

# ST MICHAEL'S PARISH CHURCH, AUGHTON

## A BRIEF HISTORY

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Many people's reaction on entering the church for the first time is "what a lovely church – how old is it?" It may indeed be picturesque, but from an architectural point of view, it is a real mixture of styles from many different centuries, which makes the "how old is it?" question rather difficult to answer. It depends which bit you are looking at!

### The Normans

The oldest parts of what you see today are Norman, from around the time of King Stephen in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The lower parts of the wall on the south side (as from viewed outside) are Norman, and the blocked Norman doorway in the south wall is clearly visible. At that time there was no north aisle. There would have been substantial external walls on both sides of a rectangular nave which was 15m long and 6.5m wide, smaller than it is now with the west wall where the western-most pillar of the arcade is now. A correspondingly smaller chancel (approx. 7.5m long and 5.5m wide) and chancel arch would have been to the east of the nave, and two stone fragments found during restoration work (and on display at the back of the church) may have come from that original chancel arch.



### Before the Normans

No evidence has been found that there was a stone church before Norman times. However, during excavations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, part of a Saxon stone cross was found, buried in the Norman foundations (in such a way as to suggest that it may have been deliberately placed there). This cross has been dated to the latter half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (around the time of Alfred the Great), and is an indication that Christians have gathered and worshipped here for well over a thousand years. The cross can be seen at the back of church, and a drawing (see back page) shows what the complete cross would have looked like. There may or may not have been a building at that time, but if there was, it would almost certainly have been made of wood, leaving no trace of its existence today.

## The Thirteenth Century

At some point between the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 13<sup>th</sup>, the period whose church architecture style is known as 'Early English', the church was extended to the west. The new west wall is the one you see now (although not with the present window). You can see a small remnant of the Early English north wall where the north aisle arcade meets the west wall. Notice also the remains of a narrow Early English window to the south of the main door. No doubt most, if not all, of the other windows in the church at this time were narrow and the church would have been much darker than now.

Also from this period, but difficult to date precisely, is the tower. Its narrow pointed arches into the nave and the chapel to the east, and its robust construction using large and somewhat rough hewn stones, are typical of the Early English period. The chapel to the east of the tower has changed much over the centuries. To understand what it would have been like you have to imagine it without all the extra building and rooms on the northern side, and without the wooden screen to the south. It is probably of the same age as the tower (otherwise, why build the arch in the tower? - and the east wall of the chapel is made of similar stone blocks), but whether it was a chapel or vestry, or both, is not clear. Notice also the buttresses on the northern corners of the tower that now form part of the walls of the north aisle and the former organ chamber. These would have been external features, of course. However, when it was built the tower did not have an opening to the west; there still was no north aisle!

## The Fourteenth Century

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the church had changed again. The old Norman doorway was blocked up (with the buttress added to stop the walls tipping any further) and a new door was created where it is now (with a steeper pitch of roof – notice the roof line on the outside of the building). Larger windows were created in the south and west walls (fragments of medieval glass remain in the west most window). A larger



chancel was built (sadly now gone), of which more below. And the north aisle was built. That meant removing the north wall and replacing it with the arcade of pillars we see today.

Not that this all happened at once. The standard of workmanship varies considerably, suggesting that the changes took place over several generations.

The font, now under the tower, also dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, although it originally occupied a position in the north aisle. There has been considerable debate over the years as to what the north aisle looked like when it was first built, for in its present form it dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some have suggested that there was originally a smaller aisle, and there is a small piece of wall protruding from the eastern-most wall of the aisle indicating where a previous narrower construction may have met the tower. However, excavations made during restoration did not reveal any evidence of a narrow aisle running the full length of the church. Rather, it is possible that a smaller chapel or room may have been built to the west of the tower (there are similar examples in other local churches, notably at Wigan parish church), and if so this is why the third (and rather poorly constructed) opening was made in the tower wall. Note how this archway is not constructed as part of the tower like the other two, but the stones of the arch are just 'stuck' on to the cut wall. We can only speculate, but it is possible that this room or chapel may have been a chantry (where wealthy patrons paid to have Mass said) or it may have originally housed the font – or both. Certainly the font was formerly in the north aisle, and remained there until 1866.

The chancel as it is now is Victorian; it was completely rebuilt in 1866 after the older chancel was deemed to be in too bad a state to repair. However, a faded photo exists to show what the medieval chancel looked like and it was not vastly different from what we see today, except that the roof was made of oak (it is now pine) and was adorned with a series of carved wooden angels bearing shields of local significance. Five of these angels survive in the church (and there are others elsewhere). They can be seen in the base of the tower. When the chancel was reconstructed in 1866 new stone versions of the angels were made to support the present roof.

## The Tudors

The roof of the north aisle is Tudor, dating from 1545. The blocked up door in the north aisle is of a similar age (note its much flatter arch, typical of the period). There are other parts of the church that date from a similar time, such as the small canopied niche near the pulpit. It is said to have once contained the statue of St Nicholas, and that this was removed by the Puritans in the troubles prior to the Civil War. It almost certainly would not have been in its present position originally, but would have been associated with an altar somewhere else in the church (perhaps in the north aisle, or in what is now the Plumbe chapel). There is a reference in the will of one Henrie Starkey, who died in 1593, that he desired to be buried "in Aughton Church before the altar of St Nicholas". Unfortunately we do not know where he was buried!

## The Victorians

At some point, probably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and like many churches in England, the bare stone surfaces were covered with thick rendering and plaster. Almost everything of architectural interest was covered and hidden. Box pews, false ceilings, a western gallery and Puritan England, made many churches look more like non-conformist chapels.

However, of even more significance is the fact that much

of the fabric of the church was by now in a poor state of repair. As has already been mentioned, in 1866 the chancel was considered to be in need of a complete rebuild. The Victorians did what they thought was best at the time, although some wish the Victorians had repaired rather than rebuilt! So the complete chancel, and much of the woodwork in the church dates from this period. The chancel roof and its stone angels are dated 1875. The reredos and lectern are from 1885. The pulpit is from 1886 and replaced a three-decker version. The choir stalls are a little later, dating from 1900.



## The Twentieth Century

The most significant restoration of recent times took place in 1913-14. After consultation with Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (of Liverpool Cathedral fame), the plaster was all chipped away, and the gallery and false ceilings removed, and considerable archaeological investigation work was done before the church was

put back into full working order (revealing much of the information given above). The inside of the southern nave wall was rebuilt using original stone (notice how the internal wall is vertical, but externally it leans at a precarious angle). The church was re-roofed, and the suite of vestry and utility rooms was built at the north-eastern corner.

New floors, new pews, a newly restored chapel, now called the Plumbe chapel after the elder son of a former Rector, and of course that new fangled thing called electricity all made the church pretty much as you see it today!

### **And Today**

The result of all these different phases of building and restoration has created what many regard as a very beautiful, if a slightly quirky, building. Each generation has sought to use it in the way that seems best at the time, and so changes were and continue to be necessary. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the Plumbe chapel refurbished to make it more useful for daily prayer and smaller acts of worship, and there are plans to make the old organ chamber into a useable room for working with children.

### **A BRIEF TOUR**

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So, having described the history, here are a few notes to point out some of the special features of St Michael's church as you wander round. Let's begin on the inside.

*Walking up the main aisle.*

**Norman Doorway** – to your right is the blocked door way. It is easier to see the shape and construction from the outside. The interior wall is vertical and finishes before reaching the roof because it was reconstructed in the 1913-14 restoration, the outside wall being untouched.

**Canopied Niche** – in the splay of the east-most nave window. It dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and is said to have once contained the statue of St Nicholas. It would originally have been near the altar dedicated to the same, perhaps in the north aisle or in what is now the Plumbe chapel.

**Pulpit** – given in 1886 in memory of Thomas Bland, it replaced an earlier three-decker pulpit. It rests on a slab of Irish marble, on top of a base of solid Scottish

stone. It is carved with the figures of the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and has five scenes from Jesus' passion: the agony, the betrayal, the scourging, the carrying of the cross, and the crucifixion.

**Lectern** – presented by parishioners to commemorate the Rev. William Henry Boulton's 51 years as Rector (1834-85). Also presented at the same time were the clock in the tower, and a silver Communion set.

*Entering the chancel.*

**Stone Angels** – the eight angelic corbels supporting the roof replace twelve wooden ones that existed in the medieval chancel, and five of which you can see under the tower. The angels bear shields with crests of the Stanley family and other donors and significant local families, and are copies of those on the original wooden ones. A separate sheet is available with more details.

**Choir Stalls** – these were installed in 1900, the gift of Mrs Seddon of West Towers. Once in place there was no need for the previous minstrels gallery at the west end of the church, so it was removed in the 1913-14 restoration.

**Reredos (The Last Supper)** – the scene behind the altar was given in 1885 in memory of Thomas Bland.

**East Window** – depicts Jesus' Ascension. It was designed by Thomas Benyon Medcalf, then churchwarden, was installed in 1900 in memory of Catherine Bland.

**Vanbrugh Memorial** – inside the sanctuary, and to the north side, is the memorial the Rev. George Vanbrugh, who was Rector from 1786 to 1834. It was carved by the well known Victorian sculptor Westmacott, and is made of Caenstone.

*Passing through to the Plumbe Chapel.*

**Plumbe Chapel** – this part of the church has had various uses. Prior to the 1913-14 restoration it served as a choir vestry and organ chamber. It was restored as a small chapel and separated from the chancel with the fine oak screen. It was further restored in 2008 when some unsatisfactory and unoriginal pews were replaced by the chairs you see today. It is named after John Plumbe, the elder son of a former Rector, and is used for daily prayer.

**Bell Tower** – built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it houses six bells. Four were cast in 1715 (two of which bear the names of churchwardens of that time, and the tenor has the name of the Rector). Two more treble bells were added in 1938, and all six hung in a new frame. They are rung from the ropes surrounding the font.

**Font** – the 14<sup>th</sup> century font was originally situated in the north aisle, and moved to its present position in 1866. The carvings that would once have adorned it have been completely worn away, but you can see the hasp marks for a lock and cover, showing how it was once secured to preserve the holy water.

**Easter Sepulchre** – the recess in the north wall of the tower (now containing a cupboard) was probably built as an Easter sepulchre. It is a decorated archway over what looks like a small empty stone coffin. The lid is nearby. This would have been decorated at Easter to celebrate the empty tomb, and would have had special place in Easter devotions.

**Wooden Angels** – these are all the church has left of the original twelve angels that supported the medieval chancel roof. Others are in private hands or in a museum in Scotland! A separate sheet is available showing details of the carving on all twelve of them.

**North Aisle** – the roof dates from 1545 and is made of oak. It is the oldest and best part of the church roof. The two ‘tie beams’ towards the west end are not Tudor but were added during the 1913-14 restoration for strength. Notice the roof line on the east most wall of the aisle (the outer wall of the tower). Two lines are visible, the lower is the roof line, the upper is a string course designed to force rain away from the point where roof joins wall (you can see many other examples of this on the outside the church).

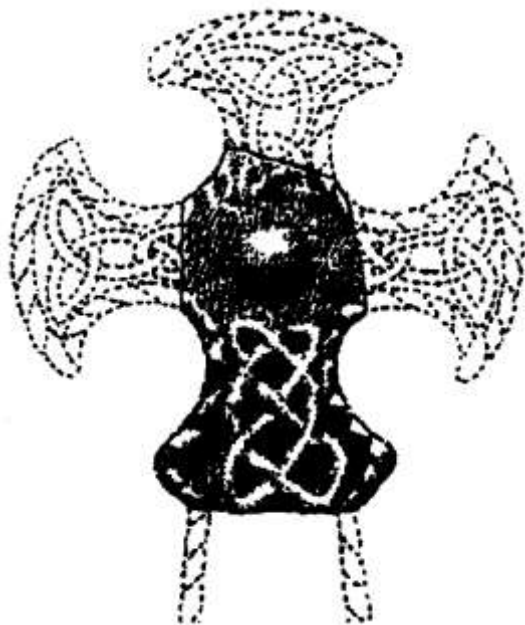
**Saxon Cross** – on a shelf in the recess of the blocked doorway are the remains of the Saxon cross found buried in the church foundations. It has been dated to be 9<sup>th</sup> century, but no earlier than 850 AD. It would have been painted white with the rope work picked out in blue, black and red. The stone is local, from within a mile. Only 14 pre-Norman crosses have been found in Lancashire. Also on the shelves are other pieces of stone found during excavations, some marked with interesting carvings. Of most significance are the two pieces that may have been part of the original chancel arch.

### *Outside the Church*

**Charnel House** - In 1739 a charnel house was erected on the north side of the church in the recess between the north aisle and tower. The churchyard was much smaller then, and the graveyard had become so overcrowded that the medieval practice was adopted of disinterring bones and placing them in a charnel house, so that ground could be used for more burials.

**Ring O' Bells** - In the 17<sup>th</sup> century three cottages were built at the north-eastern corner of the churchyard, and a school at the south-western corner. The school later (1836) moved to the other end of Church Lane. One of the cottages became an inn called "Ring O' Bells", and this was where the post coach from Liverpool to Preston stopped to deliver and collect mailbags. These buildings were demolished in 1877 when the churchyard was enlarged.

**Sundial** – it dates from 1736 (though reset in 1877) and still has its original plate with a Latin inscription which translates as "I only count the sunny hours".



A reconstruction of the  
Saxon cross, drawn by  
W.G. Collingwood

*We hope you have enjoyed  
your visit to this historic  
building. Not a museum, but a  
living building dedicated to  
the worship of the living God,  
and home of a lively Christian  
community.*