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FRAGMENTS OF AN INDULGENCE INSCRIPTION IN A WINDOW AT ALL SAINTS, NORTH STREET, YORK

Robert Swanson, FSA*

This paper reports the identification of some fragments of an inscription now preserved in a window at All Saints, North Street, York, as the remnants of a statement of indulgences to reward prayers before a painted image in a window. As far as is known, this is the only surviving glass to demonstrate the proclamation of indulgences in medieval English church windows, although antiquarian evidence of at least one other is recorded.

The painted glass at All Saints, North Street, York, is justifiably famous for its quality and for the messages of its images.¹ While it is the imagery in the glass that usually receives most attention, here the ‘Prick of Conscience’ window shows the potential for incorporating texts with images for purposes beyond donor commemoration.

Discussions of the All Saints glass rarely draw attention to the fact that there are, among the many fragments brought together in the incomplete windows, some that consist simply of texts. Some of those fragments are in fact highly significant, deriving from an inscription that recounts the availability of an indulgence, thus providing concrete evidence of the offering of indulgences in stained glass as a phenomenon otherwise seemingly only rarely attested in the surviving evidence of pre-Reformation English religious practice.²

These fragments (fig 1) are currently located in a window in the south aisle, below an image usually identified as representing a Mass of St Gregory.³ That identification may be significant, but for the moment merely serves to give the current location. The fragments provide a few complete words and series of letters from incomplete words. Despite the fragmentation, the common size and format of the words and letters tend to confirm that they all derive from the same inscription. As such, they were parts of a complete caption which, as shown by one of the pieces, originally extended over at least three lines. It is quite possible that the original inscription was even larger.

Although none of the existing scraps actually mentions an ‘indulgence’ as such, there are plenty of clues. Chief among them is the single word [*co*]nfessis, which indicates the qualification required for those who were to receive the spiritual benefits: they should be ‘contrite and confessed’. One fragment with *annorum* hints at the extent of the pardon, but is no guide to its quantity. Two fragments contain the word *quinquies*, which suggests that it was an indulgence offered in return for recitation of five Ave Marias (the eye of faith detects an ‘a’ of ‘ave’ following one of the occurrences), with five

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Fig 1. Fragments of an indulgence inscription in glass, All Saints, North Street, York. Photograph: David King

Paternosters. Individually the fragments are incoherent; combined they fit into a reasonably common (but not rigidly standardized) pattern.

The integration of the fragments into such a statement is perhaps most convincingly demonstrated by showing how the surviving letters and words fit into the text of an indulgence, but without at all pretending that the window actually replicated this precise text. British Library, Additional 33381, fol 90r recites the background to the pardon offered for devotions to the image of Christ as Man of Sorrows.⁴ This includes most (but not all) of the wording that appears in the glass fragments, as follows (elements from the fragments are indicated by bold type):

*Sanctus Gregorius quando vidit eum in tali figura concessit omnibus illis qui **ante istam** figuram ponunt genua sua in **terra** dicendo cum devocione **quinq[ui]es**⁵ Pater noster et **quinq[ui]es** Ave Maria, omnes indulgencias que sunt in omnibus ecclesiis de Roma, que sunt **xiiii** milia annorum. Et omnes istas indulgencias concessit dicta figura dicto sancto Gregorio. Et ultra hoc duodecim **alii summi** pontifices quilibet eorum concessit vi annos de indulgencia. Et adhuc **xxx** alii pontifices quilibet eorum concessit ducentos dies indulgencie. Similiter ultra hoc alii **lxvi** episcopi, quilibet eorum concessit **lx** dies indulgencie. Summa omnium indulgenciarum **xxvi** milia **annorum** et **xxx** dies de vera indulgencie.*

The integration is clearly scrappy and minimal. The wording on the glass self-evidently did not match this manuscript text: in the three-line fragment, *alii summi*, *ante istam*, and *quinq[ui]es* appear on the successive lines, so in a different order from their placing in the inscription in the British Library volume, and the window text was probably much more succinct than the manuscript text.⁶ However, there would be no need for the words to appear in precisely corresponding order: indulgence statements are highly variable, even when generically similar. Cumulatively, though, the overlap in the wording is significant, especially the coincidence of words in those fragments where bits from two or three lines are given. Nevertheless, a few of the fragments have no immediate equivalent in the manuscript text. The meaning of the few letters on one such piece cannot be recovered. Of the other two, one is fairly obviously [*co*]n**fessis**; the wording on the other might be reconstructed as [*omnib*]us ver[e]; they might be combined as part of a reference to ‘all who are truly contrite and confessed’, a regular statement of key conditions required for individuals to qualify for an indulgence. In any event, there is no reason to deny these additional fragments a place in the inscription, or to challenge their association with an indulgence.

The use of an indulgence text associated with the image of Christ as Man of Sorrows to provide the control for the glass fragments does not automatically tie those fragments

to such an image. Nevertheless, it seems extremely likely that it was linked either to a Man of Sorrows, or to an image of the Mass of St Gregory, for which similar texts can be found.⁷ It is, indeed, tempting to tie the inscription to a depiction within the same window at All Saints, taken to be a Mass of St Gregory. However, the association is not automatic: in the complex history of the All Saints windows, the glass has often moved around. Although all the glass currently in this one window may date from *c* 1440, the inscription pieces are probably to be counted among the ‘many fragments from other windows [which were] incorporated to fill lower parts’ in 1966.⁸ The ‘Mass of St Gregory’ was elsewhere at its earliest record – itself dating from the 1730s. The existing picture is very much a composite of fragments, reconstructed to approximate to a Mass of St Gregory, but with iconographic idiosyncrasies that, presumably, reflect a desire to make something reasonably coherent of a collection of disconnected pieces.⁹ While this may reflect the fact that ‘between 1730 and 1846 there was a cataclysm which reduced ... [the original window] to incoherent fragments’,¹⁰ it seems quite possible that the glass was already fragmented by 1730. Had it (and any accompanying inscription) been more substantial, it might reasonably be expected to be more fully recorded.

Whatever the original image with which this inscription was associated, its implications for the nature and devotional use of pre-Reformation glass in English churches are considerable. It has been suggested that devotional use of glass images was limited, based on the paucity of bequests that can be definitely associated with lights before such depictions,¹¹ although, as late as 1633, a window in St Edmund’s church, Salisbury, Wiltshire, was a stimulus for forms of devotion that others considered idolatrous.¹² The use of windows as devotional foci for the stimulation of prayers and the acquisition of indulgences, with inscriptions, rather changes their function, and increases the importance of the parish church as a powerhouse of prayer. That some of the relevant images may have existed without accompanying texts does not preclude the possibility that an indulgence could be acquired by the recitation of the appropriate prayers before them.

Further implications follow, in the context of the iconoclasm of the Reformation period and later. Given the hostility to ‘abused’ images in the Royal Injunctions of 1538,¹³ windows with indulgence texts positively inviting veneration would seem likely targets for any campaign to remove such stimuli. As these texts probably also specifically referred to the indulgences as papal, that would be an additional incentive for their removal. However, it cannot be assumed that any destruction would be immediate: at Mildenhall parish church, the inscription announcing the papal pardon (probably on a wall rather than in a window) was erased only in 1539,¹⁴ while a pardon inscription in a window at Fishlake, South Yorkshire, recording the rewards for the saying of the Hail Mary (whether an image existed or not), survived into the seventeenth century, and was recorded by Dodsworth.¹⁵ Equally, it is possible that inscriptions could have been removed without destroying the images that were meant to stimulate devotion or (as in the case of other images) they might have been removed in a way that would count as putting them into storage, rather than destruction.¹⁶

Any consideration of the Reformation and post-Reformation fate of the indulgence inscription at All Saints, North Street can, however, be no more than speculation. What matters is that it has now been recognized for what it is, and as such adds a few more shards to the still-incomplete reconstruction of religious life and practice in late medieval England.

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I noticed the fragments and appreciated their significance following a liturgical performance in All Saints church during the conference on ‘Visual Representations of Medieval Spirituality’ held at York in July 2007. I am grateful to Eamon Duffy, Nigel Morgan and David King – who were also present – for immediate discussion and agreement with my interpretation. David King and Brenda Bolton kindly took and supplied photographs. I also wish to thank the *Journal’s* anonymous reviewer, who pointed me towards additional publications for the bibliography.

NOTES

1. The main discussion of the glass is in Gee 1969; see also RCHME 1972, 7–9 and pls 98–113.
2. Another indulgence inscription is recorded as once having existed in a window at Fishlake, in South Yorkshire: Sprakes 2003, 42 and n 6. This offered 60 days of pardon for recitation of the Hail Mary, and was probably associated with a Marian image. (The translation of the verse (*ibid*, n 6) is incorrect: the reference in the Latin to ‘double thirty days of pardon’ may link it with a tradition that supposedly combined two 30-day pardons from popes Urban IV and John XXII: Swanson 2007, 270.)
3. RCHME 1972, 9.
4. Derived from the illustration of the text in Kamerick 2002, 171.
5. The manuscript text actually reads *quinque* for both the number of Paters and the number of Aves. The substitution here seems legitimate for the purposes of the demonstration.
6. The ‘t’ that is visible before *alii summi* might well be the end of *et*, as part of a briefer statement of the papal grants.
7. For indulgences associated with these two images, see Swanson 2006, 230–3; 2007, 258–63.
8. RCHME 1972, 9.
9. Particularly distinctive is the figure of Christ, which, unlike a ‘normal’ Mass of St Gregory, is not a Man of Sorrows, often depicted issuing from the tomb at the Resurrection and displaying his wounds (Bynum 2006, 220), but looks more like a Christ emanating from clouds: Thomas Gent’s description of 1730, ‘an Appearance to a Bishop from Heaven’ (Gee 1969, 195), seems highly suitable. Equally, the celebrant saint is actually holding a host, whereas a ‘normal’ Mass of St Gregory has the celebrant more in an act of adoration – to the point where it has been argued that in some instances it does not actually depict a mass at all: Bynum 2006, 209, 215. (The host does appear in other illustrations: see *ibid*, 225.)
10. Gee 1969, 153.
11. Marks 2004, 19.
12. Marks 1993, 61.
13. Gee and Hardy 1921, 277–8.
14. Swanson 2007, 469.
15. Hunter gives a variant reading, but acknowledges Dodsworth as his source, and it is clear that the glass no longer survived when he was writing: Hunter 1828–31, I, 193. The two versions of the text are compared in Sprakes 2003, 42 n 6.
16. Marks 2004, 263–4. For iconoclasm affecting stained glass in 16th-century England see Marks 1993, 229–32.

ABBREVIATION AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbreviation

RCHME Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

Manuscript source

British Library, Additional 33381 (collection of religious tracts, offices, prayers etc)

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