



# FRIENDS OF ST NICHOLAS CHURCHYARD

## HOW TO READ A STAINED GLASS WINDOW

### A Guide to Visual Language at St Nicholas Church

Before widespread literacy, stained glass windows functioned as visual narratives.

Victorian and Edwardian craftsmen used structured layouts, symbolic objects, and colour codes to convey stories.

By understanding these design conventions, you can systematically read and analyse the windows inside St Nicholas.

### 1. Chronology: The Timeline Layout

Unlike text, vertical stained glass windows are almost always read from the **bottom panel moving upward**. This vertical progression structure is used to map out historical timelines or theological sequences.

- **Example at St Nicholas:** In the **Lady Chapel East Window** (by Lavers & Barraud), the narrative timeline begins at the base and ascends in chronological order:
  1. *The Binding of Isaac* (Old Testament foundation at the bottom)
  2. *The Agony in the Garden* (The beginning of the Passion)
  3. *The Crucifixion & The Resurrection* (The central events)
  4. *Christ Enthroned in Glory* (The final heavenly conclusion at the top)

### 2. Identification: "Attributes" as Name Tags

Because historical figures are typically depicted in uniform, ancient robes, artists used specific objects—known as **attributes**—to identify individual characters.

- **Example at St Nicholas:** Look at **South Aisle Window 2**, designed by local Sutton resident Edward Frampton. You can definitively identify the saints by their specific attributes:
  - **Three Bags of Gold/Coins:** Held by *St. Nicholas*. This refers to the historical account of him secretly throwing three bags of gold into a poor family's home to save their daughters.

- **Holding a Severed Head:** Displayed by *St. Cuthbert*. He is traditionally depicted holding the crowned head of St. Oswald, whose remains were buried in the same coffin as Cuthbert.
- **Armour & Slain Dragon:** Seen in **South Aisle Window 3** (also by Frampton), these military attributes identify *St. George*.

### 3. Characterisation: The Colour Code

Stained glass studios adhered to a standardised colour palette to denote a character's spiritual status or identity.

- **Deep Blue:** Used to denote purity, truth, and heavenly associations. It is the definitive colour worn by the Virgin Mary.
- **Vibrant Red:** Symbolises sacrifice, the Holy Spirit, divine love, or martyrdom.
- **Bright White:** Represents holiness, innocence, and divine light.
- **Example at St Nicholas:** Observe the **East Window** above the high altar (by Lavers & Barraud), which depicts scenes from the life of Christ. Notice how the artist uses deep reds and pure whites to ensure that Jesus remains the immediate focal point of every panel.

### Comparative Analysis: Differing Artistic Styles

St Nicholas provides an opportunity to observe how two competing workshops interpreted the same narrative: *The Parable of the Good Samaritan*.

- **The Expressive Medieval Style (Lady Chapel, South Window 2):** Crafted by **Lavers & Barraud**, this window uses deep jewel tones and heavy lead lines to create highly expressive, dramatic figures.
- **The Luminous Architectural Style (South Aisle, West Window):** Crafted by **James Powell & Sons**, this window uses "Whitefriars glass." The technique prioritizes clarity and light transmission, resulting in a brighter, more pastel presentation of the same parable.

### Historical Note: The Destroyed Window

When examining the church layout, note that **North Aisle Window 2** originally housed a companion window by Edward Frampton depicting *St. Faith*. Records indicate she was represented alongside her attribute of flames, signalling her martyrdom. A German bomb destroyed this window in **September 1940**.