

# The Commissioning of the stained-glass windows at Birmingham Cathedral

This script was written by Ash Bayliss and is based on letters shared between Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, Julius Alfred Chatwin and Emma Villers-Wilkes in 1887.



## The characters

- **Burne-Jones** is the designer of the windows. He won't be rushed, can throw tantrums, and will do anything to wind up Miss Wilkes, much to the annoyance of Morris and Chatwin.
- **Chatwin** is the architect at St Philip's Church. His design for an extension to the church included big openings for stained-glass windows.
- **Morris** is one of the sensible ones. Along with Chatwin, he wants to get the job done with as little fuss as possible.
- **Villers-Wilkes** was a determined woman keen to honour her brother who had died by contributing to the windows and a memorial in his memory.



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# The conversation

Using the script below, you can re-enact the commissioning of the windows using the four characters.

**Morris:** Dear Mr Chatwin- Regarding the windows at St Philips, I've spoken to Mr Burne-Jones, and he was quite certain that "The Good Shepherd" and "Christ at the Well" would not be subjects likely to go well with the East window as it would be impossible with a multiplicity of figures to get the sort of colour which would go well with the East Window.

Clearly "The Crucifixion" is the proper subject to balance the Nativity. I will also suggest "The Transfiguration" but it seems too much like "The Ascension".

I will write once I've spoken to Burne-Jones on Monday. Yours faithfully, William Morris. P.S- Please mention these thoughts to Miss Wilkes I'm hoping she'll be amenable to the ideas. I've heard she can be a little.... pedantic

**Chatwin:** Dear Miss Wilkes. Will it be possible to visit on Tuesday? I have some proposals from Mr William Morris and Mr Burne-Jones about the St Philip's windows.

They were thinking "The Nativity" or "The Crucifixion". I can go through all other suggestions with you when I see you. Yours faithfully, Mr Chatwin.

**Villers-Wilkes:** Dear Mr Chatwin - No! I will not be able to see you tomorrow as this morning I have received a letter informing me that four of my cousins from Knowle intend coming to spend the day with me. I shall be in Birmingham on Thursday and will call at your office at about 4 o'clock. Please make sure you are available.

Regarding the windows, I have given up "The Good Shepherd" and accepted "The Nativity" for the North window. I think either "Christ leaving the praetorium" or "The Agony in the Garden" would be grand subjects for the south window but of course we must see sketches of the arrangement before we can positively decide.



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May I just mention that I positively dislike the introduction of cattle in the nativity? I consider them quite out of place! They were quite certain to be removed on such an occasion! Will you kindly request Mr Morris to return my print and the card of “the Good Shepherd”.

**Chatwin:** Dear Mr Morris. I see what you mean about Miss Wilkes! She’s told me in no uncertain terms that there is to be no cattle in the nativity scene, as she positively dislikes them. Would you be so good as to pass the message on to Mr Burne-Jones?

She also wants to see sketches as soon as possible. Oh, and could you return her print of “The Good Shepherd”? I feel the more we can placate her, the easier the job will be in the long run.

**Burne-Jones:** Mr Morris. What does she mean, “no cattle”? Our Lord was born in a stable, what does she expect to see in there? A 3-piece band playing a Verdi opera perhaps? Kindly inform her that she’ll get the sketches when I’m ready! I’m an artist. These things can’t be rushed.

**Morris:** Dear Mr Chatwin. Well, I mentioned the cattle and the sketches to Burne-Jones. He seemed.... Pensive but I’m sure he’ll come round to the idea eventually.

He must be left to think he’s got a free hand, or I fear he won’t take the commission. I’ll give it a few days then mention it again. Meantime let’s see if we can get a decision on the other window so we can get those designed.

**Villers-Wilkes:** Dear Mr Chatwin. I have decided to have “The Nativity” for the north window and will consent to the “Crucifixion” for the south window, as those two subjects seem to be the connections to lead up to the “Ascension”.

Whilst I’m happy for Mr Burne-Jones to use artistic license where needs be, I feel the inclusion of a pelican and Mr Gladstone into the design are needless fripperies and should be avoided in future! However, I am glad he’s left out the cattle.



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As regards the crucifixion, I wish it to be as little dreadful looking as possible. I will leave it to Mr Burne-Jones who I feel confident will not treat it like the ordinary dreadful looking prints I always see. No nonsense this time please.

**Chatwin:** Dear Miss Wilkes, I concur with you in respect of the treatment of the subjects and I will write to Mr Morris tonight. He wrote to me on Saturday and said, "You may be sure that we will do our best to make the new windows all they should be" and is quite confident that Mr Burne-Jones will do nothing but what is correct in the treatment of the design....

**Burne-Jones:** Mr Morris. I've excelled myself on this one. I've hidden several cows and a donkey in the haystacks! Let's see if she spots them before they're built!

**Chatwin:** Dear Mr Morris. Let's get the designs made up to scale. This must be done first to see how the perspective looks once in place. Please let me have the designs ASAP.

**Morris:** Dear Mr Chatwin. You will have the designs as soon as they have been sufficiently altered to remove all the hidden cattle. May I suggest that to speed this process along, Miss Wilkes has no contact with Mr Burne-Jones?

Her "suggestions" seem only to spur him into further mischief making. Just assure her that Mr Burne-Jones and I will do what we can to please her so long as we do not have to do what in our opinion will spoil the work. Burne-Jones' designs are sure to be perfectly serious and solemn. That is once the comedy skeletons have been removed.

**Chatwin:** Dear Mr Morris. As soon as the sketches are approved, it would be well for you to ask for an agreement as to payment. Her solicitor and trustee suggested this in a former case.



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Miss Wilkes' health is not good, so I'd be wary, bearing in mind all the trouble we've had so far. Oh, and does Burne-Jones realise that the shape of the window is concave which has a tendency of elongating the figure?

I mention this as many people remark that the figures on the present window are too long for the height. I hope this doesn't cause too much inconvenience.

I have submitted the designs for the two windows to Miss Wilkes and she liked them very much and begs you will proceed with the work forthwith. She thought she spotted the vague outline of a cow on one hay bale, but I convinced her it was just a trick of the light. I think you had better send your workmen to measure the windows and plan their curve.

Miss Wilkes has kept the pictures to show her friends. Let's move quickly before she changes her mind.

**Burne-Jones:** Mr Morris. Tell her they'll be ready when they're ready! You can't rush greatness. Greatness arrives at its own speed and won't be hurried by anyone. If she interferes again, I'll put some Morris dancers in the background!

**Villers-Wilkes:** Dear Mr Chatwin. It is now more than 6 months since you wrote to Mr Morris respecting the windows for St Philips. I think it is quite time that one if not both designs had been sent down for approval. Will you kindly write to Mr Morris and hurry him along?

**Burne-Jones:** They're going in! The Morris dancers are going in! I warned her!

**Villers-Wilkes:** Dear Mr Chatwin. I have shown the photos of "the Nativity" and "Crucifixion" to Canon Bowlby, Mr Allbut and Mr Clarke and they all three are as delighted with them as I am, and we are most anxious to see them in their places. Please write to Mr Morris and say all you possibly can to urge him to put plenty of workmen on and complete them without delay. I do hope they will be in before Christmas!



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**Chatwin:** Dear Miss Wilkes. I wrote to Messer's Burne-Jones and Morris stating your wishes to have the windows in their places this year and the following is their reply....

**Burne-Jones:** \*snores very loudly\*

**Morris:** We must ask you to accept our assurance that we will do what is possible to meet Miss Villers Wilkes wishes and our own to get the windows out of hand, but the length of time to execute the work depends first upon Mr Burne-Jones...

**Burne-Jones:** And I don't rush for anyone!

**Morris:** And afterwards with the uncontrollable circumstances connected with producing and fitting stained glass windows, any attempt to estimate the time required is of no value, as we have found from experience.

**Burne-Jones:** Basically, sit tight and you'll get them when we're done!

**Chatwin:** Well despite all the problems and artistic strops, the windows were fitted, the architect and artists got their money and Miss Villers Wilkes was a very happy lady. I'm sure you'll agree with us that that they look rather splendid. Just don't say anything about the lack of cattle!



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