



Memorial Windows and Plaques

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a noticeable increase in requests for new memorial windows and plaques. This paper sets out the general position of the Chancellor and the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches, although the phraseology is the Archdeacons' alone.

IN GENERAL

There is a presumption that we do not bring into our churches further memorial windows or plaques (especially the latter) unless some exceptional circumstances make them appropriate. The existence of a similar memorial plaque or window does not in itself constitute an argument for the installation of another.

To be more precise: the individual or individuals to be commemorated by the plaque of window must have some strong and probably lengthy connection with the church into which the plaque or window is to be placed. In addition, such an individual must have made some exceptional contribution to that church's life. A lengthy period of years during which that person has worshipped in the church will not normally qualify. In the case of an institution or organisation, the connection with the church must be clear and defined. Mere geographical location will not necessarily qualify.

PLAQUES

Plaques in churches have traditionally recorded the burial of a particular person in the churchyard (or occasionally elsewhere).

They have not usually been installed to denote the generosity of an individual in making a substantial donation to the church. Sometimes a PCC asks for a plaque to be erected in memory of a particular individual - possibly still alive - who has, for example, paid for the repair of an organ or the installation of a bell. Requests for this sort of plaque have not traditionally been granted in churches, since it is assumed that the donor will have given generously, not to receive the thanks of others, but so that God may be more glorified. Such plaques will not normally be recommended by the DAC.

One reason for this rule is that if plaques are more generally allowed, the walls of mediaeval churches will quickly be filled with plaques of this period alone. 200 years hence this will not be a welcome feature of a building whose history is much longer.

An alternative way of commemorating the generosity of donors has sometimes been the installation of a wooden "Benefactions Board"; sometimes 19th century versions of these are seen on the internal walls of a church tower.

In the exceptional circumstances of a memorial plaque being erected, it is important to produce one which will be not just a historical record, but a thing of beauty. In this area there are expert letter-cutters who will produce something worthy of taking a place in our church buildings, and which will usually cost

very little more than a mass-produced item which will not so grace our buildings.

MEMORIAL WINDOWS

The historical purpose of pictorial windows in churches has been to illustrate the Gospel. Prior to the existence of general literacy and the easy availability of books, pictorial windows in churches were one of the principal teaching aids available to the Church.

Bearing in mind, there needs even today to be some extraordinary exceptional reason to allow into our buildings a pictorial window which does not serve this specific purpose. It is true that a number inappropriate designs have in the past been allowed in churches (and even cathedrals), but this in itself is no argument for allowing yet more inappropriate designs.

It is important to recognise that when we adorn our church buildings with a new window, we are placing there something which will probably remain in place for the next 200 years. The window therefore must speak not only to this present generation, but to generations to come. There should be a timeless quality about what is portrayed which speaks not only of persons and events within our own lifetime, but speaks to those for whom the person or event commemorated will be unknown. Windows which have reference solely to particular events of the 20 Century, however, significant those events, are not appropriate adornments for our churches unless the design also speaks with an enduring significance and relevance to those of future generations for whom the actual events will merely be a memory of distant history.

In particular, there must always be in a pictorial window in a church building a clear reference to God and to his Gospel. Designs which illustrate a scriptural narrative are highly preferred. Alternatively, the text accompanying the pictorial design needs to have clear scriptural reference; interesting poetry is no substitute in a church building for scripture.

Clergy, churchwardens and PCCs are strongly advised to seek the advice of the Diocesan Advisory Committee at the earliest possible stage, as soon as an idea has been suggested.

SEEK ADVICE AND HELP!

Expert advice is available to parishes at all stages of the design and execution of memorial windows and plaques.

If an idea comes from outside a PCC (for example, from a military association), it is important to seek advice well before the PCC has considered the proposal at any depth. It creates a very difficult situation if a PCC has become strongly attached to a particular design which is then felt to be unsuitable by the DAC, as those charged with the responsibility to maintain the highest standards of our church buildings. Discussions between all parties at a very early stage, when the idea is still in sketch form, will almost always result in a conclusion which satisfies everyone.

We all want to hand on to generations yet unborn our church buildings in an even finer condition than they were when we inherited them. They need to be buildings whose general state of repair speaks of our God of beauty; the content of the buildings needs also to speak of the Gospel or our Lord Jesus Christ through word and picture alike. Then God may be glorified through our buildings for generations to come.