

The Blake Memorial Window in St. Mary's Church, Felpham

BY MARK CROSBY

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Designed by Meg Lawrence; photography by David Lawrence; © Lawrence & Co.

¹ IN 2011 a stained-glass window commemorating Blake's three-year residence on the Sussex coast was consecrated in the parish church of St. Mary's, Felpham. A Norman building dating to c. 1100, St. Mary's is a short walk from the thatched cottage that Blake and Catherine occupied between 1800 and 1803. The Blake memorial window was commissioned by St. Mary's parish council in 2007 and was funded by the generous contributions of Felpham parishioners and Blake enthusiasts and by donations raised through local charitable events celebrating the 250th anniversary of Blake's birth. The window was designed by the artist Meg Lawrence, whose work also includes painting with an egg-based tempera medium on wood panels, a medium similar to the one that Blake used, with animal glue and gum Arabic as the binding agents instead of egg, for some of his 1799 illustrations of the Bible.¹

² An experienced stained-glass artist and conservator, Lawrence has designed many windows for parish churches throughout England and Ireland. They are made using entirely traditional materials and techniques of painting and manufacture. Of crucial importance is the use of mouth-blown glass of the highest possible quality, made at a small factory in Bavaria. Much of the glass that she works with is blown to her own specification, giving exactly the colors and graduated tones required. She also employs flashed glass, which adds a very thin layer of colored glass over a thicker layer, thereby giving the opportunity to manipulate the colors further by the use of acid etching. Colored glass,

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1. For more information on Lawrence's painting techniques, see <<http://www.radnorshire.com/introduction.html>>. For Blake's tempera, see *William Blake: The Painter at Work*, ed. Joyce H. Townsend (London: Tate Publishing, 2003) 113-14.



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cut for the window, is painted and fired in the kiln up to three times to build up layers of drawing, shading, pattern, and texture. The windows are assembled using lead comes. One of her painting techniques is the use of linear brush-strokes, a method of draftsmanship that Blake famously champions in his *Descriptive Catalogue*: “The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art” (E 550).

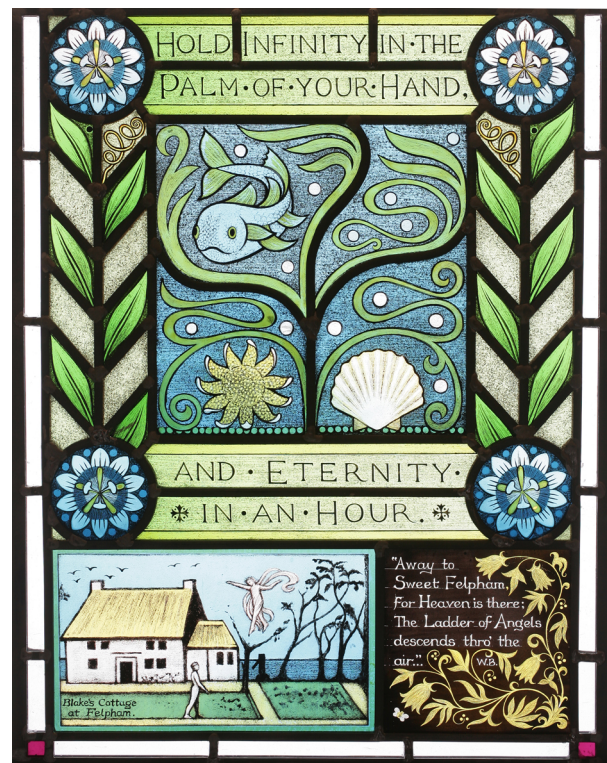
- 3 Lawrence’s overall design combines figurative Christian iconography with recognizable Blakean motifs and centers on two male figures with halo-like auras and feathered wings. These are angels of creation rising from the sea to the heavens (illus. 1 and 2, above). Above and below the angels is a scroll containing text from verses 1 and 24 of Psalm 104. Each angel holds a sphere, a familiar device in Blake’s

visual language, within which are various smaller designs. The sphere held by the angel decorating the right panel contains images of the sea and the beasts of the forest, including a Blakean tiger. The sphere held by the angel on the left panel contains images of birds, fish, the sea and sand or earth, and a male and female wearing long, flowing robes tied at the waist with golden bands. These figures are postlapsarian Adam and Eve, facing each other in poses that compositionally recall Blake’s watercolor *The Judgment of Adam and Eve*: “So Judged He Man” (c. 1807-08; Butlin 529.10 and 536.10) from the two series of designs illustrating Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Either side of Adam and Eve are two circles that represent the sun (to the left of Adam) and the moon (to the right of Eve). Within the circle to the right of Eve is a crescent shape that recalls Blake’s depiction of a crescent moon as a darkened circle with an illuminated crescent in *Satan Watching the Endearments of Adam and*

Eve (c. 1807-08; Butlin 529.5 and 536.4) and the crescent moon in the sixth woodcut from the illustrations to Robert Thornton's *The Pastorals of Virgil* (1821).

- 4 Beneath the angels are self-contained pictures, known as predellas (illus. 3 and 4, below). The upper predellas are surrounded by decorative borders incorporating the first four lines of *Auguries of Innocence* and passionflowers, and contain designs representing the minute particulars of life: a pasqueflower, various insects, and assorted marine life. The lower predellas form the base of the window and depict the sixth woodcut from Blake's illustrations to Thornton's *Pastorals* and "Blake's Cottage at Felpham" from plate 36 of *Milton*.
- 5 Either side of the lower predellas are decorative panels containing twisting vines and blooming flowers that evoke the interlinear designs of Blake's illuminated books. The panel next to the image of Blake's cottage includes the following verse from Catherine Blake's letter to Ann Flaxman of 14 September 1800: "Away to Sweet Felpham for Heaven is there / The Ladder of Angels descends thro the air" (E 709). The panel buttressing the image of Blake's Virgil woodcut bears the legend: "The Visionary, Poet and Painter, William Blake (1757-1827) lived in the village of Felpham from 1800 to 1803."

- 6 It is not known if the Blakes attended St. Mary's during their residence on the south coast, although Blake did include the church tower in his unfinished watercolor *Landscape near Felpham* (c. 1800; Butlin 368). The window is located in the south chancel wall, overlooking the area where couples exchange marriage vows. It was installed in late 2010 and dedicated by the dean of Chichester in May 2011.



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