



The story of Whitefriars Glass in eleven Norfolk churches

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By Mike Hicks

What would you say is the connection between eleven Norfolk churches and a vase known as "The Drunken Bricklayer"?

The answer is "glass."

Whitefriars Glass supplied some, if not all, of the stained-glass windows for eleven Norfolk churches, created by James Powell & Son, later to become Whitefriars Glass Ltd, who had been respected glass makers in London since 1680, operating in various sites throughout London.

Their most iconic stained-glass windows were two very notable pieces in Liverpool Cathedral in the great central space.

The Norfolk churches include Carbrooke, Coltishall, Dersingham, East Bilney, East Carleton, East Lexham, Filby, Garboldisham, Great Dunham, Homehale, and Lessingham.

Obviously, to survive, Whitefriars had to move with the times, and they were not frightened to do this.



The 'Drunken Bricklayer' vases with textured outside finish. *(Image: Supplied)*

We move forward then from the late Victorian period to the 1960s, and they had a past history of making wonderful domestic items in glass, mainly suites of drinking glass, bowls, jugs, etc., this was a large part of their trade.

However, a former art student from the Royal College of Art was employed in the 1960s as a designer.

His ideas were quite radical, and his designs were extremely modern, using moulds for vases that included nails, bark, wire, etc., to give the surface of the vase a textured effect.

Add this to the modern conceived design, such as vases with names like Banjo, Bricklayer, or Drunken Bricklayer; these designs reflected the modern Scandinavian idea.

These were an instant hit and secured the fortunes of Whitefriars Glass, thanks to the innovations of Geoffrey Baxter.

There was a great demand for these products ordered by such well-known stores as Selfridges and Fortnum and Mason, and that was sixty years ago, and demand is still out there, with many of the very rare colours and shapes making many thousands of pounds.

However, smaller items can still be bought for around fifty pounds or less.

For its time in the 1960s, the public were pleased to have colour in their homes.

Whitefriars certainly produced it with bright blue, bright red, and almost iridescent orange.

There are various glass makers emulating Baxter, but only his items make money, so do take care to buy only the genuine item.

Their former trade in clear drinking glasses has suffered a major downturn in the last ten years; these are seemingly no longer used in the same quantities.

Unfortunately, it has affected cut glass, even famous names like Waterford have suffered enormously.

Obviously, we need more Geoffrey Baxters.

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