

Artist Brief

The Equiano Family Window

St Andrew's Church, Chesterton, Cambridge

February 2025

1. Introduction

This brief represents an opportunity to contribute in a significant way to the beauty and historic fabric of the Grade 1-listed church of St Andrew's Chesterton, Cambridge, and the wider community's commemoration and reflection on its links to the family of Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), the celebrated author and campaigner against the transatlantic slave trade. We are seeking an art practitioner to design a new stained-glass window to be installed next to an existing external memorial to Anna Maria Vassa, the daughter of Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa) and his English wife Susannah. Anna Maria died just 4 years old, and the early nineteenth-century plaque recalls her burial in St Andrew's Churchyard. The new window will commemorate the Equiano family and seek to express through visual art a range of themes inspired by their story: Christian faith, lamented history, the bonds of family, English and African heritages and more.

2. About St Andrew's Chesterton

St Andrew's Chesterton is the historic Church of England church of the area of Cambridge north of the river Cam, approximately 1.25 miles from the centre of the university city. St Andrew's is a large medieval parish church dating mostly from the 1300s and 1400s, with some restoration in the Victorian period. Any medieval stained glass was removed at the Reformation. There are currently 8 stained-glass windows installed between 1870 and 1900, of varying quality. The building was previously Grade II*, but this was amended to Grade I in 2007 – the bicentenary year of the 1807 Act to abolish the Slave Trade – entirely due to the significance recognised in the plaque commemorating Anna Maria, the campaigning achievement of her father Olaudah Equiano, and the church's consequent links to Black British history.

St Andrew's remains a thriving parish church with a worshipping community of c.180 that places a high value on welcome of all generations and backgrounds, on the cherishing of Creation, creativity and learning in our shared life, and its longstanding openness to the power of the arts – visual, literary and musical – as a bridge connecting and inspiring people of faith and good will in our wider community.

The Equiano connection with Chesterton has gained growing attention and acknowledgement in recent years. The local secondary school, Chesterton Community College, has renamed one of its school 'houses' Equiano House. A successful community campaign led to a modern pedestrian and cycling bridge over the Cam being renamed the 'Equiano Bridge' in 2022. An increasing number of visitors to St Andrew's Church and churchyard express their interest in finding the plaque outside and learning more of the story it tells. Since 1997, St Andrew's has held a service on the Sunday in July closest to the anniversary of Anna Maria's death, to acknowledge the history to which the Equiano family attests: of enslavement and efforts to end it, of Christian culpability and responsibility in each, and unity and division between races, ethnicities and cultures in our world today.

3. About Olaudah Equiano and Anna Maria Vassa

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) was a celebrated author and campaigner against the transatlantic slave trade in eighteenth-century England. Equiano's autobiography '*The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African written by himself*' (1789) was the first account of the middle passage across the Atlantic from the perspective of the victims who were labelled slaves. It remains a powerful account of personal experience of enslavement and the barbaric realities of slavery. Equiano was a talented businessman and his career in England challenged the balance of political power through his campaigns and penmanship. His autobiography contributed substantially to changing perspectives on the slave trade in British society.

Equiano's first visit to Cambridge remains unknown. However, the Magdalene College Cambridge archives contain evidence of his correspondence and plans to meet with the Master of the College, Revd Peter Peckard, a leading abolitionist. Equiano worked in collaboration with other campaigners, including Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, promoting dialogue on the abolition of slavery.

Equiano's wife, Susanna Cullen, was from Cambridgeshire, and had her own abolitionist sympathies before they met, being a subscriber to his autobiography. The couple settled for a period in Soham, Cambridgeshire. They had two daughters: Anna Maria and Joanna. It is believed the children lived in Chesterton after the death of their parents and worshipped at St Andrew's with their foster parents. Anna Maria died later the same year as her father, in July 1797. Her grave in St Andrew's Churchyard - on which the children of the village are said to have laid flowers at her burial - is not marked but is close to the north wall of the church. These historic details are evidenced in the wording of the epitaph poem dedicated to Anna Maria on the external plaque written by Edward Ind of Cambridge, a local poet (See Appendix for this text).

4. The Equiano Family Project

The Equiano Family Project at St Andrew's Church is an arts, education and cultural initiative designed to promote awareness and reflection on the Equiano family story in the Chesterton community. The Project was launched in 2024, and has initiated a public lecture, provided the church as a performance venue for a touring theatre production '*Breaking the Silence of the British Slave Trade*', and hosted authors writing on Equiano and his family.

At St Andrew's Church, we believe there is so much in the Equiano family story to inspire thought, reflection and discussion in our community. This is a hopeful story of faith confronting injustice. It is a challenging story reminding us of horrifying wrongs in our history. It is a story of tragedy and loss, but also courage and triumph in the face of adversity. The story of Olaudah, Susannah, Anna Maria and Joanna further speaks of companionship and familial bonds bridging cultures – a lived experience many want to recognise and celebrate in our society today.

5. The Brief

At the heart of the Equiano Family Project is an idea for commissioning a new stained-glass window in St Andrew's Church. St Andrew's has not had a new stained-glass window for over a century. Any new window will need to be of sufficient artistic merit to complement the importance of the subject. It should also be a significant enhancement to the worship space, enriching the experience of this Grade 1-listed building for all who visit and enjoy it as a place of beauty, peace, prayer and worship. There is also a promising coincidence of a window intended to celebrate a family being above the area our young families like to gather for worship in church today.

We are seeking an artist to design (and work with a suitable stained-glass workshop to construct and install): **A new Equiano Family Window within the existing Perpendicular Gothic tracery in the north aisle of the Church.**

Location

The Equiano Family Window will replace an existing three-light window immediately adjacent to the Anna Maria plaque. Each window either side of the plaque (west or east) is currently plain glass. The window to the east of the plaque is considered the more suitable, as it will pick up some direct evening light in high summer. It is positioned next to an existing Victorian stained-glass window of the Ascension.

Potential themes

A recent community survey asked people what and who they would like to see depicted in an Equiano Family Window. We share the following ideas, images and feelings elicited in the survey as potential themes for an artist to work with freely and creatively:

- There is a strong desire the whole Equiano family be shown rather than just Olaudah Equiano alone; that the girls themselves be an important part of the design as they are the direct connection to Chesterton; and together with their mother Susannah, Equiano's wife, that they should be represented positively rather than in any subservient role, recognising Susannah's own agency and abolitionist sympathies.
- Details from Equiano's own story considered significant by local people were:
 - 1) his talent and success as an author;
 - 2) his association with promoting peace and the struggle for freedom;
 - 3) his probable appearance based on the details given of his dress sense and face in his autobiography;
 - 4) his sea journeys – both the horror endured on the 'Middle Passage' and his skill and courage as a mariner proven before and after he bought his freedom;
 - 5) the contrasting landscapes, flora and fauna of Equiano's experience, evoked perhaps by the birds and plants of places he would have come to know – from the interior of Nigeria to the Fens.

- Finally, asked what emotions or thoughts people hoped that a stained-glass window would evoke, responses clustered around a wish to honour the history of the Equiano family, principally for them to feel more like real people. Feelings included: 'The love in families, of people coming together'; 'Humility and gratitude'; 'Humanitarian and love with sadness at the slavery'; 'Equiano's generous soul'; 'Empathy, admiration, appreciation'.

Required qualities in the artist

In order for your proposal to be considered, you will need to demonstrate:

- A compelling interest in and engagement with the Equiano family story and all that it embodies and represents (see above section 4).
- How, as an artist, your body of work to date showcases your abilities and motivation to undertake this commission.
- Evidence of involvement with stained glass work, **and/or** an enquiring and active interest in the art of stained glass and ability to communicate how within the possibilities of the medium you will realise your artistic vision for the brief. You will need to have considered the technical challenges of designing for stained glass, and the requirements specific to the site itself.
- A sensitive and responsive approach to the site, its faith community, and a vision of how the work could serve both within and beyond the church building, into the broader community.
- An openness and responsiveness to emergent issues during the collaborative process, and an ability to adapt and problem solve.
- Consideration how the finished work might contribute to current awareness and discourse on important themes central to the project.
- A willingness towards community engagement during the project and ideas on what this might entail and how it could help realise some of the project aims and further the outcomes of your overall artistic vision.

Please note, at selection stage we will not be expecting detailed designs.

6. Budget

For the purposes of this brief – with which we hope to interest as wide a range of visual artists as possible, both those who specialise in stained glass and otherwise - we have drawn up the following indicative budget:

- If the artist provides a design which is then translated into stained-glass by a workshop: £6000
- If the commission is secured by a stained-glass artist generating the whole design, including materials and installation: £30,000 + VAT.

7. Estimated Timetable

- Stage 1: Call for initial responses to the artist brief open **Monday 10 February 2025**.
- Deadline for initial responses to the artist brief: **Monday 24 March 2025, 5pm**.
- Stage 2: Shortlisted candidates confirmed and invited to work up initial ideas in response to the brief during week commencing **Monday 7 April 2025** (sketch designs etc. and accompanying concept explanation to be submitted by **Monday 12 May**).
- Interviews and Selection: Week commencing **Monday 9 June 2025**.
- Church of England Planning Application, Historic England consultation, Community fundraising: **June-Dec 2025**.
- Estimated resuming of development of design late 2025-early 2026.
- Estimated installation **May-June 2026** for unveiling **July 2026**.

8. Application Process

The application process will be in two stages, designed not to be too onerous at the initial stage.

Stage 1 – February-March 2025: We are asking art practitioners to express an interest in the project by submitting a CV, two examples of relevant previous work and a covering letter of not more than two pages by **Monday 24 March 2025, 5pm**. The covering letter should include a short statement on why the submitted examples are felt to be relevant to this project. We will then select a small number of artists to progress to interview. Selection criteria will be based at this stage on:

- Evidence of enthusiasm for this particular project, its aims and potential.
- Evidence of relevant art practice to a high standard.
- Evidence if any of relevant experience within churches, other historic buildings, **or** artistic engagement with similar themes to this project.
- Evidence if any of relevant community engagement projects alongside their art practice.

Stage 2 – April- June 2025: Those selected for interview will be asked to work up initial ideas in response to the brief. This does not need to be detailed design work, but should give us enough of an impression as to:

- How they would approach the brief.
- The materials they would be likely to use.
- How the artworks would connect conceptually both to the building and the themes surrounding the Equiano family.
- An initial concept.

Artists invited to interview will receive an honorarium of £300 for this work. They are also welcome to visit the site and talk to one or more of the project team members to understand more about the project.

It is anticipated that a final selection will be based on this stage.

Once selected, we would like to work with the chosen artist to help us with our communications with the planning officers and to support our planning application. We anticipate that the planning application will be submitted in summer 2025 and that there will be questions from the planners about the artistic scheme. Once a Faculty and all other necessary permissions are granted we will fundraise for the commission (we have several existing expressions of interest from donors in our community) and final installation and construction is anticipated to be in 2026.

9. More information and how to apply

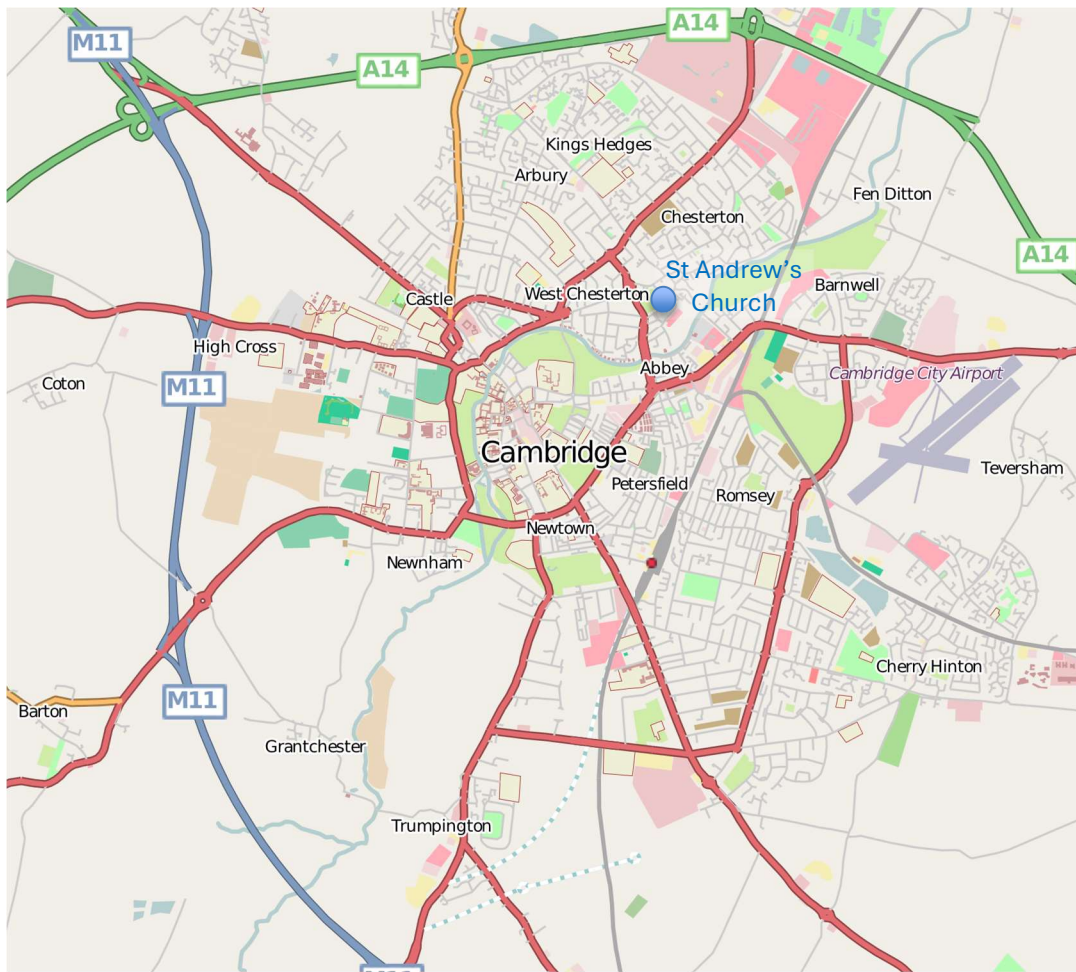
If you have any questions about this project, or to arrange an informal conversation, please contact the chair of the Equiano Family Project at St Andrew's Chesterton – the Vicar, Philip Lockley. Email: vicar@standrews-chesterton.org

To submit an application please send a CV, two examples of previous work and a covering letter of not more than two pages (including why the submitted examples are relevant to this project) to: vicar@standrews-chesterton.org by **Monday 24 March 2025, 5pm**.

10. Appendices

- I. Map of church location
- II. Photo of the church in its setting
- III. Photo of proposed window location (exterior)
- IV. Photo of proposed window location (interior)
- V. Detail of Anna Maria Vassa Memorial
- VI. Text of Anna Maria Vassa Memorial

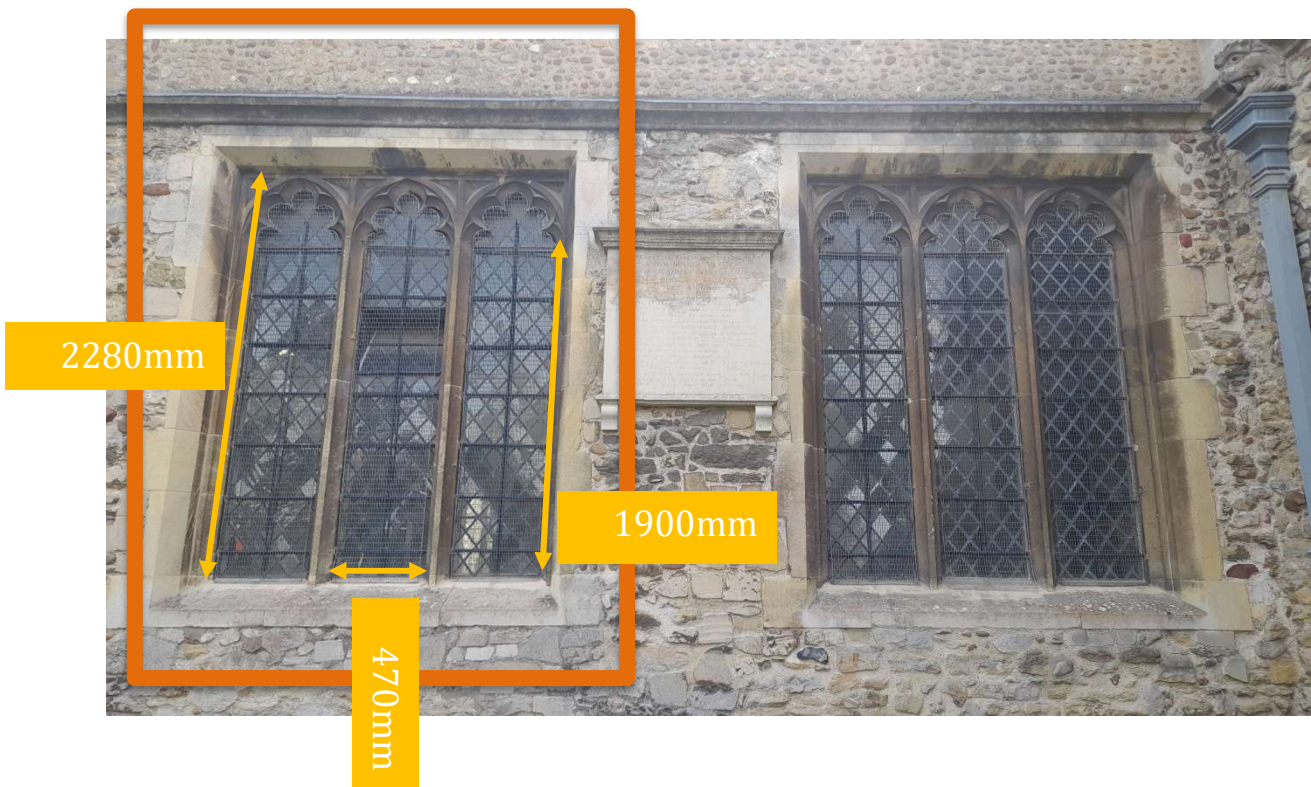
Appendix I - Map of church location



Appendix II – Photo of the church in its setting, with plaque and window indicated.



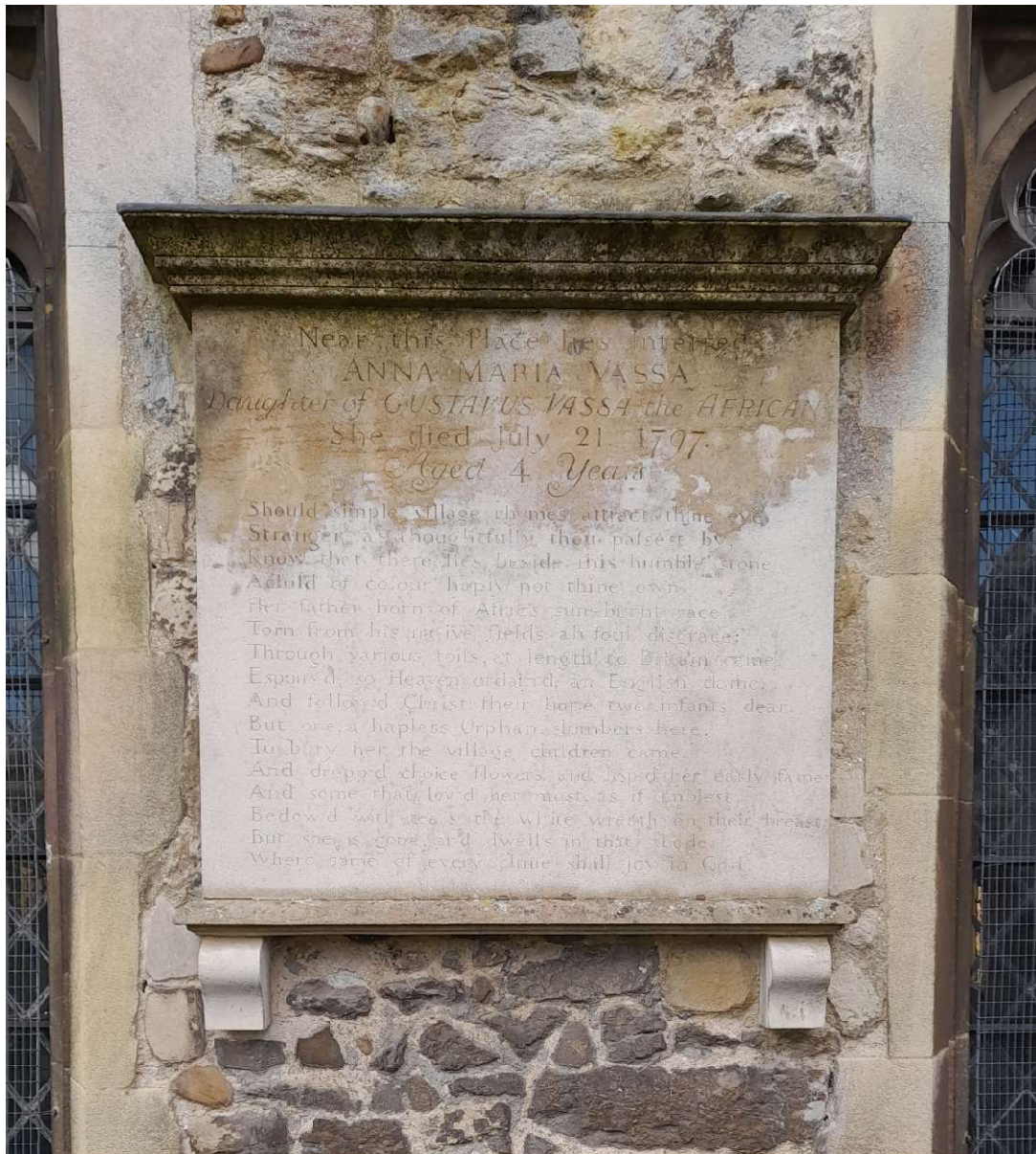
Appendix III - Photo of proposed window location (exterior) with dimensions



Appendix IV - Photo of proposed window location (interior)



Appendix V - Detail of Anna Maria Vassa Memorial



Appendix VI - Text of Anna Maria Vassa Memorial

Anna Maria died in July 1797. The epitaph poem dedicated to Anna Maria was written by Edward Ind of Cambridge, a local poet born in St Ives, Cambridgeshire. Lines from the poem were published in 1822 in the collection of poems, edited by Thomas Mott, called *The posthumous poetical works of the late Edward Ind of Cambridge and a biographical sketch of his life*.

The engraved words on the memorial read:

Near this Place lies Interred
ANNA MARIA VASSA
Daughter of GUSTAVUS VASSA, the African
She died July 21, 1797
Aged 4 Years

Should simple village rhymes attract thine eye,
Stranger, as thoughtfully thou passest by,
Know that there lies beside this humble stone
A child of colour haply not thine own.
Her father born of Afric's sun-burnt race,
Torn from his native field, ah foul disgrace:
Through various toils, at length to Britain came
Espoused, so Heaven ordain'd, an English dame,
And follow'd Christ; their hope two infants dear.
But one, a hapless orphan, slumbers here.
To bury her the village children came.
And dropp'd choice flowers, and lisp'd her early fame;
And some that lov'd her most, as if unblest,
Bedew'd with tears the white wreath on their breast;
But she is gone and dwells in that abode,
Where some of every clime shall joy in God.