

# Window of opportunity

Tom Stacey on how, as an act of penance, his great-great-uncle donated the great west window to King's College Chapel

As the choristers of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, fill our ears on radio and our eyes on television with their double Christmas bill of carols for the birth of Jesus, the light that plays upon the Chapel's sublime fan vaulting is, as ever, exquisite. Yet behind that light I have a tale to unfold, mysterious and dark.

The Chapel's great west window was the largest single scene in stained glass in Europe when consecrated in 1879. For all I know, it is so still. It depicts the Last Judgment — what mediaeval iconography called a 'Doom'. Bottom right, angels with flaming swords drive the damned down into one of Saddam Hussein's torture dens. Bottom left, the blessed are ushered up to Paradise by heavenly facilitators and angels blowing straightened-out trombones.

Paradise is an enormous colonnaded amphitheatre dominated by Our Lord seated in Judgment, flanked by apostles and saints galore and, in Jesus's own metaphor as reported by Matthew, with his (saved) sheep coming in on his right and the (damned) goats going out on his left. St Michael is on hand with his scales, and no appeal process evident.

Oh, to be a sheep. Such a thought surely gripped the mind of the ex-fellow of King's who proposed and donated this mid-Victorian Doom in murrey, cobalt, sanguine and carnelian glass, which in our family is known (in hushed tones) as Stacey's Repentance.

King's, Cambridge, was founded in 1441 by the pious if extravagant young Henry VI, the year after he had founded Eton. Let's not 'tax the royal saint with vain expense', as Wordsworth was later to counsel us: the building of King's' immense chapel was snagged by Henry himself intermittently losing his marbles, the Wars of the Roses, the Yorkist terror and the Tudor accession. Henry VIII vowed to complete the Chapel but his stained-glass team had not got around to the great west window by 1547 when Edward VI took over and (leaned on by Cranmer) turned against visual aids in church. So white light poured in from the west all those glum Protestant centuries until — well — my great-great-uncle Frank was moved to secure his personal transfer from goat to sheep.

Francis Stacey, born 1830, was a Scholar at Eton and gravitated automatically to King's, Cambridge, which was then a

stitch-up for Old Etonians, filling as they did all 48 student places. Frank Stacey had been an Eton swell: in the cricket XI (played in top hats) for the last two of his nine years at the school, keeper of the Wall, president of Pop, and playing the organ for Evensong at Windsor Castle's St George's Chapel for worshipping royalty.

I guess Frank burned the candle at both ends. At Cambridge he kept wicket for the First XI, drove a four-in-hand, became a fellow in 1853 and played first-class cricket under the *nom-de-frappe* 'F. de Bracey' in case his rich uncle came to imagine he was neglecting his Bar studies. King's fellows weren't allowed to marry, women constituting an unmanageable distraction. Celibacy did not equal chastity, and Uncle Frank had a girl in the town.

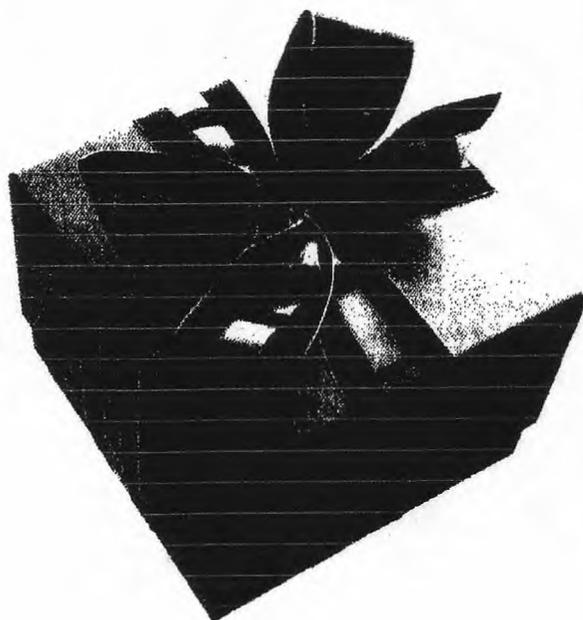
The lady of Uncle Frank's heart and loins, though hot-blooded (so my father confided when I was 40 and old enough to know, and he was passing me Frank's memorabilia), was of respectable standing, possibly even married. We don't know her name. What we do know is that when Uncle Frank, at 30, turned to another lady with marriage in view, he passed his Cambridge amour to another King's fellow, one William Ridler, a year his junior, whom he had known through Eton and King's since the age of 12. Both had lodgings in the College's Gibbs Building, Stacey's at ground level.

On the night of 14 August 1860, Frank was woken by a rap at his window. A cab-driver thrust him a sealed note. 'Come at once,' the lady had scrawled. 'Something dreadful has happened.' He threw on his clothes, and dashed in the cab to the house in town. The distraught girl conducted him upstairs. There in her bed lay Ridler, lifeless.

No hint has entered the account of that night of any but a natural cause — an asthmatic attack, perhaps, a paroxysm of consumptive coughing, a treacherously weak heart. . . . Yet there lay the body, the bucket indubitably kicked, and a lady exposed to devastating scandal. What does the Christian gentleman do?

We Staceys rise to such occasions. Uncle Frank buttoned and belted the corpse into its clothes and humped it down the stairs into the waiting cab. Perhaps he slapped its

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face, upbraiding it for drunkenness; perhaps he paid off the cabman to keep his mouth shut. The quick and the dead disembarked at Gibbs Buildings where the former heaved the latter into his, Ridler's, rooms, dressed the corpse in its nightshirt and put it to bed, where it was found in the morning by the bedder.

Presumably a physician was called; yet it seems no questions were asked. On 18 April, the weekly *Cambridge Chronicle* carried an ingenuous notice among its classified deaths: 'August 15, after a long illness, William Edward Ridler Esq., MA, Fellow of King's College, in his 29th year of age'. The College recorded Ridler dying 'in college'. The 'long illness' smacks of a cover. If death was looming, he would surely have been back at home in the Cotswolds, not at King's.

Frank quit his fellowship that year, to marry in 1862 — childlessly, as it turned out. We think he never told his wife; but he confided in his brother John, my great-grandfather and always Frank's best pal, who had played cricket for Oxford and collected a second degree at Cambridge, and had just returned from being chaplain to the British Embassy in Rome. Maybe it was John who suggested a penance the Good Shepherd could scarcely fail to spot.

Was penance really called for? Frank thought so. He settled into Llandough Castle, practised law on the South Wales circuit, played more cricket, hunted foxes and otters, drank port, became high sheriff of Glamorgan, and worked on the big window. The thing took years. The first design he submitted was turned down by the college for including scenes (such as the martyrdom of St Alban) 'not rooted in scripture'. The pedants. The second design was criticised for including one of the damned — all the damned are men — in the nude. The prudes. The family's arms, perhaps as a reminder to the Almighty, were slipped into an upper light.

When at last the glass was up and in, a congregation of nobs was treated to an oratorio by Louis Spohr (a composer rated second only to Beethoven just then) and repaired to Hall for a feast of *soupe à la reine*, salmon, filets de bœuf aux olives, a quarter of lamb and Victoria pudding. Uncle Frank was alongside the provost, raising a privy glass to the luckless Willic Ridler . . . supposing himself, we must trust, to have made it to sheep.

And Cambridge? The year after the death in the awkward bed, 1861, King's opened half its scholar places to non-Etonians. By the year of the window's consecration, King's had risked admitting 'certain female students to inter-collegiate lectures in Hall'. Of King's' 400-odd undergraduates today, two in five are girls and four in five are state-school entrants, making King's the university's champion in lofty-leftie levelling, but strapped for cash and low on alumni with a few hundred thousand to spend on their college to square the founder's Maker.