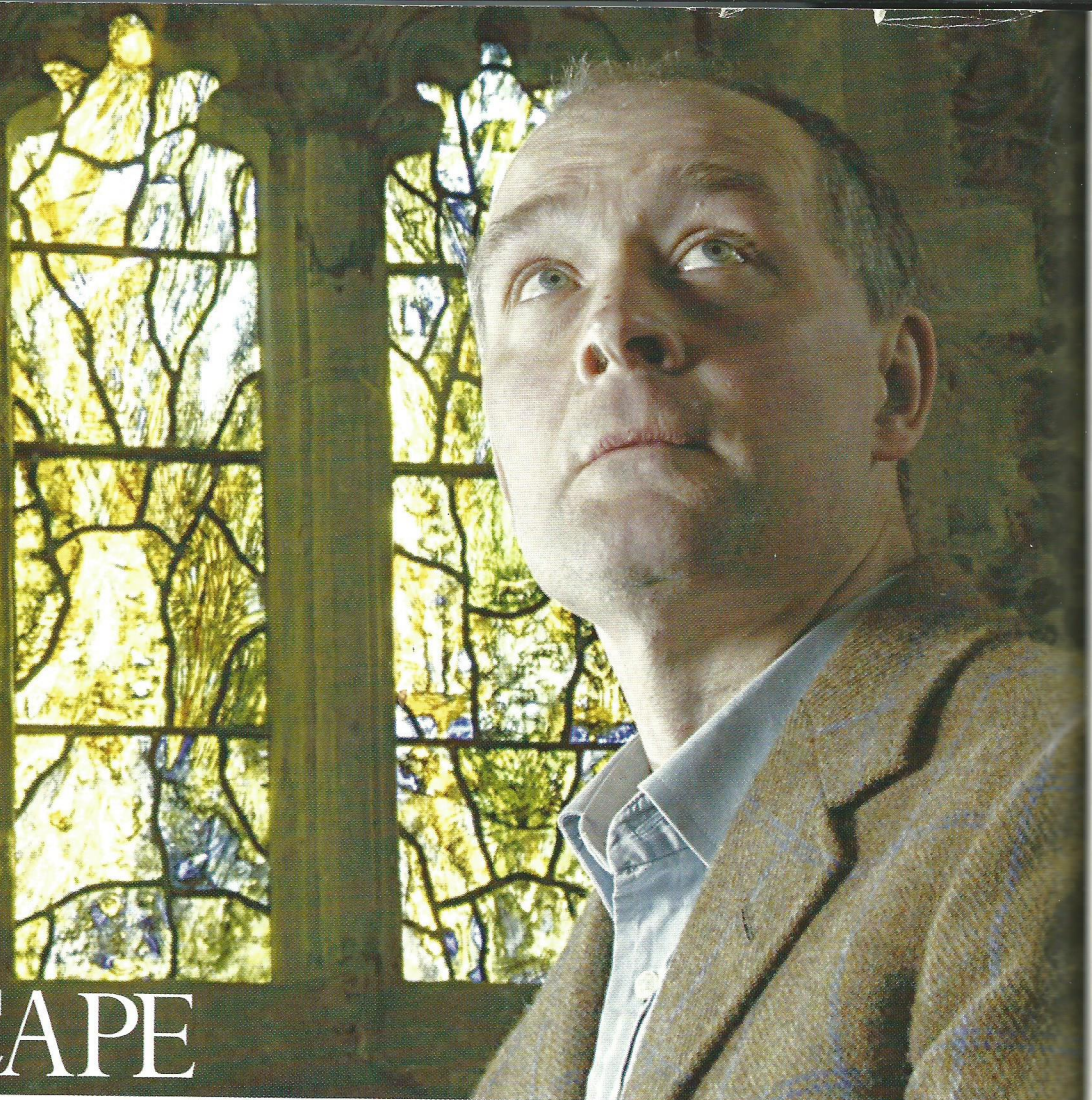


Informed by his love of beautiful buildings and passion for landscape, Thomas Denny makes stained glass—rooted in the methods and traditions of the great medieval stained-glass makers—which radiates an intensely spiritual quality, as MARY MIERS discovers.

WINDOWS SHOW A SACRED LANDSCAPE



1—Thomas Denny in front of his millennium window at St Mary's, Tarrant Hinton, Dorset

THOMAS DENNY'S stained-glass windows have a radiance that defies beating rain and fading light. On a recent pilgrimage to see some of them, I found myself in the church of St Peter's, Martley (Figs 2, 3), viewing one of his millennium windows at dusk. Flickering tongues of yellow and gold flashed with blue, illuminating the 15th-century bell-tower with a fiery glow. At All Saints in the tiny village of Bolton Percy, near York, I discovered one of his most ravishing works—a millennium window set into a church already enriched with beautiful 15th-century and Victorian stained glass. Inspired by Isaiah 43, it ripples with the colours and movement of water, exploring the relationship of time and eternity in a rhythm of landscape fragments, figures and creatures.

Like the sacred and human worlds they represent, Mr Denny's stained-glass windows are many-layered—rich in meaning and not immediately fully comprehensible. On first impression they are beautiful, abstract works of light and colour, but they are designed to be rewarding on many levels, full of possibilities for the viewer. With a potency that moves even those not generally accustomed to looking at abstract art, these windows draw in the viewer to discover at closer quarters their wealth of narrative

detail. They engage the onlooker, not in the banal sense of puzzles with images hidden in a colourful pattern, but as complex interweavings of naturalistic and biblical imagery conveying deeper threads of meaning.

One of the country's foremost stained-glass makers, Mr Denny is also an accomplished landscape painter. Now in his early forties, he is descended maternally from both branches of the architectural practice Verity and Beverley, with whom his father, the architect Anthony Denny, worked. He grew up in an artistic milieu (his mother paints; his uncle is the well-known abstract painter Robyn Denny), first on Hampstead Heath and then in the Cotswolds, where his family lived at Daneway, which his uncle, Oliver Hill, had rented in the 1950s and 1960s. A medieval house with strong Arts and Crafts associations, Daneway exerted an important influence; Mr Denny's work reflects the architectural sensibility of somebody who has always been drawn to beautiful buildings. As a student, he rented accommodation at Newhailes in East Lothian and spent time at Oakwood Tower, near Selkirk, later moving to the gatehouse of Wolfeton House, near Dorchester. He now lives with his wife, Benita, daughter, Madeline, and adopted son,

Ezekiel, in a 17th-century house in the Dorset village of Hinton St Mary.

After studying art at Edinburgh, where his Arts and Crafts philosophy proved a formative influence on a close group of like-minded artist friends, Mr Denny undertook his first commission for the kirk at Killearn in Stirlingshire. In the 1980s, he began to explore the possibilities of a medium no longer widely familiar to the general public. For all his contemporary inventiveness, Mr Denny's work is rooted in the methods and traditions of the great medieval stained-glass makers. His stained glass is essentially religious in nature; it is a medium he describes as 'too overwhelming for domestic settings'. His first major commission was for three windows in an ambulatory chapel at Gloucester Cathedral (1992), and he has recently completed a pair of windows in another 14th-century chapel, at Tewkesbury Abbey, to celebrate its 900th anniversary. This year he is making a cycle of stained glass for two windows in the north choir of Malvern Priory, a church unrivalled for its 15th-century glass.

Mr Denny speaks in a lyrical manner, quoting fluently from biblical and literary sources as he explains his work. Quietly religious, he chooses passages that portray

the natural world in its wider, spiritual context—‘I love the idea of landscape being a vehicle for sacred ideas’—and his windows are filled with subtle references to their physical surroundings. ‘I’m obsessed with landscape,’ he says, describing how, as a boy, he would take off on his own to explore distant counties such as Radnorshire or Northumbria, and how the Cotswolds, and now the Blackmore Vale of Dorset, have fed that passion.

His millennium window at St Mary’s, Tarrant Hinton (Fig 1), celebrates the ‘gladness’ of the land, a joyful theme of renewal based on Joel 2, verses 21–27. It contains intimate, jewel-like observations of the surrounding chalklands where, close to home, Mr Denny finds many of the elements he admires most in a landscape: a sense that it has been worked by generations; richness at close quarters. He rejoices in gnarled field oaks and ancient hedges, woodland clumps and mossy pollards, stony fossils, flints and undulating barrows. All these he depicts with a Dürer-like emphasis on texture and detail.

The Tarrant Hinton window—a pair of lights with 15th-century tracery—responds to the pale colour tones of an adjacent Edwardian window, their lambent yellows and golds the result of a 14th-century technique known as silver staining. Mr Denny uses



3—Detail of a window at St Peter’s, Martley. The shepherds listen as an angel brings news of Christ’s birth: ‘Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy’

pieces of glass flashed with thin layers of colour, which he then acid etches to modify their intensity. The etching process creates a richness of texture that works well with the ancient surfaces of the building. Narrative detail is then ‘coaxed out’ using black paint, which is fired onto the glass.

Mr Denny is particularly attentive to the contextual demands of setting, which gives his windows their satisfying overall harmony. His palette at Tarrant Hinton

echoes the grey-blue flints and greenish Shaftesbury stone of the church; at Malvern Priory, his glass will reflect the same balance of ‘areas of whites and near-whites with clusters of intense colour’ that characterises its glorious 15th-century precedents. Unlike painting, where colour, tonality, texture and form are combined in a brushstroke, stained glass requires each of these to be worked out independently in advance, and then drawn together with the abstract and narrative elements of the window to harmonise with the church’s architecture and lighting.

The flow of colour extending beyond the lead-lines holds the key to unity and expression. Mr Denny’s lead-lines have their own tumbling rhythms, but they are unassertive, supporting rather than controlling the areas of colour and light. ‘I think of my lead-lines as the quiet movement of B-roads on a map; they catch the eye in a different way from the main roads,’ he says. He greatly values his collaboration with Patrick Costeloe of Bristol, who does all his cutting, fixing and leading.

Like those of the medieval stained-glass makers whose tradition he continues, Mr Denny’s compositions radiate an intensely spiritual quality, rare among his contemporaries. That they emanate from Hinton St Mary has its own special significance. For barely 100 yards from his studio is the spot where, in 1963, a blacksmith unearthed Britain’s earliest known representation of Christ—the Hinton St Mary Mosaic, now in the British Museum. Here, ‘on the scruffy edge of one of Dorset’s most handsome villages’, Mr Denny is maintaining a thread of continuity that stretches back almost two millennia to the 4th century.

Thomas Denny can be contacted on: 01258 471569. Photographs: Frank Noon.

2—Thomas Denny’s millennium window at St Peter’s, Martley, Worcestershire

