

Arms and the town

Veronica Smith on the glories of the stained glass and heraldry at Rochdale Town Hall.



The magnificent stained-glass windows on the staircase of Rochdale Town Hall feature the civic coats of arms created by the London firm of Heaton, Butler and Bayne. Transforming traditional heraldry into a modern, industrial artform, the windows provide a narrative of Rochdale's prominence in world industry. Ascending the stairs, there are, at the top, nine brightly coloured three-light windows. Divided by mullions and transoms, with rose windows for traceries, these display local, national and international civic heraldry, with all the towns and cities represented linked to Rochdale through politics, commerce and trade.

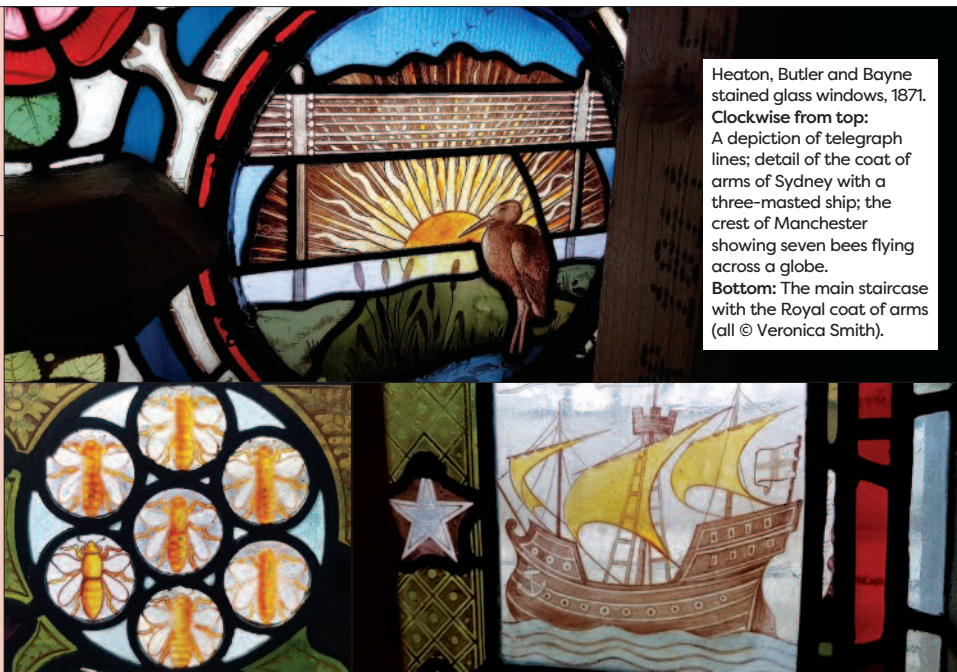
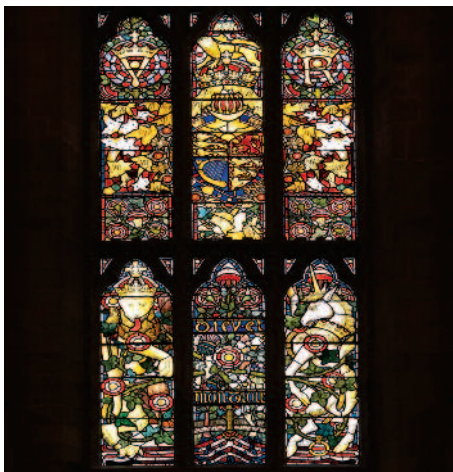
The Gothic splendour of the Grade-I-listed Rochdale Town Hall is the work of William Henry Crossland – he designed it in 1864 and the building was completed in 1871. Crossland chose Heaton, Butler and Bayne to undertake all the glazing work, and the firm was one of the most prolific stained-glass producers in the second half of the nineteenth century, with examples of their work found in secular and ecclesiastical buildings both in Britain and across the world.

Corporate, civic and institutional heraldry boomed in the nineteenth century and when heraldry expert Charles Wilfrid Scott-Giles was writing in 1933, 500 local authorities in England and Wales had obtained coats of arms with three-quarters of these granted in the previous 100 years. The rush to obtain coats of arms can be linked to a desire to commemorate and impress the civic identity and power of a town or city. This resurgent interest in and reinvention of heraldry allowed for much innovation in stained glass.

Rochdale Town Hall embodies the essence of this civic display. In the first set of three windows ascending the staircase, Rochdale is placed beside the central Royal Coat of Arms, with the familiar motto 'Dieu et mon droit' in a striking yellow glass on a blue background, and the date AD 1871 painted at the top of the

central panel. All the other towns and cities – both national and international – revolve around town and the British Empire. Many of the new coats of arms gave prominence to emblems of industry, and this was particularly significant for many northern towns. The character of civic heraldry was in this way adapted to the changing times, with emblems such as locomotives, and corps of miners, glass-blowers, smiths and fishermen. According to Scott-Giles, these are the 'industrious but un-picturesque figures who have been called from their work to uphold the arms of their cities'.

Rochdale's coat of arms was granted in 1857. It contains a fleece, woolpack, cotton and millrind, representing the wool, cotton, and iron industries, which puts it firmly in the northern civic tradition of modern heraldry. However, the motto, *Crede signo* ('believe in the sign'), is based on that of the Byron family who owned the manor of Rochdale; their family motto: *Crede Byron* was created with its coat of arms in 1643. This sets up a fine contrast between the modernity of Rochdale's heraldic imagery and the traditional nature of its motto. The stained-glass arms of Rochdale have been designed to stand out in a highly elaborate design,



Heaton, Butler and Bayne stained glass windows, 1871. Clockwise from top: A depiction of telegraph lines; detail of the coat of arms of Sydney with a three-masted ship; the crest of Manchester showing seven bees flying across a globe. Bottom: The main staircase with the Royal coat of arms (all © Veronica Smith).

rendered in uniform cool tones of blue, green and grey with stylised, swirling leaves around them.

Above these central panels, representations of smaller local towns such as Clitheroe, Blackburn and Bury create a visual geography. The windows to the east and west display the arms of other Lancashire and Yorkshire towns and of British ports with commercial trade links to Rochdale. A selection of these contain further symbols of modern industries. Blackburn's arms, granted in 1852, contain three bees *volant* (wings outstretched in flight), with bees being emblematic of skill, perseverance and industry. Bees also appear in the crest of Manchester's arms and on the shields of Burnley, and Barrow-in-Furness. Blackburn's white shield is representative of the local production of calico, and their motto, *Arte et labore* ('By skill and toil') has similarities with Manchester's *Concilio et labore* ('By counsel and by labour'). Ships are prominent, with Liverpool, the West India Merchants, Belfast, Barrow-in-Furness, Bristol, Trinity House and the Levant Merchants all showing beautifully rendered vessels.

References to trade are also represented in the tracery lights which contain a sailing ship, a steamer, telegraph and railway. These small panels, so high up they are almost hidden from view, are the pieces that connect the towns and cities represented below them. They are a fascinating addition to the composition of the windows, reflecting a modern world that had come into being as the Town Hall was completed, with technology replacing angels and Biblical stories. Allowing for a reciprocal narrative around the staircase windows, they complete the series of heraldic panels that narrate the story of Rochdale and its growth into a significant and powerful town. ●

Veronica Smith is a stained glass artist, conservator and researcher.