

A forgotten Chester legend



St Werburgh, Caldvy Church, Wirral

Next time you're in Chester city centre take a peek into St Werburgh's catholic church. Just inside the narthex of this late 19th century building you will be heralded by glorious, coloured light streaming through eight small but vibrant stained-glass windows. These windows were the work of one of Chester's cultural icons, a prolific creator of stained glass in Chester, the Wirral and beyond, an artist called **Trena Cox**.

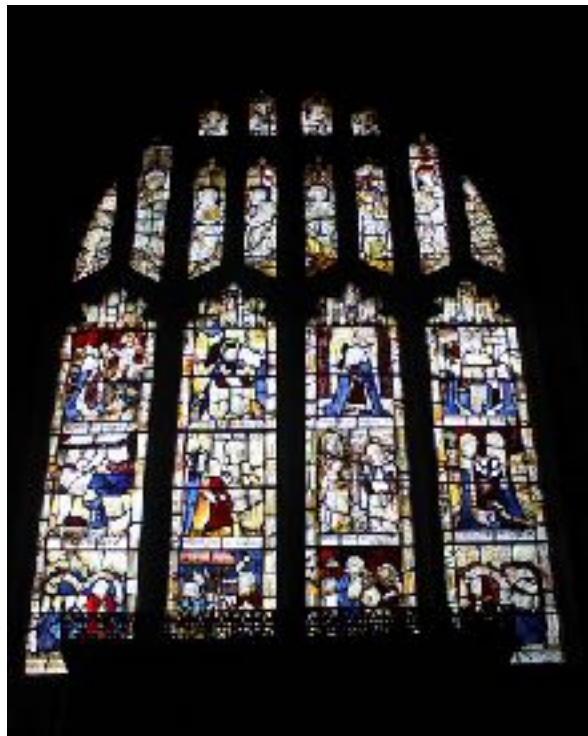
In 2024 an exhibition, *Trena Cox: Reflections 100*, curated by **Aleta Doran** spent time at Chester Cathedral and subsequently at the Grosvenor Museum. This marvellous exhibition allowed many, including myself, to get to know a Chester artist for the very first time and to wonder at the sheer volume of her stained glass production which spanned six decades from the 1920's right through until the 1970's. Aleta has compiled a collection of her own photographs showing many examples of Trena Cox's work here: www.aletadoran.co.uk.



Early windows by Trena Cox in the cloister at Chester cathedral

What is so striking about Trena Cox's work is the way she predicted how light would pass through the coloured glass to achieve an exquisite vibrancy. Her depiction of the 'ordinary' in the form of birds, flowers and human realism makes her bejewelled art so much more than religious iconography; in fact, she was not particularly religious but somehow found a way to convey a deep spirituality going way beyond conservative Christianity.

The cloister at Chester Cathedral is a great place to study some of Trena Cox's earliest glass whilst some of her late work, so different in style, can be seen, for example at St Magdalene, Tallarn Green near Malpas or The Blessed Sacrament in Connah's Quay.



'Life of the Virgin' window, 1498
in All Saints Church, Gresford

Getting to know Trena Cox's work was, for me, a catalyst to a better understanding of the earliest stained glass; it became widely used in the Middle Ages and was, of course used as a pictorial form of Christian education for a largely illiterate congregation. So much early stained glass has been lost over the centuries, including at Chester Cathedral where only fragments remain, however we are lucky to have on our doorstep at the **Church of All Saints, Gresford** some of the best-preserved mediaeval windows in the UK.

Through the centuries, natural decay helped along with periodic iconoclasm meant that the skilfully coloured glass of early church windows was lost for ever. It was not until the 19th century that the art of stained glass enjoyed what has been described as a 'regeneration' pushed along at some speed by William Morris and others. It was Trena Cox and other stained-glass artists who took up the baton and ran with it, flat out to bring these deliciously coloured artworks into the 21st century.

Trena Cox has been an inspiration for Ralph Boydell and his work on illuminated manuscripts. Take a look here: