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## A window on the soul of rural Yorkshire

**Phil Thomas, of the Ellerton Church Preservation Trust, describes how its new window reflects the history and landscape of that part of Yorkshire.**

In May 2002 the results were announced of a competition to design a new east window for Ellerton Priory in Yorkshire. Ellerton's lovely church building, standing on the site of a rare Gilbertine monastery just above the ings of the Lower Derwent Valley, was closed in 1978 and was completely derelict by 1992. Since then it has been lovingly rescued, with the help of money from the Heritage Lottery Fund and hundreds of hours of local volunteer labour.

The brief for the window competition, which would commemorate the 800th anniversary of the foundation of the church, called for a design which responded to the landscape and ecology of the Derwent ings, celebrated the harmony of husbandry and nature dominated by the seasonal rise and fall of the river, and acknowledged the history and associations of this ancient religious site.

A total of 56 young stained-glass artists from England, Wales and Scotland submitted designs and trial panels for the Worshipful Company of Glaziers' annual Stevens Competition – the most prestigious British event of its kind. Eight finalists received awards.

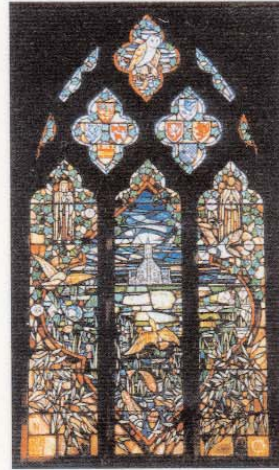
The successful artist, Helen Whittaker of Barley Studios, has imagined the east window to be a fragment of the ruined, medieval priory, with ivy and bindweed creeping over the stonework from each side. At the top of the right main light is a weathered statue of a Gilbertine monk, which may even be St Gilbert himself, who died in 1189, aged 106. At the top of the left main

light is Robert Aske of Aughton, leader of the 16th-century Pilgrimage of Grace.

In the two large traceries above, the arms of families associated with Ellerton Priory in the 14th century shine through the ivy. Not only do these replicate the 14th-century originals, now lost or removed from Ellerton, but they are also made using precisely the same, 14th-century glazing techniques. In the topmost light sits a barn owl, the guardian spirit whose ancestors have haunted this place for centuries. In his talons he clutches a shrew, not only to remind us that 'in the midst of life is death', but also to symbolise the pious Gilbertine canons of Ellerton and Robert Aske, their defender, who all fell prey to their king, Henry VIII.

But this is not only a window on the past, but also on the present and the future. Across the three main lights, boldly outlined in red, is laid a great quatrefoil – a shape found in the tracery of every window in the nave and chancel, and thus a unifying feature. Through it we see a vision of the restored church, viewed from the river across the precious, quietly magical landscape of the ings.

The seasonal cycle of flooding, hay meadow and grazing are all represented. In the foreground, the riverside willows part to reveal a salmon and a burbot – a rare, freshwater relative of the cod, believed to dwell in the Yorkshire Derwent. Beyond the riverbank, between the last gleams of water in the drying meadows, great burnet and sweet vernal grass



Helen Whittaker's lyrical creation

are growing, and sheep graze before the churchyard wall. Wheeling above the face of the waters are birds characteristic of flood-meadows – lapwing, curlew, snipe and migrating swans. The sharp-eyed can also find a bumble-bee, a banded


demoiselle dragonfly, a meadow brown and a peacock butterfly.

A leaf of hemp (or cannabis) commemorates 16th-century hemp-retting in Abbey Garth – probably to make ropes for Queen Elizabeth's navy. The badge of the Army Foundation College in Harrogate records the trust's debt to 80 young soldiers, without whose efforts there would be no new stone floors in the nave.

At the heart of the window the resurrected church rises above the levels of Ellerton ings and Abbey Garth, the renewed cross on its spire visible against a troubled, but ultimately optimistic, sunrise.

This east window, installed last September, not only celebrates the rich creativity and beauty of nature, art and the human spirit, but also a 1,000-year tradition of fine stained glass in York.

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