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What links the RAF with the mediaeval stained glass of St Mary's, Fairford in Gloucestershire? The obvious answer would be the nearby airfield, but if you add in a generous wartime Squadron Leader and a cluster of workshops outside York, it begins to resemble a Round Britain Quiz mind-teaser. The solution lies at 128 Piccadilly, where the RAF, courtesy of the first Lord Cowdray, has its magnificent Club. A fund raising appeal to buy more works of art for the Club, with the modest target of £50,000, was astounded to receive a cheque for the full amount from a single member, Ivan Heath. To recognise such extraordinary generosity the Club decided to use his donation to commission a stained glass window which they hoped would transform a dingy and depressing stairwell at the back of the building into a glorious commemoration of the people who have served in the RAF during its 91 year history.

The project was put out to tender and when the proposals came in, the committee had no doubt which to choose. Whereas other designers seemed to be thinking very much in terms of traditional, hierarchic compositions, Helen Whittaker of the Barley Studio in Yorkshire had seized on the concept of movement and exploited the diagonal possibilities of the site. The eye zig zags across and upwards, from a fighter pilot scrambling to his plane, to a Harrier whose pilot is clambering up the cockpit ladder, then to a Lancaster climbing into the night sky over the North Sea.

Above, the arch of the window becomes a full circle, representing a brooding moon as well as imitating the sweep of a radar, with moments in RAF history depicted in each panel. Crucially, the design, 20ft high and 7ft wide, can be read as easily by someone descending the stairs as ascending.

The contract was awarded and 18 months later the separate pieces of the window were brought down to London and fitted. It all sounds so simple. Except that the decision had been taken to keep the old window, with its irregular sized panes and the even more irregular existing glass, a brave but inspired idea which greatly adds to the subtlety of the final result but which demanded a high degree of exactitude in measuring, making and fitting. Barley Studio is the brainchild of Keith Barley, a conservator who for the past 25 years has, amongst other projects, been engaged on the complex and challenging task of restoring the windows of St Mary's, Fairford, the most complete set of mediaeval stained glass in Britain. But the Studio also undertakes new commissions, such as the 'Four Seasons' windows in Stowmarket parish church, and its designer, Helen Whittaker, cut her teeth in the very contemporary world of 3D design, with a degree from Sunderland in glass and ceramics, before specialising in the field of stained glass. But she readily admits that the world of aviation was a completely new one to her and that the internet cannot always be trusted to provide accurate information and

images: the tail of the Nimrod had to be corrected by the eagle-eyed advisers.

Members of the Club are notorious sticklers for detail, but no one has been able to find fault with the ultimate depiction of any of the aircraft or scenes. They appreciate clever technique and good craftsmanship, both of which are fundamental to the aesthetic impact of the design. The darker, lower parts of the window make use of sign writers' and gilders' methods, with different metals – gold, bronze and silver leaf – applied behind the painted and tinted glass to boost luminosity. The upper levels increasingly use transparent glass to make full use of the natural light. Keith Barley himself, with his wide experience of glass of all types and periods, enjoyed incorporating pieces from his collections. For the vertical beams of the searchlights, for instance, he realised that some commercial glass made by Pilkington in the 1960s, *Reed Drop*, gave the perfect effect he was seeking. Perhaps it's this attitude of finding a way round difficulties that made the relationship such a successful one. Certainly Squadron Leader Heath thinks it money well spent: when he saw the final result he said he had given away sums far in excess of this £50,000 but nothing had given him as much pleasure.

If you are unable to visit the Club (it is not open to the public), an illustrated brochure is available. Contact the Assistant Club Secretary Kathryn Cooper, on 020 7399 1036 or kcooper@rafclub.org.uk.