

A PEEK THROUGH THE WINDOW - NO. 23

MIKE DEEMING WRITES:

Here are six nativity scenes taken from windows in the Cathedral. Do you recognise where they are and can you spot the odd one out?



Top left – from the Jesse Tree window, in the south nave aisle; this is an old photo taken when the window was much less discoloured than it is today (C13)

Top centre – Mary and child from the WWII memorial window in the north nave aisle (1949)

Top right – nativity scene from the window in the Morning Chapel, in memory of Isabel Kerr Hamilton (1886)

Lower left – the odd one out of course – this shows Ruth with the baby Obed (born in Bethlehem and later becoming the father of Jesse and grandfather of King David) with her husband Boaz and first mother-in-law, Naomi (1932)

Lower centre – Mary and Child from the 'Victory' window in the St Michael Chapel in the south transept (1920)

Lower right – from the narrative windows on the life of Christ in the Trinity Chapel (1872)

There are a few give-aways in the Ruth and Obed window, not least the presence of the mother-in-law and the absence of halos. But perhaps more tellingly is the colour. All the other images feature the 'Marian' blue colour. Blue was first used for colouring images of Mary's robes as far back as the fifth century – previously 'red' was the typical colour. Blue was a colour of distinction and 'Marian' blue became the standard paint colour in the Middle Ages because the paint was based on lapis lazuli. Lapis lazuli came from Afghanistan and was even more expensive than gold, so its use was a symbolic demonstration of the veneration of wealthy donors.

Early medieval coloured glass was made in kilns dotted round the forests of France, where the local combination of beech ash and sand allowed the glass blowers to make specific colours. Their recipes for these 'pot-metal' colours were prized secrets, with each glass maker typically producing just one colour. The colour was derived from the natural iron and manganese oxides in the ash. Pedlars would collect samples and sheets of glass to sell to end-users, mainly the church. Red glass made this way was extremely dark, so was usually 'flashed' - a thin layer of red glass was essentially laminated to clear glass for strength. Coloured glass wasn't made in England and imported glass was expensive, so most glazed windows here would have had clear or greyish (grisaille) glass. Later, colours were achieved by adding metallic oxides, including cobalt for blue. Silver staining dates from the early C14 and the use of enamel paints from c1530. Indeed, from the mid-C17 all colouring was done by enamel paints, the secrets of pot-metal colours having been lost. Not until the 1850s when 'antique' glass became available, could the pot-metal colours be recreated by chemical synthesis. There are examples of most of these different colours and techniques in the windows depicted above, including medieval red flashed glass in the Jesse window image. For enamel painted glass, you'll need to look at the Moses window above the Quire, installed in 1781.

I can't write about Christmas without mentioning the three kings – they are depicted in this 'Adoration of the Magi' roundel from the lancet next to the Jesse window in the South nave aisle. It is amongst the earliest glass in the Cathedral. Indeed, Roy Spring, the former Clerk of Works, thought that it may well have pre-dated the Cathedral, perhaps coming from Old Sarum. He would have formed this view looking in detail at the age of the glass and the way the colour in each piece has aged. One day technology will be able to identify precisely where in France the glass came from and when it was made, but we're not quite there yet.