

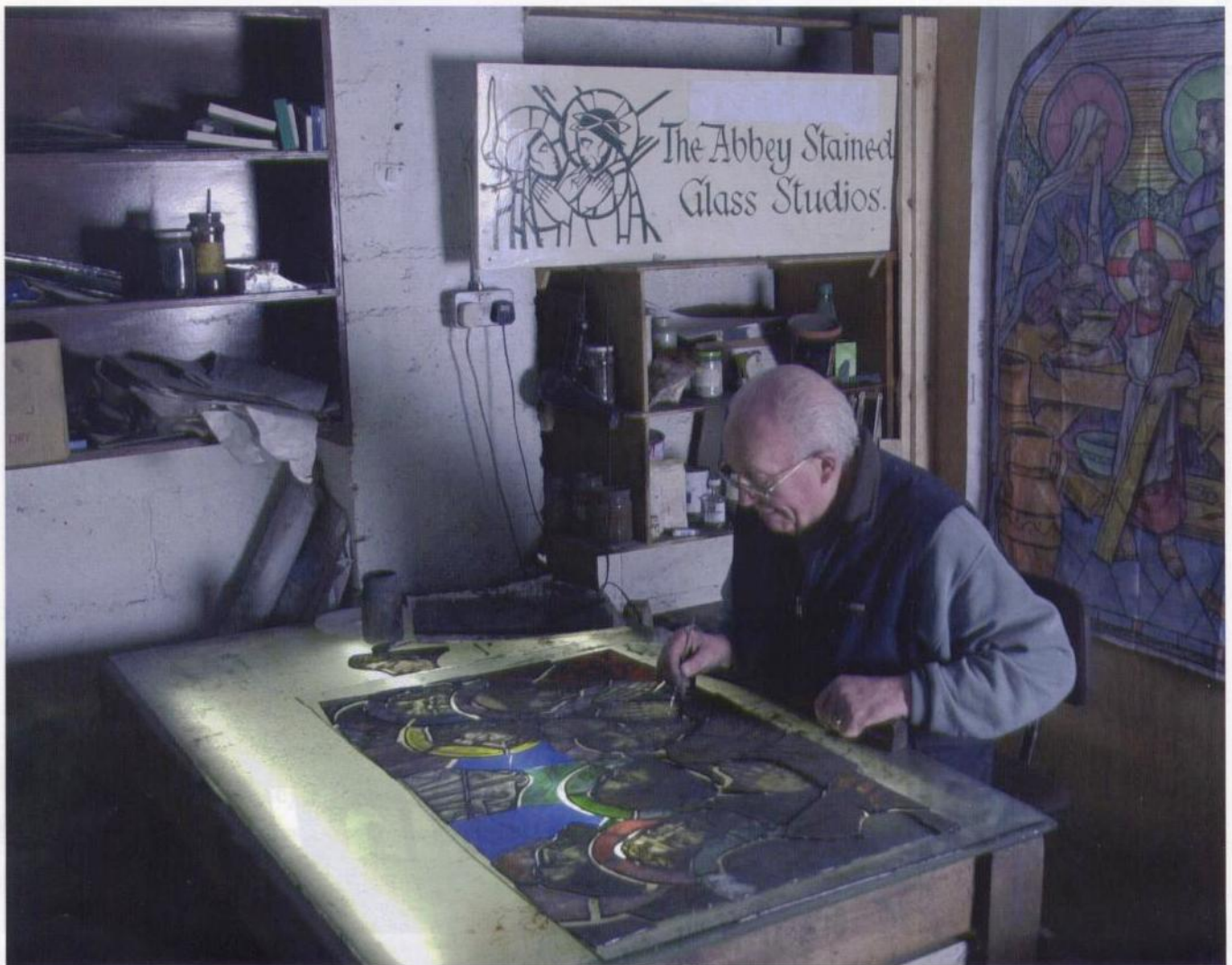
Seeking Truth in Light.

Photojournalist Kim Haughton was lost in admiration of the beauty, craftsmanship, decorative colours and magic of stained glass after a recent visit to one of Dublin's leading glass studios.

Kevin Kelly has been sitting in a darkened room since 1942. There are distinct windows in his room and when the sun decides to shine in, something magical happens. Shafts of coloured light reflect in kaleidoscopic patches, painting the room with its beams. Kevin is the senior stained glass artist with Abbey Stained Glass Studios. Nestled in a neat alcove in Old Kilmainham in Dublin, the Studio's 20-strong workforce have been creating and restoring stained glass for almost 60 years. For Kevin, painting images on light is not a job, it is a passion. "I love drawing, love painting, love the research and love creating a story and fitting it into a specific space. Stained glass is a wonderful medium, unchanged since the 12th Century," he says.

Nothing much has changed either in the running of this unique and important operation. Managing Director Ken Ryan worked with his father in the company since returning from a long African adventure that ended in 1983 after the untimely death of his young wife, Eileen. Tragedy propelled him to the position he holds today when his father Frank passed away in 1987. Since then, the focus of the business has shifted from the creation of new works to the restoration of old ones. Today, Ken runs the operation with his wife Muriel. Seventy-five percent of the business is restoration of old and damaged ecclesiastical stained glass. "Currently in Ireland there is a re-awakening of interest in the beautiful stained glass which surrounds us. We are most fortunate to house a wealth of stained glass by artists of the highest calibre," he says. Ken lists off impressive curriculum vitae of churches from Arklow to Kanturk, cathedrals in Tuam, Monaghan, Cavan and Killarney and the basilica in Lough Derg, whose glass has been lovingly retouched by his craftsman's gentle hands.

Artists' names like Michael Healy, AE Child, Michael O'Connor and Harry Clarke trip easily off Ken's tongue. Restoring the tender work of such legends of light is all in a day's work for his meticulous experts. He fondly recalls



the time in 1986 when one of the vats exploded just across the road in the Guinness Brewery. Just next door to the brewery stands St. James's Church, where a 130 year old window of magnificent stained glass by artist Michael O'Connor lay shattered in hundreds of pieces, like confetti, on the altar.

"Our craftsmen were dispatched to the church grounds where they collected buckets full of tangled stained glass", Ken relates. "As the window consisted of panels representing 20 different subjects, no one was exactly sure which panel went where." With the help of an image of the window provided by the National Gallery, the jigsaw was painstakingly pieced together. Missing pieces were re-created by Kevin who applied ageing techniques to the new pieces so their faded colour matched that of the salvaged originals. "A year later, the craftsmen returned the window to the church. One could almost hear the gasps as the glass sparkled like it must have when it was originally installed" Ken recalls.

As we meander down well-worn wooden steps, we enter into the belly of the building. Angry flames from a fiery kiln

caress the pieces of glass in temperatures of 600 degrees centigrade until paint and glass become one. "The same piece of glass can be fired up to six times depending on the texture and artwork" explains kiln operator Derek Murray.

Entering onto the studio floor is like stepping into a life-size jigsaw puzzle of glass and lead. William Malone, a Lead Glazier and foreman is cutting and fitting hundreds of pieces of glass onto a 4x8 ft sheet of paper. Coffees and creams in a marbled fusion are placed beside emerald greens tinged with hints of buttery browns. He is piecing together a new window commissioned by the Defence Forces. It depicts a pretty faced UN soldier on peace-keeping duty in a far-flung place. Armoured personnel carrier cut-outs in embryonic form are waiting to be brought to life by the gentle touch of Kevin Kelly's brush. Eventually, all of the pieces will be made to shine with the sublime transparency of mouth-watering colour whose dramatic intensity is only realised when it is exposed to light. And it will shine, and continue to shine, for as long as time itself!

