

Henry Edmund Goodridge and the West Window of Malmesbury Abbey

The West Window of Malmesbury Abbey is a prominent feature, alongside the frontage of the Old Bell, in a busy corner of Malmesbury.

Inside, it is equally impressive: while the interior of Malmesbury Abbey is primarily Norman, this splendid, early 19C., Gothic Revival window dominates the west end of the nave and is all that remains of extensive works of 1822-26.



Photo: Barry Dent

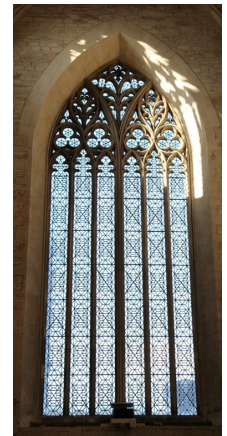


Photo: © Christina Staff



Photo Credit: Athelstan Museum,
Malmesbury

The Abbey once extended for three more bays westward, until the West Tower fell towards the end of the 17th C. A rather crude wall was quickly erected with a wooden-framed window. This late 19th C photograph shows the present window at the left. The cannon in the picture is said to have come from Sebastopol and stood on the empty plot until commandeered for the WW2 war effort.

Only a tantalising fragment of the original West Doorway survives, plus a few shards of Mediaeval glass, probably from the lost window above.



Photo: Barry Dent

On the 10th of April 1822, under the auspices of the Vicar, George Bisset, an architect from Bath, Henry Edmund Goodridge, submitted plans for a redesigned West End to the Incorporated Church Building Society: *“New roof timbers, groining of the west end, west window half blocked up and proposed new gallery with new seating”*. Within a fortnight, the plans were modified to enlarge the gallery and replace the window in its entirety. This modified version was accepted and duly completed ; Goodridge was paid £227 for the work.

The origins of the window shed light (the pun is inevitable!) on social interactions and mores of the early 19th C., so we need to look in detail at H E Goodridge, George Bisset and the other characters involved.

Henry Edmund Goodridge was the most significant architect practising in Bath during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Over his forty-five-year career he progressed from Regency Greek Revival into Victorian Extravagance and was greatly influenced - probably from his Malmesbury experience – by the Gothic Revival. Despite that, he remains a rather shadowy figure, possibly being outshone by reputation of two John Woods (Father and son) from the previous century. Sadly, despite having lived well into the photographic era, the only possible likeness of him is a plaster silhouette inside one of his buildings: “Fiesole”, now Bath Youth Hostel

Although a Non-conformist Protestant, he was much favoured by Roman Catholic clergy and an important, early commission was Downside College and Chapel of 1820-23. However, he is considered by some critics to be “frivolous” on account of eccentric commissions such as Beckford’s Tower on Lansdowne Hill.

(With acknowledgements and thanks to Dr Amy Frost for access to her thesis: “The Stylistic Development of H. E. Goodridge”)

Reverend George Bisset (1765 - 1828) was the son of Alexander Bisset and Jane Bockland, whose father is believed to have been a General. At age 17, he was admitted to Christ Church College, Oxford and duly received his B.A. and M.A. by 1790 and in 1793 he succeeded Henry Strong as Vicar of Malmesbury.

There, he fell in love with **Catherine Howard** (1779 –1850), the daughter of the 15th Earl of Suffolk, who strongly opposed their marriage, effectively forcing Bisset into a long exile as a missionary in Ceylon (Modern Sri Lanka). After a distinguished career there, and the death of the 15th Earl, he returned to Malmesbury c1820, married Catherine and set about the restoration of the Abbey's West End. Their story has been told by Dr Diane Lovell of Blinn College, Texas, based on a cache of letters discovered in a Cotswold cottage.

The West End restoration was financed by subscription led, we believe by the **16th Earl, Thomas Howard**. He was Catherine's brother and their father's second son. His elder brother, Charles Nevison Howard, had sadly died in an accident with his shotgun in 1800.

We know two of the subscribers: one was H E Goodridge himself, who gave five guineas (£5.25, equivalent to £500—£1000 today).

The other was **John Britton**, a local boy made good, whose drawings of Malmesbury Abbey, published only a few years before Goodridge's project, undoubtedly influenced him.



Lady Catherine Bisset, née Howard
C1802 by Charles Wilkin
Scottish National Portrait Gallery



Charles Nevison Howard & Thomas Howard
Before 1800, Artist unknown

Born in humble circumstances in Kington St Michael, John Britton was orphaned at an early age and went to London where he did odd jobs and had some success as a writer.

His break came when he was commissioned by a Salisbury publisher, in conjunction with his friend Edward Wedlake Brayley, to write "The Beauties of Wiltshire". The first of many topographical volumes, which included etchings of Malmesbury Abbey. He may well have met George Bisset at that time.



Malmesbury Abbey West Front 1806.
Courtesy Devizes Museum



John Britton (1771-1851)
by John Wood, 1845
National Portrait Gallery

While Britton made little money directly from his works, such did his reputation become that a Britton Society was formed which awarded him £1000, and he was subsequently granted a civil list pension by Disraeli, then chancellor of the exchequer.

Britton was an earnest advocate of the preservation of national monuments, proposing in 1837 the formation of a society comparable to the later Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (founded 1877).

At Britton's suggestion, the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society (WANHS) was founded in 1852: "to cultivate and collect information on archaeology and Natural History in their various branches and to form a Library and Museum illustrating the History, natural, civic and ecclesiastic of the County of Wilts." His library and artifacts subsequently became the core of the Museum's collection.

All in all, he was more than a century ahead of Pevsner, Betjeman, Clifton Taylor and others who led the heritage movements of the second half of the 20th century.



Proposed Interior c1822 by HE Goodridge.
Courtesy DeVizes Museum

The works were duly completed by 1824 /6 (accounts vary) , in accordance with Goodridge’s drawing which we can compare with a later, Victorian photograph of the interior. A major difference between the images is the presence of an organ mounted on the gallery, obscuring much of the window.

How and why it got there is explained by the purpose of the West Gallery itself. West Galleries are largely an 18thC fashion. But their use persisted well into the 19thC.

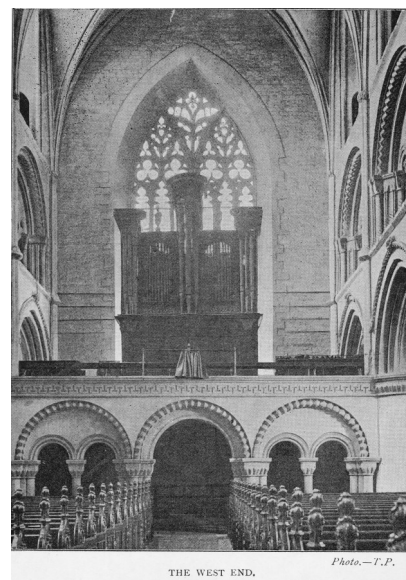


Photo: Rev Thomas Perkins c1900

They evolved following the Commonwealth and Charles II’s Restoration, when congregational singing in Church became permissible. Soon, the better singers formed a specific choir and needed somewhere to partially separate them from the general worshippers. A raised gallery at the back of the church was built, behind the worshippers but still facing the altar. In time, the singers were joined by fiddlers and woodwind players and in time, a genre of music evolved which has sparked an interest and revival in the late 20thC.

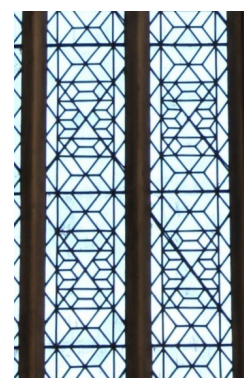
A problem arose in some instances. While the singers were generally drawn from the congregation, the musicians could be independent, external professionals and, sadly, sometimes rowdy! A single organist was easier to discipline. This may have affected Malmesbury, because in our case, a suitable organ was available, in store in Bath. This elderly but serviceable instrument built by Abraham Jordan in 1714, had been removed from St Benet Fink in London and was purchased for £100, some time between 1824 and 1830. It had not formed part of the original plan.

Having music at the back was not necessarily convenient. Members of the congregation were known to climb on the pews and turn their backs to the altar to “face the music” as it were. Nevertheless, the organ, albeit in some disrepair, lasted until the Brakspear restoration of the early 20thC.

Countrywide, changes in Anglican practices were already underway. The rise of the Oxford Movement during the 19th C and the publication of Hymns Ancient and Modern in 1861 paved the way for the position of organ and choir as they currently stand. Now all but the window itself has been swept away leaving only a few scars in the stonework.

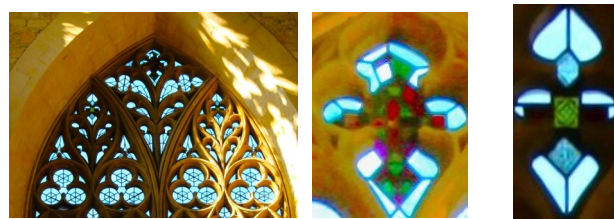
The West Window Glazing.

The window, in Gothic Revival style, resembles the 14thC clerestory windows of the nave. The glazing is an intricate pattern of clear glass, because there is a great gap in the history of ecclesiastical stained glass in England. With the Reformation, Mediaeval glass was suddenly Popish and out of favour. The iconoclasts had a field day! In our case, what part of our original that they did not destroy, was lost when the West Tower came down. Stained glass expertise was largely lost until its revival in the mid-19th C – a couple of decades later than Goodridge’s window. Of course, we are happy to have some good, early 20th C glass elsewhere in the Abbey.



Photos: © Christina Staff

There are, however, some tiny pieces of coloured glass, high in the tracery at the top of the window. These are probably excavated shards of Mediaeval glass but so far, no explanation has been offered as to why Goodridge placed them there. His little joke, perhaps?



The window remains for us as a testament to the work of a remarkable vicar and an underappreciated architect, and as an illustration of social interactions in the early 19thC.