

Sir Edward Poynter's Stained Glass

AT THE MAISON DIEU ALAN BROOKS

DOVER IS FORTUNATE TO POSSESS a magnificent series of stained glass windows designed by one of the most eminent of the classical painters of the Victorian period, Sir Edward Poynter. These windows were designed when he was only twenty-one, and are by far his best work in stained glass. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the windows rank among the best in the country for glass of that period.

In his career, Sir Edward Poynter reached the pinnacle of artistic achievement. He became Director of the National Gallery in 1894, and then President of the Royal Academy in 1896 a post which he held until 1918, the year before he died. He was perhaps the most distinguished of several painters who had an early involvement in stained glass. A few, such as his brother-in-law, Burne Jones, continued their involvement in stained glass design as a major part of their artistic career all their lives.

Poynter first received commissions for stained glass designs when he was studying in Paris in 1857. He produced work for the important firm of Powells of Whitefriars between that date and 1863, at which point he ceased designing for glass because he was beginning to achieve success as a painter. His work can be seen notably in churches at St. Ives, Cornwall and Hitchen, Herts.

The Maison Dieu in Dover dates originally from 1253 and has had a varied and fascinating history. When it was purchased by the Corporation of Dover in 1834 it needed much restoration. A major phase was commenced in 1859, when sufficient funds had built up. Ambrose Poynter was appointed as architect, but was soon after forced to

retire through failing eyesight. He handed the job over to William Burges, now known as one of the most exceptional of Victorian architects. Burges was responsible for obtaining stained glass work for the young Edward Poynter, Ambrose's son, while in Paris, and it was he who undoubtedly put forward Edward in 1860 for the job of producing a design for a window in the Maison Dieu in memory of a Mr Bass, a relative of a former Town Clerk. The subject was 'The Embarkation of Henry VIII at Dover for the Field of Cloth of Gold, 1520'. This design was so admired that the Restoration of the Hall Committee quickly resolved to obtain five more designs from Poynter of historical events concerning Dover. The matter went to the full Council who, after debating whether it was reasonable to pay Poynter the sum of £20 on production of the designs (about £650 in today's terms), approved it.

In the event, the Council got a bargain. The composition, figure design and historical detail in all the windows, is of the highest quality. Poynter later became known for a meticulous attention to detail in his paintings. In these window designs he was assisted greatly by his father Ambrose, who settled in Dover and was active in local archaeological work, and the

Town Coroner, George Thompson, who himself is commemorated in the second window of the series, having been killed by the accidental explosion of a gun at Archcliffe Fort. This window was installed in 1861 and its subject is 'The Landing of Charles II at Dover on his Restoration in 1660'.

The making of the other four windows followed as commemorative funds became available. 'The Landing of the Emperor Sigismund Opposed in 1416' dates from 1864, 'The Relief of Dover Castle by John de Pencester in 1216' in 1865, 'Henry III granting the Charter of the Maison Dieu to Hubert de Burgh, 1277' in 1872, and 'The Embarkation of Edward III at Dover, 1359' in 1873.

Having designed the original water-colour sketches for the windows, Poynter was subsequently actively involved in the cartooning of the full-scale designs in the studios of the stained glass makers in the case of the first two windows, which he signed along with the makers, and also the 1871 window where the *Dover Express* felt impressed enough to report the fact. His involvement is likely in fact with all except the last, the 1873 window, whose

figure work is noticeably not as strong as the others.

The series achieves a remarkable unity considering that it was made over a period of thirteen years by two different stained glass firms. The first two windows were produced by the prolific William Wailes of Newcastle, who had also made the west window of the hall in 1858 and the following four windows by the London firm of Heaton, Butler and Bayne, who picked up a reputation for fine glass in the early 1860s and who had designed a notable window in 1864 for the nearby new St. James's church (demolished as redundant after WW2). It was they who made the later series in the adjacent Connaught Hall and Council Chamber.

With the revival of interest in Victorian stained glass, Poynter's windows today should be seen once again as a gem of artistic achievement of which Dover can be proud.

(This essay is a much reduced version of that which won the Pevsner Memorial Prize for 1996 awarded by the Victorian Society and which is published in their Annual for this year.)

POSTSCRIPT

Heard on the B.B.C. programme "Sunday" on Radio 4 on the morning of 2nd November 1997:

(paraphrased) William Wailes of Newcastle, the old established firm of stained glass makers, suffering from an almost total lack of orders, will close down at the end of November.

The firm said *(still paraphrasing)* they had many potential orders that were to be, or might be, financed through the Millenium Fund, but the wheels of the Fund turned so slowly that they could not survive the waiting period. .

and POSTSCRIPT II

On 16th November during the same serial programme the B.B.C. said *(para-phrasing)*

The possibility of helping the firm out of its difficulties is being examined and there appears to be a good chance that there will be a successful outcome. B.A.

MICHAEL JOHN SARTIN. We are sad to have to record the death of Mike Sartin who recently took on the post of Archivist to the Society. Though he had not spent all his life in Dover he was well respected and well loved and all who knew him, especially in H.M.Customs, will miss him greatly. At his cremation the chapel was full to overflowing.