

PERCY FORBES-LEITH OF FYVIE CASTLE & THE TIFFANY WINDOW MEMORIAL



Tiffany Window at Fyvie Parish Church

A bereaved mother watches Irish glassmaker, Frederick Wilson creating a heavenly vision of Archangel Michael at the factory of Louis Comfort Tiffany in New York. She weeps as it reminds her of her soldier son, Percy, who has died of typhoid fever during the Boer conflict in South Africa. She expresses the desire to have Wilson's finished product shipped back to Scotland and installed in the family church at Fyvie. Her friends know how much employment her husband has provided in America through his steelworks, now Illinois Steel Company, thus they buy her the glass out of appreciation.

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Alexander Forbes-Leith, Percy's father, a former Navy lieutenant, had acquired Fyvie in 1889 using his industrial fortune. Yet, as the grandson of Sandy Leith-Hay, one-time Lord of Leith Hall, Rhynie, Alexander was buying back a bit of local heritage. He and his American wife, Marie Louise January had three children, yet only their son and elder daughter, Ethel-Louise survived. Percy was his mother's baby, the last of the three, born in 1881, thus it is no surprise that she was devastated when he succumbed to illness.

Whether she drew comfort from the fact that as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 1st Royal Dragoons, 19-year-old Percy had not been killed as a result of enemy action, we cannot tell. What did give Mrs Forbes-Leith cause for concern was the realisation that Fyvie's Parish Church would have to be extended to cater for the beautiful new Tiffany window in Percy's memory. Money, however, was no object, thus in 1902 Alexander Forbes-Leith commissioned a brand-new granite chancel and a family prayer loft for the kirk which itself was under a century old. The site itself, however, had been a place of worship dedicated to St Peter since the late 12th century.

Once finished, the fabulous window was finally revealed to the locals who could not fail to be impressed by the huge winged Archangel in medieval armour, carrying a sword and a lance. Some might have wondered at the St George's flag hanging behind Michael, yet as he was regarded as the patron of knights during the Middle Ages, it must be interpreted as the Crusaders' banner, not the English emblem. Michael stands atop the wheels of Time, representing the victory over Satan and the fallen angels before God created the world. The window is made of prism glass, allowing the colours to subtly change depending on the light behind them. Wilson remained in the US till his death, aiding Louis Tiffany in developing a foundation to support artistic talent, leaving in 1923 to set up his own studio in Los Angeles. The only other Scottish church to have a Tiffany window is St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, which was installed in 1903, also to commemorate a Boer War soldier.

Visitors to Fyvie should contact the minister or church session clerk to view the window, or attend a Sunday service.