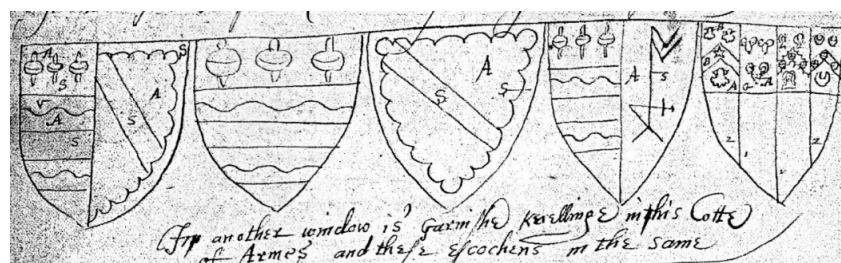


THE TOPPES WINDOW in St. Peter Mancroft

In about 1450 Toppes donated a large and impressive stained glass window for St Peter Mancroft church. Dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it was for the new east window of a chapel on the north side of the chancel, then known as the Chapel of St. John the Baptist, but today known as the Jesus Chapel. St Peter Mancroft was the church favoured by the elite of Norwich and by some gentry and aristocracy. From c.1380 the Norman church was re-built and it was completed by 1455. Toppes had already donated a mass book for the chapel and we presume that he worshipped there as he lived in the parish. He left 24s to the altar in his will and was buried there, although his tomb has not survived.

The stained glass for the window was made in the workshop of John Wighton, an eminent glazier who became an alderman in 1453, the year that Toppes was Mayor. His workshop also made the glass for the Mayor's Court Room in the recently built Guildhall which today includes the Toppes arms.

Whatever the spiritual and political purposes of the design it also clear that the window, in a chapel at the centre of the life of the city elite, served as an advertisement for the power, wealth and prominence of alderman and merchant Robert Toppes and his family connections. Any parishioner could easily see on the bottom row his arms, the arms of his wife's family, the Knyvetts, and his merchant's mark.



*A sketch of the bottom row of the window made in 1754
(from David King: *The Stained Glass of St Peter Mancroft*)*

In the middle of the bottom row was the 'donor panel' of Toppes and his two wives in rich gowns. It was probably this image that worshippers saw immediately above the host when the priest raised it at the climax of the mass. If their eyes wandered upwards, immediately above Toppes they would have seen the Nativity, and higher up, two panels of the Virgin Mary. Thus the spiritual, the social and the personal were combined in a way that was quite normal for medieval society even if alien to us today.



*The donor panel: Toppes and his two wives
(Photo: Mike Dixon)*

The original window

The original window had thirty main lights or panels, of which only sixteen survive. Eleven of these have now been moved to the main east window of the church, above the high altar. . One light is in the treasury at St. Peter Mancroft; one in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow and three at Felbrigg Hall, Norfolk.

David King has 're-constructed' the whole of the original window as it was in the north chancel chapel. The main lights consisted of six rows of five lights per row. The top three rows were devoted mainly to the Virgin Mary, her death, funeral and Assumption into heaven. The next two rows showed the Annunciation, the Nativity, the flight into Egypt and the Massacre of the Innocents. In the "donor panel", which we can see today at bottom right of the main east window of the church above the high altar, Toppes is shown holding a scroll which includes a quotation from a hymn from the Little Office of the Virgin Mary. In the tracery lights at the top a series of sainted English kings and prelates were also portrayed. The glass was probably still in situ in 1712 and was moved c.1740. Some time before 1815 the surviving pieces were moved to their locations today.



*The Jew arrests funeral of BVM
(Photo: Mike Dixon)*

The Jew arresting Mary's funeral

While we can probably understand that it was quite normal at his time to show devotion to the Virgin, it may be more surprising to learn that in the window glass Toppes combined this with elements of political propaganda relating to the power struggles and disturbances of 1437 and 1443, the so-called 'Gladman's Insurrection'. He had played a significant, if not a major, part in these disturbances and in 1437 had been exiled to Bristol by the king. In 1443 he was accused of 'making a common insurrection' and the disturbances resulted in the king suspending the city's liberties for about four years and imposing direct rule by Sir John Clifton – who just happened to be the uncle of Toppes' second wife, Joan Knyvett. This political aspect is shown in three of the original panels which depicted the Jew who 'arrested', or stopped, the funeral of the Virgin; his conversion; and a palm being handed to him by St John. Only the first of these three panels has survived and is now located two panels directly above the Toppes family panel. This story about the Jew is of course not biblical but originates in The Golden Legend, a compilation of fanciful tales about the lives of the saints which was published c.1260 and became very popular.

The politically significant aspect of the three panels depicting the Jew, says David King, was that he was depicted wearing a surcoat with the faces of three leopards, a clear reference to the arms of William de la Pole, the Duke of Suffolk. He had been a key protagonist in the political strife in the city and had been murdered in 1450. In particular, in 1442 he had imposed an arbitration award in a dispute between the city and the Cathedral priory. It was the city's opposition to this award which led to 'Gladman's Insurrection'. But the meaning of the depiction of the Jew's 'arrest' of the Virgin Mary's funeral bier and then being given the palm by St John is ambiguous. It seems to suggest both hostility to, and reconciliation with, the Duke of Suffolk and therefore with the King who had granted a new charter to the city after the 1443 disturbances. This had granted a general pardon for all offences and confirmed the restoration of the city's liberties. In 1453 both Henry VI and Queen Margaret, of whom Suffolk was a strong supporter, paid visits to the city, when Toppes was mayor. The political purpose of the window therefore seems to have been to mark the reconciliation of the city with the king, thereby confirming Toppes' status among the city elite.

The surviving panels

The eleven surviving panels from the Toppes Window can be seen in the east window of St Peter Mancroft today, as follows:

						Jesus at the Tomb
The Circumcision of Christ					The Apostles	The Jew arrests the funeral of Virgin Mary
The Annunciation	The Visitation	The Nativity and shepherds		Adoration of the Magi	Adoration of the Magi	Massacre of the Innocents
						Robert Toppes and two wives

Further reading

David King, *The Stained Glass of St Peter Mancroft*

W.H. St. John Hope, *Inventories of the Parish Church of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich (Norfolk Archaeology XIV (1901) pp. 153 – 240)*

Richard Matthew, *Robert Toppes – Medieval Mercer of Norwich*