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GLASS

light fantastic

HISTORIC FARM BUILDINGS
KEEPING MAINTENANCE IN MIND

A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY
TIN CHURCHES AND CHAPELS

JEANETTE WINTERSON'S PROJECT
FRENCH DRAINS, BRITISH RAIN

Revealed: the ancient glass

In 1880, the SPAB launched one of its first campaigns involving a private home. At stake was a superb manor in Berkshire, a precious relic from the 1400s. Philip Venning looks back to the fight for a national gem, while, overleaf, Ann Darracott reveals the glory of its stained glass, seen here for the first time in detail

Ockwells' rare 15th-century stained glass panels – now its greatest treasure – were absent when Philip Webb and a SPAB sub-committee reported on the condition of the house in November 1880. The glass had been in store for safekeeping for many years. The issue at the time was the very future of this much neglected medieval, timber-framed masterpiece.

The SPAB group had been forewarned by the owner, WH Grenfell (later Lord Desborough), that other architects had already predicted that it would cost a lot to restore properly. No surprise there. The SPAB group took a more relaxed view. In spite of the fact that the house had been used by farm tenants for years, they concluded that the natural strength of the building's materials had resisted decay to a surprising extent. Only "a very moderate amount of absolute repair is needed to put the building in a condition to withstand decay for many years to come".

Seven years later the alarm was raised: the house was to be pulled down to build labourers' dwellings on the site, it was rumoured. William Morris wrote a characteristically powerful letter to the press on behalf of the SPAB. The house was comparable to buildings like Hever or Leeds Castle, he said, erected when the artisan was really "free": free to carry out with his hand what his brain suggested to him. And in one of the earliest calls for a "listing" system, Morris argued for a national right of pre-emption when one of the country's precious relics was threatened by a private person. "In spite of Lord Wemyss's terror at Socialistic legislation, one of the rights of private property is still held sacred among us is the right to destroy a portion of what is above all things national property – the history of the nation in the past."

WH Grenfell's reply was simple. He had no intention of demolishing the house. The ancient glass – 18 shields of armorial panels of about 1460 – had been removed by his grandfather because of



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serious settlement in the building. It was safely in store at Taplow Court and if anyone would restore Ockwells he would be happy to hand over the glass to be put back. Morris replied. He was relieved the house was not to be knocked down, but there was a danger of thorough "restoration" that would destroy the art and history of it almost as much as demolition.

His plea fell on deaf ears. In 1885 a new tenant,



Tom Columbus Smith, undertook some repairs and alterations, and, two years later, the house was sold for £2,500 in 1889 to Sir Stephen Leech. He employed the architect Fairfax Wade to undertake precisely the sort of heavy-handed "restoration" that Morris feared. This included building a new wing on the west front.

The SPAB realised it was in uncharted waters when trying to dissuade a private owner from going down this route. Private owners had an absolute legal right to do whatever they liked with their property, however ancient. In a letter of December 1889, Thackeray Turner, the SPAB Secretary, wrote that he was "fully alive to the rights of private property and should not feel

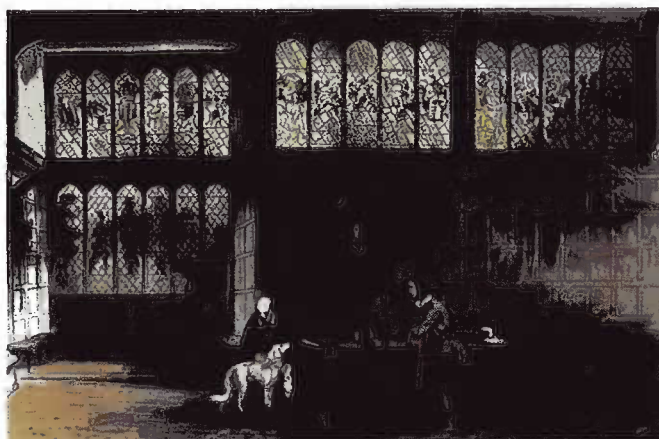
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that stirred William Morris



Facing page (top), heraldic antelope, supporter of the coat of Henry VI.
Facing page (lower), the Norys badge, three golden distaffs.

Above (this page), the oriel window in the Great Hall. Above (facing page), the right of the Great Hall, showing two sets of five lights: Set 1 (from left) with the achievements of John Norys Esquire and his second wife, Eleanor Clitherow; Set 2 begins with Norys and his first wife, Alice Merbrooke. Only the Norys achievements have supporters (sea otters chained with fish in mouth). Right, a print of the Great Hall, 1845. Top right, achievements of Sir Hugh Mortimer of Martley and Kyre Wyard, Worcestershire, and Tedstone Wafre, Herefordshire, and John Nanfan Esquire of Birtsmorton, Worcestershire and Trethewell, Cornwall



justified in making the matter public or in offering objections in the same manner as I should if it were a Church or a Town Hall" At that point, the Society was best known for its very public denunciations of proposed restorations of churches. Clearly, no owner was likely to lay him or herself open to such treatment and co-operate with the SPAB. However, Sir Stephen did permit a SPAB visit, which paved the way for objections to be put to the architect.

In July 1890 the Society listed these objections in a letter to Wade, querying the necessity of much of the proposed works to the house. The SPAB questioned the conjectural reinstatement of the porch, and felt the moving of the stairs to be unfortunate. "The staircase is a fine piece of oak work obviously made for its present position. If placed anywhere else most of its interest would be lost, whereas in its present position it is part of the history of the building."

The Society also objected to plans to jack up the timbers of the great hall, straining them to no advantage; and to the addition of windows to the right-hand end of the main front and the removal of brick nogging under the hall

1440s power struggle, in colour

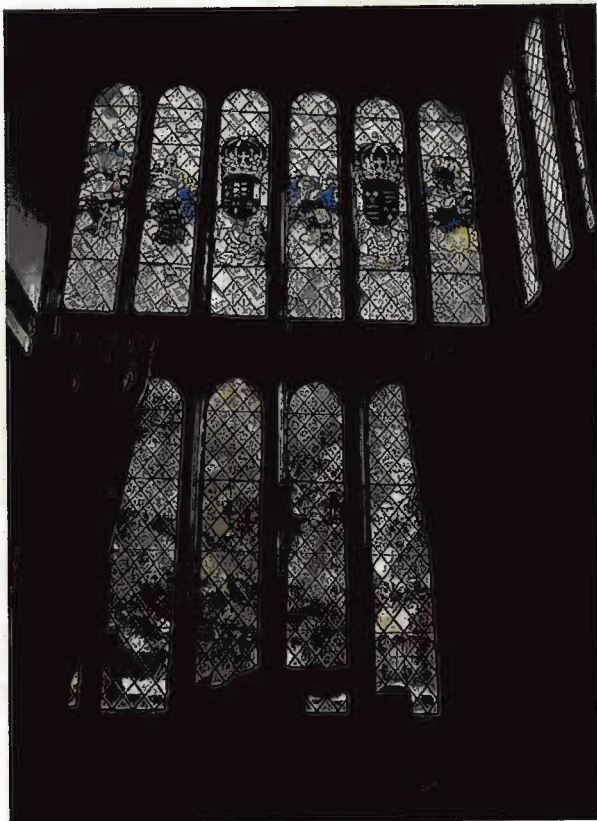
The stained glass at Ockwells Manor has been hailed as the finest pre-Reformation domestic glass surviving in Britain. Ann Darracott offers a tour of its history, meaning and significance

There is no doubt that the survival of Ockwells has been due to the presence of the armorial glass in the great hall. So what is it about the glass in its original setting that makes such an impression on people lucky enough to see it? In 1888, the *Illustrated London News* said that it wished to see "sunshine streaming into the vast room through the casements stained with every variety of exquisite colour". Certainly, this light bathes the great hall, setting off its medieval features; the open timber roof (with collar-beams, arched braces and wind braces), large stone fireplace, refectory table and minstrels gallery. It is also true that the glass is of great aesthetic value, the draughtsmanship is superb, the colours are clear, and there is some "jewelling" (insertion of small pieces of glass to resemble jewels) in the two crowns and the surviving mitres (one is lost). It is undoubtedly the work of an expert – most likely John Prudde, who was King's glazier to Henry VI in the mid-15th century.

The passage of time has not left the glass unscathed. Losses include one achievement, two crests, the names of the people represented once in the base of each light and in one coat the upper two quarters are spurious. However, most of it remains and is a visual triumph. However, it is probably the historic significance of who is represented in the Ockwells glass that makes it so important a survival.

John Norrys (Norreys, Norris), Esquire of the body of Henry VI, built Ockwells circa 1450, and in the great hall devised a scheme of 19 armorial lights, of which 18 remain. Six lights occur in the oriel window, including the achievements of Henry VI and his queen Margaret of Anjou with, placed between them, that of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, signifying his role in arranging their marriage which was supposed to bring about peace between the English and the French.

The remaining lights represent other lords who, with Suffolk, met the French embassy that arrived in England in the summer of 1445 to try



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Above, armorial glass of the oriel window showing the achievements of Henry VI and his queen, Margaret of Anjou, together with lords who assembled in the summer of 1445 to greet a French embassy coming to England to reach a peace settlement and end the Hundred Years War

Right (top), the east front at Ockwells

Right (lower), a close-up of the coat of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk and his wife, Alice Chaucer (granddaughter of Geoffrey) showing the Burgherish lion (for Chaucer) and the three leopards' heads (for de la Pole)

and reach a peace agreement. The side of the oriel had three ecclesiastics (one lost), representing bishops and abbots connected to Norrys. The remaining 10 lights in the side of the hall are divided into two sets of five. The set

nearest to the oriel represents John Norrys Esq and his second wife, Eleanor Clitherow – granddaughter of the lollard martyr Sir John Oldcastle, the inspiration for Shakespeare's Falstaff – together with knights and esquires, most of whom had links with her family in Kent, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. In the second set of lights is the achievement of Norrys and his first wife, Alice Merbrooke, together with esquires prominent in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. All the lights bear the Norrys badge (three golden distaffs) and most bear the Norrys motto – "Feythfully Serve" – in the quarries, the exceptions being those for the King and Queen, which has their mottos of "Dieu et mon Droit" and "Humble et Loiall" respectively. Supporters are only found in the two Norrys achievements (sea otters collared and chained, with fish

in mouth) and in those of Henry VI (heraldic antelopes) and Margaret of Anjou (dexter the heraldic antelope, sinister the eagle of Lorraine).

As said, Ockwells was built circa, 1450 and 1450 was the year that the English were kicked out of Normandy by Charles VII, King of France, with the assistance of his brother-in-law, René of Anjou (King of Sicily and Margaret's father) and Charles, Count of Maine, her uncle – both of whom ignored the treaty of alliance with Henry VI they had made with Suffolk. The turmoil that followed the loss of French possessions led to rebellion in England. Suffolk was blamed, and, while crossing the channel *en route* to exile in 1450, was captured and summarily beheaded. Unrest eventually led to the Wars of the Roses, during which several

Ockwells Manor GLASS



men represented in the armorial glass – including the King himself – were killed.

Ockwells is now, and always has been, a private house. The survival of the house is a tribute to past and present generations of owners. As to the future, I can only agree with the auctioneer in 1892, when bidding for Ockwells reached £22,500 – and was then withdrawn. He said: “but as for the mansion, they could not give an estimate of its value any more than most people could give to a work of art at Christies”. He wished somebody had the “patriotism to purchase the property and present the house to the nation as a specimen of what an English house had been and should be”.

Ann Darracott has made a detailed study of Ockwells Manor and its glass, and is a member of Maidenhead Civic Society.

■ The SPAB wishes to thank the owners of Ockwells Manor for granting the Society permission to visit and photograph their home.



The achievements in the oriel window of (from left) Queen Margaret of Anjou: William de la Pole – Earl and in 1450 Duke of Suffolk – and King Henry VI. Suffolk's central position indicates his role in standing as proxy for the King at the betrothal ceremony in Tours in 1444 and in leading the escort that brought Margaret to England marry Henry in 1445. The achievements of the King and Queen show their supporters (antelopes for the King, and antelope and eagle for the Queen with, in the quarries, their mottos 'Dieu et mon droit' and 'Humble et loial' respectively). The central light bears the motto of John Norys, Esquire – 'Feythfully serve'

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“A REPRODUCTION OF A WORK OF ART BY A MAN WHO WAS NOT AN ARTIST, THE SPAB ARGUED, WAS VALUELESS AS A WORK OF ART”

windows. The Society could not see how the various proposals would make the building more habitable, “except perhaps in the case of the proposed new bay window... such an addition would not be objectionable from the Society's point of view, provided no attempt was made to imitate the ancient work”.

The architect appeared to consider that no harm would be done, the letter continued, provided no actual ancient work was taken away. But the SPAB Committee considered that the value of the old work would be seriously diminished by the large amount of modern work surrounding it. A reproduction of a work of art by a man who was not an artist, the SPAB argued, was valueless as a work of art.

The Society concluded by sending relevant extracts from Ruskin.

Wade's reply, if any, does not survive on the SPAB files, but Stephen Leech's does. He was disappointed that the SPAB did not approve of so many of the proposed alterations. “I feel that I am doing as little as possible to the place consistent with keeping it at all, and that all additions and alterations will only be carried out where there is sufficient proof to justify me in deciding upon them.”

“Restoration” went ahead. However, there was one very positive outcome – the return and reinstatement of the ancient glass in the great hall, a gift from Lord Desborough. Leech was only there for four years, to be followed by Sir Edward Barry. He added another wing on the north-west corner, built a side passage and took down Leech's wing.

Today, the house is privately owned, but the National Trust holds covenants over it.