

Wonders of Light
The Stained Glass Art of Christopher Wallis
Heritage in Oil, Heritage in Faith

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THE AIMS OF WONDERS OF LIGHT

One aim of the book is to shine a spotlight on this collection of wonderful windows. The name Christopher Wallis may be unfamiliar to many but we happily discovered that he is one of Canada's leading stained glass artists. This entire church is a collection of Christopher Wallis windows which makes it rather uncommon in Canada.

"Collection" is a key word. Many churches have stained glass art by several different artists. In Christ Church Petrolia, the windows were designed as a complete collection. This gives the eye a beautiful harmony of design, colour and texture.

This church is like no other because it is steeped in oil history. Another aim of our book is to share the unique history. Much was never known or has forgotten since Christ Church last published a book more than half a century ago in 1959. There was a time when many knew that the founders of this parish were founders of the oil industry.

THE ENTWINED ROOTS OF THE CHURCH AND THE OIL INDUSTRY

We have stories to tell. This parish predates Confederation. It dates back to 1866. That's the year the King wells ignited an oil boom that made Petrolia the oil capital of Canada for four amazing decades. In 2011, Christ Church will celebrate its 145th anniversary.

Christ Church had very humble beginnings in 1866. The very first service for this parish was held in bar room of The American Hotel. To make it more tolerable, the line up of liquor bottles was discreetly masked with a curtain.

Its first actual church was built on Railroad Street on land donated by an up and coming oil producer named John Henry Fairbank. The church was slapped together with unpainted wooden planks - just like every other building in this hastily built boom town. Fairbank's wife, Edna, led the charge to raise money for a new and better church. She even offered up the income from her husband's next three oil wells. Unfortunately, they were all dry holes.

It took 10 years but the second church was built in 1882 on this site. It was a stately white brick church, the first brick church in Petrolia. It was here that Canada's largest oil refiner Jacob Englehart wed Charlotte Eleanor Thompson in the most lavish wedding Petrolia had ever seen. Exactly 17 years later, on their wedding anniversary, Charlotte died.

Afterwards, Englehart made an extravagant gift to the church. He donated a magnificent chime of 11 bells in her name.

It was here that the funeral was held for John Henry Fairbank who had risen to become Canada's largest oil producer. When Englehart later died, a special train brought his body back to Petrolia and another enormous funeral was held in Christ Church. In this parish, there were a good number of oil families in the congregation. Among the better known ones were Harrison Corey, John D. Noble, Charles Jenkins and F.H. Edward.

The church was a source of strength for the parish...as the oil ceased to flow, through two world wars, and the great depression. But tragedy struck on the night of January 10, 1957. Flames from the furnace room quickly engulfed the entire church. By dawn, the church that stood for 75 years was charred rubble. The only blessing was that the valuable chime of 11 bells was spared. One of the few items salvaged from the debris was the brass plaque from Englehart dedicating the bells to the memory of his wife, Charlotte. It hangs today at the church entrance for all to see.

The church of today is the third church and it was built on the same site as the former one. Its first service was June 7, 1959. Over the past 144 years, this parish was often homeless for various reasons. Services have been held in eight different locations. This includes a two-year stint at the Fairbank mansion while this current church was being built.

A NEW CHURCH AND NEW PLANS FOR STAINED GLASS WINDOWS

When this church opened it opened with plain windows. In September that year, a new minister arrived, the Rev. George Menzies. He had an idea. He inspired the parishioners with a vision of nine stained glass windows for the church. He spoke of making the designs contemporary, non-traditional and beautiful. In the fall of 1961 the church contacted a young stained glass artist named Christopher Wallis.

Wallis had only arrived in Canada a few years before from Britain. He set up his studio in London, Ontario. He agreed to create the collection as funds became available. No one knew the entire collection would take 27 years to complete. And no one could possibly know that Wallis would become one of Canada's most distinguished stained glass artists.

There grew to be 13 windows in total and they were completed in 1988. Our book has a map and detailed descriptions. There was a time when descriptions might not have been needed, when stained glass windows were called "The Poor Man's Bible". The windows told stories of the Bible to those who could not read. Today, we find we that we often need the printed word to better appreciate the stories in the windows.

THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OF CHRIST CHURCH

The sanctuary window above the altar was the first to be created in the collection. On the sides of the nave are six windows all based on the Six Rules of Life from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The most talked about window is the highly original Memorial Window which was given Ontario Heritage designation in 2005. There is some debate on how the idea originated. The Rev. Menzies said it was Charles Fairbank Sr. who sparked the idea. Fairbank, however, would say it was the reverend's idea. There was a great deal of thought and research in planning the window. Sadly, Charles Fairbank Sr. died the year before the window was installed. Many donations to this window were made in memory of him.

It can be safely said that this is the only church to ever have a stained glass window incorporating oil history. Here it is fitting because this church, this town and its oil industry all grew together. A timeline frames the window on three sides and the book includes full descriptions of these entries and their significance.

CHRISTOPHER WALLIS, STAINED GLASS ARTIST OF NOTE

The book also tells something about the artist, Christopher Wallis. Since the early 1990s, Wallis has made his home in Lambton County. His Lakeview Studio is just north of Grand Bend. Here are but a few highlights of his illustrious career:

It was 1992 when two of his windows were unveiled at Rideau Hall in Ottawa by none other than Queen Elizabeth II. These were the regal and vice regal windows at the entrance. Later, two more of his windows were added to the ballroom.

In 2003, Canada Post chose one of his windows from St. Stephen's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Calgary to be featured on an international postage stamp. As well, Canada Post issued a First Day Cover featuring one window of St. John's United Church in Arva.

He is also renowned for his series of 10 windows for Osgoode Hall in Toronto depicting 4,000 years of law history. In Ottawa, one of his famous stained glass windows at Christ Church has been photographed by the famous Yousef Karsh. This was included in the 2010 Doors Open tour in Ottawa.

In all, he has designed more than 800 windows since arriving in Canada and the list of noteworthy commissions is incredibly long.

His work has not gone without recognition. In 1993, he was awarded a Canada 125 medal for his "significant contribution to Canada". Three years later, Wallis won the Bell Canada award for excellence in heraldic stained glass art, which is his major love.

He is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art. As well, he is a fellow of both The British Society of Master Glass Painters and The Royal Heraldry Society of Canada.

Happily, Wallis' current project is designing stained glass windows for the entrance of Victoria Hall here in Petrolia.

COMING SOON TO YOUTUBE:

Mark McNabb of Skylight Video will soon be posting a clip of the book launch on YouTube.

WHERE TO BUY WONDERS OF LIGHT

The 64-page book features 23 color photographs of the window as well as several historical photos. It is \$15 and all proceeds go to Christ Church, Petrolia

In Petrolia:

- Contact Christ Church – (519) 882-4221, www.ccstj.ca,
- Specialty Rubber Stamp
- Rebecca's Gift Shop and Home Décor
- The Bookstore

In Sarnia:

- The Bookkeeper

In Oil Springs:

- The Oil Museum of Canada

In Grand Bend:

- The Lambton Heritage Museum