



# Christ Church

## UNLOCKING CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL: FAMILY RESOURCES

### A VIRTUAL VISIT ONLINE Saint Catherine of Alexandria



#### Christ Church has two windows dedicated to Saint Catherine

##### Introduction:

Catherine lived in the early 4<sup>th</sup> Century. She was the daughter of Constus, the Governor of Alexandria, a big city and port in Egypt.

The Emperor at the time was Maximius and he was tolerant of Christians like Catherine. But the next Emperor (Maxentius) wasn't kind at all and put people to death if they disagreed with him (Christians, for example).

Catherine confronted Emperor Maxentius, so he summoned fifty of his cleverest advisers, philosophers and courtiers to argue against her. Despite her young age, Catherine was very eloquent and used logic so skilfully, the clever men lost every argument. She was so persuasive, many of them even became Christians. So, the Emperor had them all put to death.

The story tells how the Emperor had Catherine whipped, but she showed no sign of pain. She was then put in prison, where angels healed her wounds. The Emperor tried starving her to death, but a dove came from Heaven and fed her. Jesus himself came to visit her and encouraged her to fight on, promising her a crown of everlasting glory.

Over two hundred people visited Catherine in prison, and all of them converted to Christianity - so Emperor Maxantius had them all put to death as well (including his own wife, Valeria).

With his first wife out of the way, Maxantius tried another approach – he asked Catherine to marry him, but she refused.

He then tried crushing Catherine under a wheel, but she just touched it lightly and it shattered. In the end, the Emperor had her beheaded, milk flowing from her, not blood.

The Catherine Wheel is named after her. You can usually spot St Catherine in church art because she's usually holding a wheel (as in the medieval window above). In Burne-Jones' Victorian window, the wheel can be seen. Each blue-winged angel is standing on it.

Because she was so intelligent, clever with logic and argument and full of wisdom, Saint Catherine is the patron saint of scholars, school children, thinkers and philosophers.

### **Background: Stained glass**

Stained glass lasts for a long time. Its colours are melted into the glass, so they do not fade. Windows, hundreds of years old, are still brightly coloured. Glass is, of course, fragile but church windows are usually high up, to catch the maximum amount of light.

Glass can be stained with chemicals, made from minerals, and/or painted (which is great for details). The different coloured pieces are then put together like a jigsaw (there can be thousands of pieces of glass in just one window). They are held in place by a network of lead strips soldered to each other.

### **Our Catherine of Alexandria window**



This window is in the Cathedral's Remembrance Chapel. It was designed by Edward Burne-Jones in 1878. It is dedicated to the memory of Edith Liddell, Alice Liddell's sister. Edith had

only just announced her engagement a few days before, when she died at the age of twenty-two. In order to commemorate her life, her parents asked the artist to use Edith's portrait as the basis for Saint Catherine's face.

Edith's father was Dean Liddell, the 'Head' of Christ Church, and Edith's more famous sister, Alice is, of course, the Alice who had the book 'Alice in Wonderland' dedicated to her by Charles Dodgson who taught at Christ Church.



**One of the blue-winged angels in the St Catherine window**

The artist asked his wife, Jane Burden, to be the model for this blue angel who is on the right-hand side of Saint Catherine. Jane had grown up in Oxford and was renowned for her beauty and her flaming red hair.

Burne-Jones designed numerous other windows in the Cathedral. This is one of his later ones and we can see how his style had matured. This is a simpler, more harmonious design - unlike the earlier 'Frideswide' window, which was all about telling a whole story, inside a limited space.

#### **Things to do at home- a few ideas:**

- Find out a little about how life was in 4<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt, in preparation for this:
  - A 4<sup>th</sup> Century Egyptian boy or girl has walked into a time-machine by accident (a bit careless maybe, but could happen to anyone), and ended up in 21<sup>st</sup> Century England. They knock on your door and ask for help. Talking, you realise how much is different and, possibly, how much you share in terms of hopes, feelings, what you want from life.
  - You could invent a conversation, and write it down or use action figures, toys, etc, as actors... or you may want a live-action epic and rope in your ever-so-cooperative sibling (or parent?).
- Find out what you can about Alexandria as it is nowadays. Your mission is to find: three pictures of street scenes, a recipe of what an Egyptian dish might be, a picture

of a place of worship, a picture taken looking inland from the sea. You could turn this into a treasure hunt for members of your family, or your friends, on Zoom.

- Make a piece of artwork like a stained-glass window. Cut out shapes of white paper and stick them on black paper with a narrow gap or 'path' between them. Felt-tip pens are particularly good for producing bright vibrant colours on the white shapes.
- Do a drawing of an episode in St Catherine's life.
- Saints have their symbols. Saint Catherine's, as you probably know now, is a wheel. Design a sign, possibly for your door, but make sure to fix it in a way that is approved of by any adult who has to deal with pin-holes, pulled-off paint, etc!

The sign could contain your 'symbol' (an object to do with an interest or a skill you have) and your initial, large and decorated.

- You could, on the other hand, do the same as a card for someone, as a very special, personalised gift.
- Find out more about the artist Edward Burne-Jones and his fellow painters who were known as the Pre-Raphaelites. They lived in the time of Queen Victoria and included William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.