

St Luke's

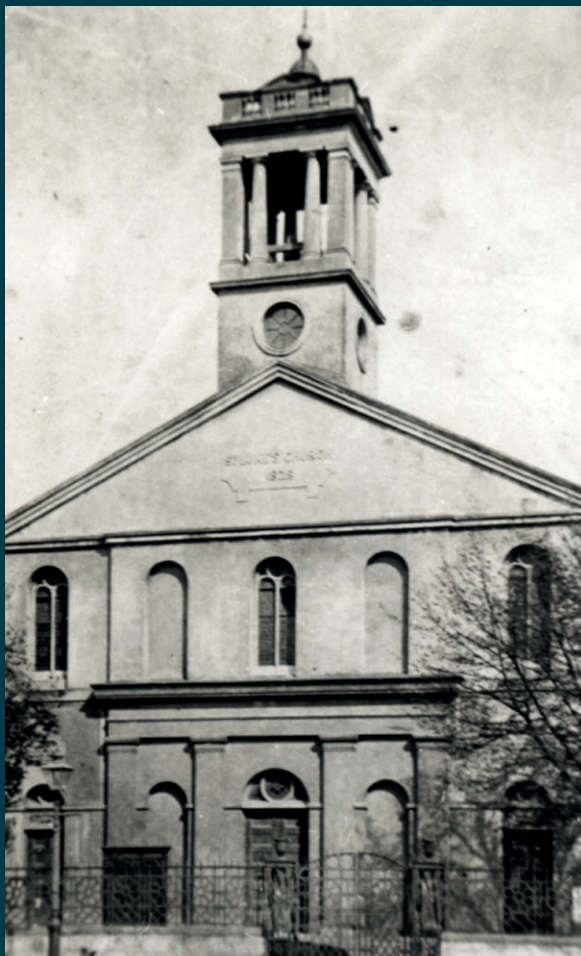
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Transformation of St Luke's

The Box is Plymouth's new museum, art gallery and cultural centre. Originally three buildings, it now occupies the former City Museum and Art Gallery, Central Library and St Luke's Church, providing 13 new exhibition spaces.

The transformation of St Luke's Church into a major new cultural destination and world class exhibition space aligns well with the pursuits of Saint Luke, the patron saint of artists, painters, lace makers, sculptors and craft workers. An important part of the renovation of St Luke's was to re-instate the east window with a striking new contemporary design.



History of St Luke's

St Luke's has played a significant part in the religious and social history of Plymouth. Built in 1828 by architect James Henry Ball, The Anglican Church of Saint Luke the Evangelist, was formerly known as Charles Chapel. It served as a chapel of ease to Charles Church for 46 years. In March 1874, with a growing local community and expanding parish, Charles Chapel became St Luke's Church.

This development saw a number of changes to the building, including the erection of a new chancel in 1878. The large pulpit and reading desk were rearranged and the church was refurbished. During this period the vicar, Reverend L Hawker, held services in the schoolroom. The building work was undertaken by Messrs Palk and Partridge and cost approximately £490 (the equivalent of nearly £60,000 today).



In 1888, a large east window was installed above the altar in St Luke's. Additional restoration work was undertaken in 1891. One of the church's most interesting features - an outdoor pulpit - was installed in 1913. A plaque behind the pulpit reveals that it was built "In memory of Caroline Louisa Courtney, wife of Bishop Frederick Courtney, 5th Bishop of Nova Scotia and past Incumbent of Charles Chapel." The Box intends to continue using this outdoor space for outdoor art, music, dance and performance events in the future.



Serving the community



St Luke's served its community well, hosting many communal services during its years as a place of worship.

Joan and Mervin Harries got married in St Luke's in the spring of 1949. At the time, Joan was living nearby, just off Ebrington Street.

Joan Harries: "Just because I was living nearby, I got married in St Luke's chapel because in those days you had no choice but to marry in the parish where you lived. I had a beautiful day with lots of guests.

I remember the lovely frontage to the building and the pulpit outside for the preacher- at that time, there were preachers on all the street corners. I had the chance to look round the chapel a few years back when the library was in there and it was packed full of shelves and books. I'm looking forward to seeing the new window when it opens again."

For 140 years, the 2,000 seat church served a flourishing parish, and even functioned

as an air-raid shelter for the local community during World War II. When Charles Church was destroyed in the Blitz of 1941, St Luke's welcomed its congregation until they were allocated a new place of worship in the nearby St Matthias Church.

Although St Luke's remained unscathed during the war, many dwellings in the parish did not. As a result, a large number of residents were forced to move out to new post-war housing developments, causing the church's congregation to diminish. Its last service, held on Easter Sunday 1962, welcomed a meagre 54 attendees.

Despite initial plans for St Luke's to be demolished so the land could be used for development, in 1964 it was bought by the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and citizens of the City of Plymouth and was subsequently used for secular purposes. In 1969, the church was converted into an annexe for Plymouth City Council Library Services. It has since been used as the bookbinding department and, in more recent times, the library headquarters.



The East Window

The original stained glass window, installed in 1888, and crafted by Plymouth-based company Fouracre and Watson of Stonehouse, depicted the Nativity and the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Magi. Fouracre and Watson's reputation was elevated when they won a Bronze award at the 1878 Paris Exhibition and Fourth in order of merit award at the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1881. When St Luke's closed its doors as a church, the



window was removed and reinstalled in St Matthias Church on North Hill. The window aperture remained unglazed and boarded over until the recent renovation.

In 2018, Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes, was commissioned to design a new east window to remain as a permanent feature and a lasting legacy of The Box's inaugural exhibition in St Luke's. Antunes represented the Portuguese Pavilion at Italy's 57th Venice Biennale, an internationally renowned contemporary visual arts festival, in 2019.

Inspiration for the new East Window – ‘Sibylla’

Antunes’ inspiration for the window came from Maria Sibylla Merian’s book *Insects of Surinam*, first published in 1705. The Box’s copy, published in 1726, is one of the many uniquely crafted books from its Cottonian Collection. Illustrated with engravings based on Merian’s drawings and meticulously hand-coloured, the book was pivotal in its authentic depiction of natural history in the late 1600s.

In 1699, Merian travelled to Dutch Surinam (a plantation colony in South America) to study and record

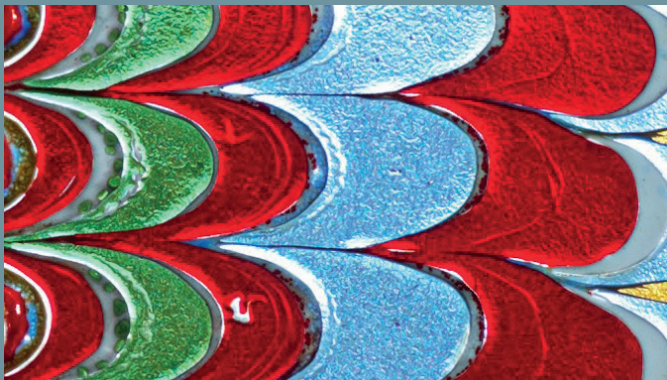


tropical insects. She was an early pioneer in botany and biology, their taxonomy and illustration. Her drawings are extraordinarily vivid in colour and detail. After her death, Merian gained a prominent name in the scientific community. Butterflies, a moth, a bird-eating spider, a lizard, a bird, a toad, a snail and an assortment of flowering plants have all been named after her.

Antunes was drawn to Merian’s unique creativity and brave, independent spirit, and drew on the marbled end pages of the book.

“My commission began with a visit to The Box’s offsite store where I was captivated by the Cottonian Collection, and in particular by the books that are part of it. I was interested in revealing and enlarging a fragment of Maria Sibylla Merian’s book - amplifying what seems a minor detail and seeing it enlarged.”

Fabrication



Antunes collaborated with architects and stonemasons, ensuring they worked closely within the tracery and stonework of the original window at St Luke's to realise her design. The production of the window was led by specialist glass studio, Glas Mäder which is based in Zurich, Switzerland.

"Like all my projects, the other important aspect for me is the fabrication. Some of the work Glas Mäder have produced is incredible and after visiting their studio I knew the window had to be made with them. The window uses a fused glass technique so the finish is not graphic or flat, but vibrant and almost sculptural."

The window has been fabricated using a process called fusing. Rather than the traditional stained glass methods used to create the other windows in the church, it has been cut from large sheets of coloured glass which have been melted together at extremely high temperatures (around 800°C) in a kiln. For Antunes' artwork, individual shapes were cut to replicate the marbled pattern. Several sheets of coloured glass were then layered or stacked before melting to create the specific hues. This technique enabled her design to imitate the irregularities, tonality and textured relief-like finish found in the original marbled end papers of *Insects of Surinam*.

Each of the larger panels have been made in three sections. Traditionally a horizontal line would be visible where they join. For Antunes' window the lines correlate with the design so that the viewer is unable to see a join. This decision and detail was essential to the artists vision.

Inaugural exhibition

In addition to the fused glass window, Antunes has created a complex installation titled *Sequences, Inversions and Permutations* in St Luke's as part of *Making It*, the opening contemporary art exhibition at The Box.

Antunes uses sculpture to connect with architecture, craft and design. Fusing the unfamiliar with the familiar, she works with materials such as leather, rope and glass, often used in ancient craft traditions, to highlight the histories rooted in material production.



With thanks to Leonor Antunes, Graham Naylor,
Joan Harries, Glenn Carter and Urs Rickenbach

Photograph Credits:

The Box, Plymouth (Pgs 2-6)

Reverend James, preaching from the pulpit
Royal Army Chaplains' Museum (Pg 3)

Nick Ash (Pg 7 - & large poster of the new east window)

Dom Moore (front cover image)

The Box visiting hours are Tuesday to Sunday and
bank holidays, from 10am to 5pm.



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