenting monotony of concrete and asphalt, medieval Britain was everywhere decorated with works, some great, many small, of public art. Be it funerary sculpture, architectural ornament, decoration on fountains or bridges left even from Roman times, or in and about the literally thousands of churches, monasteries and cathedrals throughout England, public art was everywhere, and nowhere more magnificent than in the then greatest of English art forms, excepting perhaps cathedral architecture itself, the stained glass window.

Although the majority of these great works were destroyed later, enough had fallen to the anti-Catholic Reformationist hammer in early Tudor times that Elizabeth herself felt it necessary to decry, and prohibit, in the Royal Injunction of 1559 just one year after her accession to the throne, the wonton destruction of what she identified as "Monuments of Antiquity". Sadly only a relative handful remain intact today, plus a few cartoons of the originals in Parish records. Most of the stained glass the England of our time dates only from the revival movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The best introduction to Medieval (and other) glasswork in Britain that I have seen anywhere is a little book from Shire publications, little in form, that is, but big on content, titled Discovering Stained Glass. With chapters devoted to technique, subject matter, and historical development, it includes also directions to remaining examples of old glass in both church and museum. This truly wonderful book is modest and inexpensive enough to be accessible to anyone wishing to get a feel for at least a part of the everyday visual world of the average Elizabethan. For those who wish to delve deeper there is Stained Glass in England During the Middle Ages, a big book full of detail on craftsmen, style, sources for glass and pigment, all the stuff of which serious art history is made. As good in its own way as the little book is as an introduction, the big book is, nevertheless, more suited for those who are really nuts about old glass (present writer included) or historic recreation (present writer included), although the illustrations are worth a thumb-through just for their own sake. If you want to know that "the accounts of 1469 for the glazing of the nave of Westminster Abbey include a payment 'for brike and other necessaries for making the anelyng herth' ", or that "on 1 August 1351, 250 'clozyngnaill' costing 18d were purchased for St Stephen's Chapel" this book's for you (and me).

Discovering Stained Glass, Harries and Hicks,
Shire Publications Ltd., ISBN 0 7478 0205 X