

Abbey's stained-glass renaissance

By Sue Corbett

STAINED glass at Tewkesbury Abbey has entered a new era with the dedication last Saturday of Thomas Denny's vibrant new windows in the Chapel of St Catharine and St John the Baptist.

Denny's style is undeniably modern but it also has links to the breathtakingly beautiful 14th-century glass for which the abbey was already famous. Both the 14th and the 21st-century windows convey, first, an intense blaze of seemingly abstract colour, and on further scrutiny, an astonishing wealth of detail — in Denny's case, even down to the tiniest stained-glass snake or snail.

Denny's commission, funded by the abbey's friends organisation, celebrates the 900th anniversary of Benedictine monks arriving at Tewkesbury. It also marks a stained-glass renaissance for the abbey after a largely undistinguished Victorian period and a scanty representation of 20th-century artists. Denny, 46, has coped sensibly with the proximity of the glorious green and gold of the 14th-century glass above the choir, some of which is visible from the chapel.

"I don't think that, for a new window in the vicinity of a 14th-century one, one has to try to be 14th-century in style," he says. "Style is less important for harmony than colour."

And his own windows, each with 15ft tall central lights and two slightly shorter side lights, have enough of a green and gold bias to make an appropriate connection with the earlier work, while achieving a modern identity of their own.

They have transformed the character of the tiny chapel (about 21sq ft) from a well-lit space, where the sun streamed, sometimes blindingly, through plain modern glass, to one where, in the mornings and early afternoons in particular, daylight reveals a large expanse of intense and uplifting colour, composed of a remarkable amount of narrative detail.

The peachy gold, in Denny's wheatfield section and elsewhere, is a particular success. Not only does its delicacy help to preserve the chapel's light appearance but it also represents a triumph for the artist over a disconcerting working practice because, until the final process of silver staining, Denny's depictions of wheat and architectural columns were in a startling soft, warm pink.

The windows' theme is the Benedictine motto *orare et laborare* (to pray and to work), and the artist, a committed Christian, has gone to both Old and New Testament texts



Thomas Denny has sought design inspiration from the Old and New Testaments

for his inspiration. In the south window the mood is largely purposeful as masons are shown working on the building of a great church with columns reminiscent of Tewkesbury's, while other figures hoe or plant a tree in an orchard, but the central light shows a kneeling figure contemplating the works of God.

The southeast window is more reflective, with questioners in the right-hand light asking Christ to teach them how to pray. A field of wheat in the central light leads to a Malvernesque horizon at the apex, one of several gentle hints at local topography.

Denny's raw material is

flashed glass (that is, clear glass with a thin flash, or layer, of colour on the surface). "It starts life as flat, quite bland colour and I coax it into something quite dense and richly worked," he says. "There is an awful lot one can do to modify the colour, and this is something that really interests me."

He uses acid etching to bite through the colour right up to the whitish glass below, or a half or a quarter of the way through to it, to provide an infinite range of tones, closely associated but all subtly different. "This produces a very crude colour-only version of the imagery," he says, "and I work into that with glass paint,

which is fired on and bonds with the surface. Adding paint, you are not profoundly changing what is already there in colour but you are moving from something quite clumsy towards subtlety and imagery, and that is the longest part of the process."

Tewkesbury has taken him a year's work; now he moves on to the challenge of two new windows for Malvern Priory, just the other side of the M50 from Tewkesbury and even more famous than the abbey for its medieval glass.

□ Tewkesbury Abbey, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire; tel: 01684 850959.

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