

## The Story of the Great West Window

The west window in Winchester Cathedral is incredible! It's huge! It's colourful! It's old, but it does not have pictures. It used to, but not anymore. If you look carefully you can see bits of pictures. Eyes peering over coloured segments. Bits of writing in Latin. A piece of an angel's wing. But no complete pictures. So, what has happened?

A long time ago in the 1600's, dreadful things were happening in England. This was the time of the English Civil Wars when Englishman fought Englishman. One group supported the King Charles I and were called Royalists. The other group hated the king and wanted to get rid of him. They were Parliamentarians but were nicknamed the Roundheads because they wore their hair very short. The Roundheads hated the King so much they captured him, put him on trial and eventually executed him in January 1649 by chopping off his head! For several years England didn't have a King or Queen it was a Republic or Commonwealth.

In 1642 the war came to Winchester and by the autumn the city had surrendered to Sir William Waller. The Roundhead soldiers hadn't been paid and so in their anger on Tuesday 12th December they looted the city and the Cathedral.

The soldiers threw open the great wooden doors at the west end of the Cathedral and rode their horses into the great empty nave. The horses cried out as their hooves hit the stone flags, terrified that they would slip and fall! The men beat their drums, waved their huge flags and shouted at the top of their voices. The sound echoed around the nave and added further to the noise. Upon entering the Cathedral, the foot soldiers loaded their muskets with shot and gunpowder, then, raising the gun to their shoulders they fired at the windows. There were loud explosions, bright light, smoke, the smell of gun powder and the sound of windows shattering into thousands of pieces and falling to the floor. Again and again the men reloaded and aimed at the windows. Again and again came the dreadful, sickening sound of beautiful windows being smashed forever.

The people of Winchester were furious at the treatment of their city and Cathedral, but felt powerless to stop it. The soldiers carried guns and there were so many of them! Anyone who stood in their way was imprisoned or cut down. There were however, things they could do, quietly, carefully, without drawing too much attention from the soldiers. People salvaged what they could from the destruction. Pieces of glass were carefully collected and stored, ready for the day when all the silliness would end and peace would return as it did eventually when a new king Charles II was crowned on 23rd April 1661.

The beautiful Cathedral was an empty shell with holes in the roof and no glass in the windows. Wind and rain blew through adding to the feeling of sadness and desolation. It looked abandoned and seemed to have no one to care for it. In Parliament the subject of Winchester Cathedral was discussed. Some thought it beyond repair. 'Knock it down!' they said, but that was not to be.

The people of Winchester loved their Cathedral. It was old and big and had seen so many kings and queens come and go. It had seen good times and bad times. Yes, it was damaged, but it was their cathedral! So the people of Winchester decided that their Cathedral should be repaired.

Diamonds of clear glass were cut and fixed into place in the window spaces around the Cathedral, blending in with areas of old glass which had managed to survive the fury of the soldiers. Pieces of glass of all shapes, sizes and colours were collected and lovingly fixed together and placed in the frame of the old west window, bringing the Cathedral to life again. Careful examination of the window would reveal the faces of angels, disciples and kings, all jumbled up with pieces of coloured glass. Small fragments of writing in Latin, next to drawings on glass of clothes, hands and feet. Bit by bit the window space was filled in with old glass until the most amazing window was completed. A feast for the eyes, and a thing of beauty. It didn't tell stories from the Bible as it was meant to but told a different story. This story was of good overcoming bad, of great sadness turning into great joy, of conflict and fighting replaced by forgiveness and peace. It put the words of Jesus into action by showing what could be done when people worked together to do good things.

Look carefully at the great west window in Winchester Cathedral, high above the big wooden doors. What can you see? The longer you look the more you will notice. The more you notice hopefully the more you will remember about the dreadful day Winchester Cathedral was almost destroyed and how the love of the people of Winchester for their huge, old Cathedral brought it back to life!