

## Mercy for Bramley

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The story of St Peter's Church, built in 1861-3, in Bramley, Leeds, is a sad tale. Dry rot was discovered in the roof in 1975 and there was much debate about what to do with the building. <sup>1</sup> The most expensive option, to keep the frame but rebuild large parts of the church, as well as add parish halls, was selected. Primarily, this was intended to transform the building into more of a community space. The parishioners raised £80,000 of the cost, which had risen to £200,000 by completion. This intervention has been disastrous for both the heritage of the building and for the church-going community. By the rededication in early 1980, almost all of the interesting architectural features of the building had been lost – sold or demolished. Worse still, just thirty-six years later, in late 2015, it was discovered that the floor installed in the renovations had begun to rot, rendering the church unsafe for use. Following this discovery, the church was closed.



Fig. 1. Left light of Acts of Mercy Window in east wall of the sanctuary in present day church  
(Image © Stephen Huws).

Today, St Peter's church stands empty, disused and devoid of much that would be of interest, except the east and west windows of the chancel, which are the subject of the present article, and which will be referred to hereafter as the Acts of Mercy window. The two lights in the present church face one another in the east and west walls of the south-facing sanctuary (Figures 1 and 2). Each light comprises two roundels, containing figural depictions of acts of mercy, set in a foliage background. The east window depicts Visiting the Sick in the lower roundel and Teaching the Ignorant above; the west window has Giving Food to the Hungry below and Visiting the Prisoners above. The glass is from a window made in 1875 by Morris & Co. to designs by Edward Burne-Jones; the current configuration represents a drastic reduction from its original setting in the north transept. When installed in 1875, the window contained seven roundels showing acts of mercy. These were arranged in two lights, each containing three roundels, with a rose window above displaying the seventh in its centre. The transformations made to the building and the original and new position of the Acts of Mercy window are illustrated in Figure 3. The new position for the window could only accommodate part of the original glass, the top of the original lancets and all of the rose panels are no longer on display. Indeed, less than half of the original window's glass is installed, with most of the other half in storage – something which was not previously known outside of the church. A consequence of the rebuilding is that the building no longer has an opening capable of displaying the window and so the window will probably never be seen again in its full, original form.



Fig. 2. Right light of Acts of Mercy window in west wall of the sanctuary in present day church  
(Image © Stephen Huws).

In the following article, I will examine this window in terms of its original context within the church, its commissioning and dedication, and through the lens of my own reconstruction. This analysis will demonstrate not only the significance of the window and the necessity of its preservation, but also the importance of preserving other vulnerable windows. Far too many windows of the nineteenth century in particular have been neglected beyond the point of repair, due to a combination of lack of resources and lack of knowledge on the part of those responsible for them.

I will begin with a brief history of St Peter's, which was built between 1861 and 1863, to replace an earlier church, St Margaret's Chapel. The building of the church was led by Samuel Joy, who was curate at Bramley from 1859. Within two years of his arriving, he had raised £4000 from the parishioners, giving the largest individual contribution, of £350, himself. The final cost of the church totalled £5131 7s 3½d. <sup>2</sup> The church was designed by the architects Perkin & Backhouse, a local Leeds firm who rarely worked more than twenty miles outside the city. <sup>3</sup> They built eleven churches in Leeds, more than any of the much better-known architects of the time: Gilbert Scott built seven, GF Bodley four, GE Street and William Butterfield two. <sup>4</sup> Although Perkin & Backhouse were not known for their individual flair, the church (Figure 4), in a 'Geometric Gothic' style was a very fair one, and large for a community the size and wealth of Bramley. <sup>2</sup> It possessed a nave eighty-five-and-a-half feet long with a glazed clerestory, north and south aisles and transepts, and a chancel. <sup>5</sup>

The church already had a few stained-glass windows when the Acts of Mercy window was added. One had been installed in the east end shortly after the building of the church, with three more windows being added by 1871. The first two of these are either by William Wailes, or thought to be by him. <sup>6</sup> The third is a window by Hardman & Co., dedicated to Charles Hainsworth, churchwarden at Bramley 1871-5. It must have been given earlier, and the dedication added to or amended because it appears in the 1871 inventory. <sup>7</sup> Money was raised for the Hardman window through subscription by Hainsworth's friends, who selected its design. They had also considered other firms when commissioning the window, as the inventory indicates a payment of £2 2 shillings to Morris & Co. for designs which were not carried forward. As such, the name of Morris & Co. was clearly already known to the parishioners when they came to commission the Acts of Mercy window.

The windows already in the church when the Acts of Mercy window was added had been installed in a clockwise pattern, which began at the east end of the building (Figure 5). Having reached the south porch, they returned to the north transept to install the Acts of Mercy window. The pattern then seems to have continued after the Acts of Mercy window was added, with the next windows installed along the north aisle,

beginning at the eastern end and working westwards. The final window installed was in the west end. Placing the Acts of Mercy window in the north transept rather than in the then-empty window to the west of the south porch is significant. This puts it in the easternmost vacant window, closer to the high altar and holiest part of the church. It is also a significantly larger and more prominent window aperture.



Fig. 3. St Peter's Bramley 1964 and 2019, adapted from Dobson, St Peter's Church, 87.



Fig. 4. View of St Peter's from the north with north transept. From Dobson, St Peter's Church, plate 3.



Fig. 5. St Peter's Church in 1875, adapted from Dobson, 1964, 87 (Image © Alan Dobson / Stephen Huws).

There is a common theme across the windows installed up to and including the Acts of Mercy window. In the slow addition of stained-glass windows to this church, the lack of oversight by one person and the piecemeal approach over nearly thirty years may not be expected to lead to a coherent or unified scheme. But, although clearly not a planned scheme, the 1875 addition of the Acts of Mercy shows a clear thematic and functional link between the windows in the church up to this point. Three of the other windows, those on the south side, were given to commemorate the dead and good works done in life. The story of the Good Samaritan appears in two of these and a woman giving bread to children appears in the third. The remaining window, in the east end, is of sacrifice and ascension to heaven. These windows and their iconography and function all share expressions of death, commemoration, and charity.

The plight of the poor had long been a Christian concern and the Church had always been the primary provider of charity. <sup>8</sup> In the 1860s, most members of the middle class viewed poverty as a social condition that they could personally alleviate. This trend is well represented in St Peter's, where charity can be seen to be high in the minds of the parishioners, both through the choices of commemorations in the church and the deeds of the people whom they memorialise, as we shall see.

The Acts of Mercy window was installed at Bramley to commemorate their assistant curate, Reverend Dillingham William Seppings, who had died on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1874, aged thirty-seven. <sup>9</sup> His death was evidently hard for the parishioners to take. The Bramley Parish Magazine was normally brief at this time, with most items being no more than four or five lines long, but the January edition of 1874 devotes an entire page in memory of Seppings. This is followed by a letter from Seppings' father, thanking the parishioners in the February issue and a two-page commemorative poem by a frequent contributor, 'J.T.B.' in the March issue. <sup>10</sup> This is a parish in mourning.

The July 1874 edition of the magazine states that it had been decided to put a window in the north transept to the memory of Seppings. <sup>11</sup> A committee had been appointed and some designs submitted. Collections were being raised and parishioners were invited to contribute. This window would be made by Morris & Co. to designs by Edward Burne-Jones. The August 1875 edition of the Parish Magazine mentions the

installation of the window by July 18<sup>th</sup> of that year 'which adds greatly to the beauty of the church' and is 'quite in keeping with [Morris & Co's] very high reputation'. <sup>12</sup>

The arrangement of the window was in two lancets with a rose window above, effectively three separate windows treated as a single unit. As mentioned, there were seven medallions containing figural scenes, each representing an act of mercy, three to a lancet and one in the centre of the rose. The placement of these roundels within a foliate background would have been costly compared with a plain background of quarries. The Acts of Mercy window was clearly quite an expensive one – Burne-Jones' fee for the seven cartoons for the roundels alone was £56. <sup>13</sup> By comparison, the final cost for the aforementioned Hardman window was only cost £87 2 shillings. For the parishioners of Bramley, Seppings was clearly worth this great expense.

While the acts of mercy were a popular choice in stained glass of this period, the seven scenes chosen at Bramley are not those usually used in such windows. Five of the roundels show corporal acts of mercy, taken from Matthew 25:35-6: Clothing the Naked, Giving Drink to the Thirsty, Feeding the Hungry, Visiting the Prisoners, and Visiting the Sick. Another roundel shows the spiritual act of mercy Teaching the Young, or as it is better known, Instructing the Ignorant. The remaining roundel contains Leading the Blind, which is not among any of the usual lists of acts of mercy. Its source and inclusion are curious. There are many biblical references to aiding the blind, especially in Isaiah. But perhaps the most famous is 'Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit'. <sup>14</sup> Perhaps this roundel is serving a warning to anyone looking to perform good works, reminding of the importance of sound judgement in leading, lest they do more harm than good. Its selection is a clever variation on a well-known theme. With its placement at the top of the window, in the centre of the rose, it also acts as the final word or warning on the subject. Typically, windows depicting acts of mercy select six or seven of the corporal acts of mercy. Depictions of the spiritual acts are rare and this inclusion of Leading the Blind is unique.

Regardless of the unusual selection of scenes, the acts of mercy is a highly appropriate choice to commemorate Seppings, something which his native *Norfolk Chronicle* makes mention of in an article on the window which serves as his obituary. <sup>15</sup> There was also a brass plate under the window, lost in the rebuilding, but recorded in A. C. Sewter's book on Morris & Co. stained glass:

*To the Glory of God and the Memory ever dear of Dillingham William Seppings, M.A., who served as priest in this church for 7 years and spent his life for the children the sorrowful and the dying and departed in peace on the Feast of the Circumcision in the Year of Grace 1874.* <sup>16</sup>



Fig. 6. Image of Seven Acts of Mercy window (Image source: Sewter, 1974, Illustrations 505-7).

Seppings was heavily involved in charitable works, his eulogy in the January 1874 Parish Magazine saying that, 'His kindness to the poor; his faithful and attentive visitation of the sick; his sympathy with the afflicted and bereaved; need only to be mentioned here to ensure the fullest recognition'.<sup>17</sup> These eulogies from the brass plate and parish magazine cover at least three of the acts of mercy represented in the window. This suggests that the selection of the iconography for the window did not follow the typical process of commissioning a window from Morris & Co., which saw Burne-Jones selecting the subject, sometimes without even discussing it with patrons.<sup>18</sup> However, in this instance, the window aligns too closely with the praise of the commemorated individual for there to not have been input from the committee in charge of commissioning the window.

When reconstructing the window during the course of this research, errors in the earlier literature were discovered, which warrant correction here. Sewter's catalogue provides a written description of the windows, as well as photographs of each light and the rose window, taken as separate elements from before the rearrangement, rather than an *in situ* photo (Figure 6).<sup>19</sup> However, the written description and images do not agree, as they show the left and right lights the opposite way around. In fact, it is the images which are the wrong way around, as they have been mirrored. This can be confirmed by comparison with the surviving glass and Burne-Jones' cartoons. Sewter's images were provided by the church and the same mirrored images were used on the cover of a Bramley Parish Magazine from September 1972. Therefore, it seems likely that the photographs provided by the parish introduced this error, perhaps as a result of the reprographic process.<sup>20</sup> In addition, one other photograph shows the window in its original position, although it does not show the whole window and is of very poor quality. Nevertheless, it is just possible to make out which medallions are which, confirming that Sewter's image is mirrored. In this reproduction, the bottom two medallions can certainly be made out (Figure 7), where the figure lying down in Visiting the Sick can be seen on the left. The presence of the organ on the right of the image also confirms that this photo is not mirrored.

These bottom two medallions are also the source of some ambiguity regarding the ordering, caused by the titles of the cartoons, which needs correcting. The cartoons are held by the British Museum and the source of their titles as given in the museum catalogue remains unknown; these titles may be on the back of the cartoons, but, as they are now mounted and glued down, this cannot be ascertained. The problem is that the titles the British Museum have would imply that Sewter's text and pictures do not agree in terms of which medallions go in which light. The two cartoons which are the subject of this issue show Visiting the Sick and Feeding the Hungry. Based on the iconography, British Museum 1898,0727.2 (Figure 8) should be 'Visiting the Sick', and British Museum 1898,0727.5 (Figure 9) should be 'Feeding the Hungry', but the British Museum labels these the other way around. Although both feature one person bringing food to another, and in fact in 'Visiting the Sick' there is more food prominently visible, the one with a person lying in a bed seems much more likely to be 'Visiting the Sick'.

My assertion of the correct titling of the cartoons is corroborated by nineteenth-century photographs held by the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. <sup>21</sup> These photographs of the cartoons were taken for Morris & Co. by Frederick Hollyer as a record and so that they could be blown up or altered more easily for any future reuse. This was also done as Burne-Jones sometimes requested his cartoons back, although they were contractually owned by Morris & Co. <sup>22</sup> Burne-Jones did this when he liked a design so much that he would flesh it out into a more finished work of art. This appears to be the case here, as the cartoons were sold on his death from his possessions and not as part of the sale of Morris & Co. cartoons. 'Visiting the Prisoners' has some colouring in with chalk, but Burne-Jones must have abandoned whatever he had intended to do with it (Figure 10). The photos of the Acts of Mercy cartoons have titles written on them in pencil. Although there is no way to tell when these titles were added, their disagreement with the British Museum labels and agreement with Sewter adds to the weight that the British Museum has simply swapped the two around. The Curator of British Drawings and Watercolours before 1880, Dr Kim Sloan, agrees, and the British Museum will change their labels accordingly. <sup>23</sup>

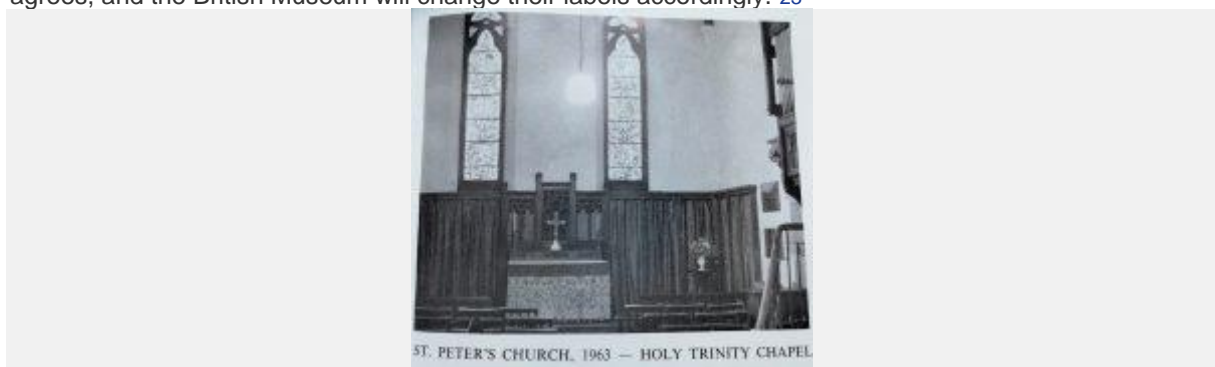


Fig. 7. Photograph of Acts of Mercy Window from 1963 (Image source: Dobson, 1964).





Fig. 8. British Museum Cartoon: 1898,0727.2. Visiting the Sick. British Museum Collection Online, accessed April 7, 2019 (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 9. British Museum Cartoon: 1898,0727.5. Feeding the Hungry. British Museum Collection Online, accessed April 7, 2019 (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum).



The evidence of the photographs and cartoons confirm that Sewter's written description is indeed correct and that only the image is incorrect. The picture from Sewter (Figure 6) and the other picture of the window (Figure 7) agree regarding the contents of each light, even if not the arrangement of the lights, and Sewter's description agrees with Figure 7. This enables the original arrangement to be confirmed. The left light contained, from bottom to top: Visiting the Sick, Teaching the Ignorant, Clothing the Naked. The right light contained: Giving Food to the Hungry, Visiting the Prisoners, Giving Drink to the Thirsty. Leading the Blind was located in the centre of the rose above.



Fig. 10. British Museum Cartoon: 1898,0727.6. Visiting the prisoners, British Museum Collection Online, accessed April 7, 2019 (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum).

Incredibly, during the course of my research, I discovered that much of the glass not installed in the new arrangement is retained by the church, in storage and wrapped in newspapers dated March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1980; it seemingly has not been touched since then. When I went to look at the windows for the first time, I was expecting to find only four roundels installed in the church, based on the only literature to discuss the windows since Sewter's book, Barrie and Wendy Armstrong's *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Yorkshire*.<sup>24</sup> Unexpectedly, the vicar mentioned that he 'thought they had a few fragments' in storage, leading me to find almost the entire rose window and the head of one of the lights. The panels are not in bad condition – they have suffered some bowing due to being stored poorly – but it is important that they are looked after better in future, before lasting damage can be done to them. It seems the survival of these panels is not known outside of the church.

Unfortunately, two panels of glass: the roundel depicting Giving Drink to the Thirsty, and one trefoil from the rose window, are currently missing. I have created a composite image to recreate how the window would have appeared in its original format, using the cartoon and extant glass (Figure 11). This can be compared with the images from Sewter, which will also demonstrate how his are mirrored and illustrate what is left and what is missing (Figure 6).

Regrettably, it seems that this window has suffered from extensive paint loss. Despite this, it is still a beautiful window, and one can only imagine how stunning it would have been when new. To me, the most impressive of the roundels is Visiting the Prisoners (Figure 12). The inward curling of the figures, following the arc of the lead frame, and the halo subtly evoked by the barred window of the cell, are small details of a masterful work. Present in all the panels, but more difficult to see in those installed in the building, is the flower patterning in the white glass (Figure 13). This daisy patterning and the foliage are very likely by

William Morris and complement the roundels. <sup>25</sup> Philip Webb was barely involved with Morris & Co. by the point this window was made, and had no hand in this window, but the scheme, character and architectural suitability of the window are of no less than the highest standard of work produced by the firm with his contribution. <sup>26</sup> The amount of white glass ensures that the window would have let plenty of light in, even on the darker, north side of the church, and the foliage design makes a virtue of necessity, beautifully creeping into the roundels.



Fig. 11. Composite digital image of remaining pieces of glass. Combined image from author's photos. Includes British Museum Cartoon: 1898,0727.3. Giving Drink to the Thirsty, British Museum Collection Online, accessed April 1, 2020 (Image © The Trustees of the British Museum / Stephen Huws).

The designs were clearly much admired, as Morris & Co. reused them several times. 'Giving Drink to the Thirsty' was reused eight times, 'Teaching the Ignorant' six, 'Visiting the Sick' eleven, 'Leading the Blind' seven, 'Visiting the Prisoners' six, 'Feeding the Hungry' eleven, and 'Clothing the Naked' ten times. <sup>27</sup> This includes a complete set in St Stephen's, Gateacre, Liverpool (1883) and one for a 'Van Cruger' (1876) in New York, which is untraced. <sup>28</sup> The Gateacre window arranges the roundels in a completely different way and includes an eighth, depicting Christ Blessing Children. But Bramley was first, and the origin of these designs. With much paint lost and badly reconfigured, it is still significant as the original window for an exquisite design from Morris and Co. and Burne-Jones at the height of their powers.

The church has long known that this is their best and most important window. Its attractiveness was remarked upon in the Parish Magazine when it was first installed, and Alan Dobson in his 1964 history of the church wrote that it was the most beautiful window there. <sup>29</sup> When the rebuilding project took place in the late 1970s, it was decided to sell all but three of the windows, even selling an 1882 Morris & Co. window of St Peter and St Margaret – the church's patron saint and the patron saint of the previous church, which St Peter's replaced. The windows selected for retention were all moved from their original positions. One which had been near the font is retained in front of the font in its new location, while two lights containing small crossed keys and a bishop's crozier were shifted northwards along the west end. The Acts

of Mercy window was moved from the demolished north transept into the sanctuary, the holiest part of the church. Figure 3 demonstrates how the Acts of Mercy window is presently installed, and how the rebuild keeps the shell of the original nave and the tower.

It is regrettable that the heads of each light and the rose window were deemed 'surplus to requirement' by the architect of the rebuild.<sup>30</sup> This was likely in part due to the planned changes to the building, which removed all large window openings and lowered the roof. Certainly, there are no longer any apertures, or even space, where the whole window could now fit. It is of vital importance that these panels, which are not presently installed, are properly looked after and at the very least stored correctly, to prevent further damage.

There is one last thing to resolve: the missing panels. Nothing has turned up on the missing trefoil, and given the damage sustained by some of the trefoils in storage, it is quite probable that it was considered too badly damaged to be worth keeping and was discarded. Or perhaps, as is the case with the final roundel, something more deliberate has occurred. It is not possible to go into too much detail on what has happened to the final roundel at this point, due to a complex legal situation, but what can be said is that I have discovered its location and it is reputed to still be intact. The reasons for its long absence from St Peter's are at least in part due to those in charge of the 1970s rebuild not following correct procedures; indeed, the faculty for the rebuild does not go into enough detail to allow for the sweeping changes they made. It is hoped that more can be said on this in the future.

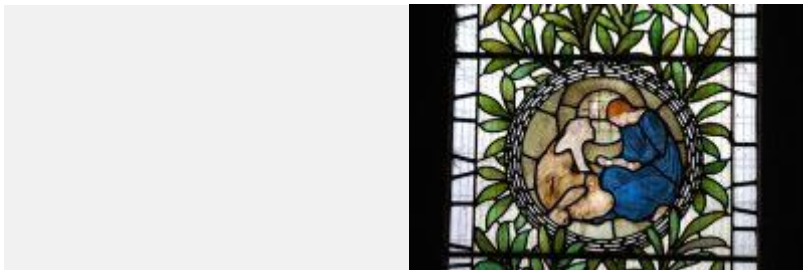


Fig. 12. Visiting the Prisoners (Image © Stephen Huws).

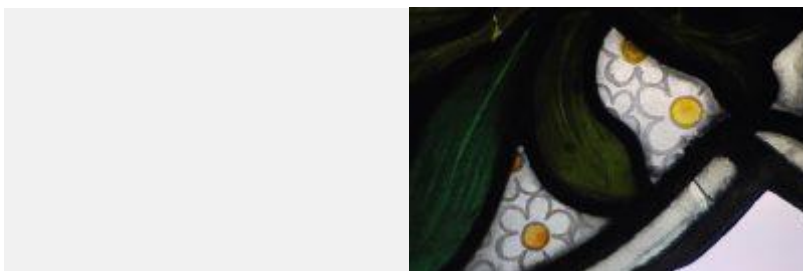


Fig. 13. Flower detailing amongst the foliage background (Image © Stephen Huws).

Towards the end of his book, Sewter worries about the future of some vulnerable Morris & Co. windows:

*A great many Victorian churches are becoming redundant, or else inadequate to the needs of growing communities...one ever present danger arises from the lack of records of many nineteenth-century works of art in churches, at a parish level, and the resulting ignorance of the responsible clergy as to what their churches actually contain.*<sup>31</sup>

This could have been written specifically for Bramley, as it is exactly the fate that has befallen the windows there. In their attempts to be ready for the future, the decisions of the team involved in the rebuild have ensured that Bramley is neither built to last for the future nor fit to carry forwards what little heritage was left. Hopefully, this can at least serve as a warning to other churches of the damage that can be done to heritage which is not understood or looked after properly. The importance of the Acts of Mercy window as an original design, which was reused by Morris & Co. so many times, is surely reason enough to warrant its preservation. Its history within the church shows in microcosm the dangers of such brash intervention in ageing churches. Bramley's is a sad story. I hope that the discovery of the remaining panels from the Acts of Mercy window can lead to the missing pieces of this window being recovered, and that the uninstalled portion of the window can find a new home, where it will be cared for and saved from further damage. I hope this window can have a happier future.

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