

The Wales Window of Alabama

On the 16th September 1963 the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, was almost totally destroyed a bomb planted there by a splinter group of the Klu Klux Klan. Birmingham was no stranger to civil rights violence, with 50 previous church bombings, and iconic images of police dogs attacking children being spread across the globe. However, this bombing was different as it caused the deaths of four young girls, who were attending Sunday school. Cynthia Westley, Carol Robertson, Denise McMair, and Addie-May Collins all died in the basement of that church, with more being seriously injured. The nation as a whole was stunned. Even fervent separatists were appalled at the loss of life of four young girls, in a place of sanctuary. The incident became a catalyst for the Civil Rights Act which came into effect one year later. However, it was not just the people of America who were shocked into action by this terrible crime. Welsh artist John Petts, having read about the destruction of life and of the church's stained-glass windows, formed a newspaper campaign to raise the money to have the windows replaced. The campaign touched the people of Wales deeply, and people from all religions came together to offer up what they could. Petts imposed a limit on the amount one person was able to donate to the campaign – half a crown – to ensure that no single financier could pay for everything and that the window really was from all the people of Wales.

Having raised well over the £500 target, John Petts travelled to Birmingham to install his artwork in the church. Having been both horrified and inspired by the photographs of civil rights protestors being fired at by bullets and water cannons which forced their arms up above their heads, Petts drew on this image to create one of a Christ-like figure on the cross with arms outstretched above his head. With his palms extended outwards, the image represents both the pushing out of hatred, and the bringing in love and forgiveness. Whilst this figure could represent anyone suffering, many have interpreted it as a black Christ, reminding all those who look upon it, that to condemn anyone for how they look is to crucify Christ once more.

Upon the window's installation, many of the people of Birmingham could not even locate Wales on a map. However, the knowledge that people from foreign countries heard of their plight, and gave what they could to ease it, helped to remind them that what they experienced in the town known as the Johannesburg of America, was not normal, and that not all white people were against them. The window still stands today as a living reminder of the horrors of the violence of Birmingham, Alabama, and the bonds of friendship that grew out of it.