

MIKE DEEMING WRITES

To celebrate one hundred editions of Jot-and-Tittle, I thought I'd look at windows from one hundred years ago. In the Cathedral, the WW1 memorial windows date from 1922 as does the Jesse window, relocated in the same year from the great west window[1].



On this occasion, though, I thought I'd go a bit off-piste and write about one of the most extraordinary windows in the diocese, in St Mary's Church, Sturminster Newton ('Stur'), also installed in 1922. The window is by Harry Clarke (1889-1931), Ireland's outstanding stained glass artist, described as the 'Strangest Genius' in a recent biography[2]. Born in 1889, he worked as a book illustrator and trained as a glass designer at his father's Dublin workshop. A strict Catholic, very few of his windows are in Protestant churches – indeed most of his work is in Ireland and the USA.

1922 was also the year of the establishment of the Irish Free State. Clarke's workshop had been hit by gunfire during the Irish War of Independence, but nobody was injured and the workshop continued to thrive. Clarke could have moved to An Túr Gloine ('the Tower of Glass'), a co-operative of Dublin Arts-and-Crafts glaziers, but chose to stay in the workshop which he had taken over on his father's death in 1921. His style was influenced by many contemporary movements, including Art Deco and the French Symbolist movements, but his use of colour is based on his experience of Chartres Cathedral. Even today many find his work utterly bizarre.

Sir Drummond Spencer-Smith (1876-1955), a Royal Artillery officer, became ADC to the Governor General of New Zealand, where he met Roma Hope of Timaru, a beautiful red-head;



they married and returned to England to live in Stur. She became a nurse during WW1, but sadly died in November 1917, an early victim of the 'Spanish' flu epidemic, leaving her husband a widower and their eleven-month-old son motherless.

The three-lancet window in the Stur church is her memorial.

It focuses on three ladies – St Elizabeth of Hungary (the patron saint of nursing), the Virgin Mary, and St Barbara (patron saint of the Artillery). St Elizabeth (left) took bread to the hungry, against her husband's wishes; one day he stopped her going to feed the needy – but miraculously the small loaves she was carrying in her cloak turned to roses. The pink roses are shown in the window.



St Barbara (right) converted to Christianity against the will of her father; he imprisoned her in a tower, (shown in the window near her right shoulder), where she studied the Bible all day long. Eventually she was reported to the authorities, who condemned her to torture and death which her father agreed to carry out! Returning home, he was struck by lightning, which is why she was chosen as the patron saint of artillerymen, the thunder and lightning reflecting the sound and the flash of the discharge of their guns. One story describes how on one occasion when she was being scourged, angels turned her scourges to feathers and that, too, is shown in this window; note also the artillery gun above the angel's head!

The images in the windows reference the Spencer-Smith family. Thus, St Elizabeth's red hair (very unusual in windows) reflect Roma's hair; St Barbara is a portrait of Clarke's own wife; and the Christ-child is a portrait of Roma's young son.

Clarke was only 41 years old when he died in 1931, but he leaves a unique legacy in design, colour and materials. We are very fortunate to have one of his extraordinary windows in our diocese.

[1] Discussed in peek numbers 21 and 38 in J&T 75 and 98 respectively

[2] 'Strangest Genius – the stained glass of Harry Clarke', by Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen, The History Press Ireland 2010