# Workshop Review by Julia Bruce

Stained glass in the snow

I arrived at Anna’s lovely studio at the heart of the Cotswolds in the middle of a snowfall. Gingerly edging down the country lanes as I approached, I wondered at one point if I would make it, but I did. And I am so very glad that I did. I was very lucky to have a one-to-one workshop with Anna making a leaded frame for a stained-glass panel I had painted on a course at Ely Cathedral a few weeks earlier. It was there that I had met Anna.

After a warming cup of coffee, we repaired to her beautiful light studio at the back of the house looking out over the garden. We started with the basics, looking at some of her pieces and how they had been constructed, going through health and safety, and thinking about the design of my piece and drawing it out life-size as a template. Then we started on the real business, the cutting. Anna demonstrated then let me have a go, practising on some scrap pieces of glass. That’s one of the great things about the workshop, it was completely hands on. Anna trusts you to explore the techniques yourself and gain confidence before naturally moving on to the next stage. We then did the fun bit, choosing the glass for the eight pieces that would make up the final frame around my painted panel. I chose some gorgeous dark blues and ambers. I then set about cutting the shapes, using my design as a template. Lunch followed, traipsing through the snow through Christmas-card-perfect Charlbury to a lovely deli for soup and cake.

Back in the studio afterwards we laid out all the pieces to ensure it was all going to hang together correctly, and then we started leading. Rather than trying to impart everything all at once, then leaving you to your own devices, Anna takes a stepped approach, teaching and demonstrating each stage as you get to it, then letting you practise and when you are confident carry out what you have just learnt on your actual piece. She keeps a respectful distance at this point, letting you do your thing without breathing down your neck, but being on hand if you need any help. The experience feels very natural and organic and helps you understand why things are done in the order they are. It also means that you do everything on your piece yourself, so it feels completely your own work.

Leading involved building up the pieces against a two-sided wooden frame, from bottom left to top right, in a very ordered fashion. You cut the lead framing pieces to exact lengths from long strips and slowly build the panel up, securing each piece of glass with its lead keeper as you go. Once that was done, we checked for any tiny gaps where the lead strips butted against each other. Inevitably there are always one or two, but we filled them with tiny slivers of lead, then were ready to solder all the joints. I loved this bit. You brush flux (a compound of borax the consistency of shoe polish) on all the joints – this helps the solder to melt and flow. Then you take a strip of lead solder, place the end on the joint and touch it lightly with the tip of the soldering iron. You think nothing is going to happen, then suddenly you feel the solder ‘give’ as it melts under the heat of the iron. You leave the iron in place for a couple of seconds then lift it away, leaving a shining button of molten metal sealing the joint – magic! I did this for each joint then carefully turned the panel over and repeated the process on the other side. Anna then showed me how to solder two loops at the top of the frame so it could be hung up with wire or fishing line. Almost done! The last stage is to cement it all in place. This is a delightfully mucky job involving smothering the glass in dark oily cement, which you push vigorously into all the all the joins between the glass and the lead framing with a stiff brush. That done on each side, you clean off what you can, then smother the piece with ‘whiting’, a calcium carbonate powder that absorbs all the greasy cement left on the piece. You knock off the excess powder then have to leave the piece for at least eight hours for the cement to set. I left mine overnight, then brushed, scraped and wiped off the whiting/cement residue to finally reveal the end result. The whiting has the added bonus of polishing your piece as you wipe it off. It’s fabulous to see the finished article emerge from the mess of cement and powder. If you wish, you can then black the leading and the piece is ready to display. I was absolutely delighted with the final result.

Anna’s approach to teaching is so clever – very structured, taking you through each stage step by step, but in such a way that you absorb what she is telling you without feeling you are being taught at all. It all feels very unhurried and unpressurised, which is lovely. We overran by about 15 minutes, but that was because I got held up during our lunch break so didn’t get back as promptly as I should have done. All in all, it was a wonderful experience. Intense yet relaxing. You are concentrating so hard and are so focused on what you are doing, you become completely absorbed, and learn a huge amount. I had the most brilliant day, and feel I took away much more than just my finished panel. Anna is a fabulous, kind and patient teacher, and a skilled and inspired artist. You couldn’t want for a better introduction to stained-glass making than one of Anna's workshops.