

GARSTANG ST. HELEN'S CHURCH
CHURCHTOWN



HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

St. Helen's Church has been called the 'Cathedral of the Fylde', a fine example of an ancient church. It shows the architecture of almost every age since the Normans. The fascination of the church is its simple irregularity – it seems to have grown naturally, rather than by design, for the worship of God.

Its age is unknown, though the oldest existing part of the building can be dated to the 12th century. The church is not mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086), as is its neighbour at St. Michael's-on-Wyre, but this does not prove that there was no church here before that. When St. Michael's attempted a "take over" of the church in about 1203, the jury found that St. Helen's had always been a 'Mother Church', that is, an independent parish; which certainly pushes back the date of its foundation.

It is not too fanciful to think that it is very ancient indeed, for two reasons, which are plain today. First, the churchyard is almost circular,¹ which is unusual, secondly, until a new bed was dug for the river Wyre in about 1746, the branches of it (as can still be traced) completely surrounded the Churchyard. This would make it a very likely place of meeting for the worship of the pagan gods of the Anglo-Saxons and it was the practice in early days to claim such sites for Christianity by building a Christian shrine there.

The Parish was very large (there are now nine Parishes once served by St. Helen's) and the Church was gradually extended, when it was under the control, from about 1240 to 1539, of the 'White Canons' of the Abbey of Cockersand eight miles away. Its development to its present size and shape could serve as an illustration to a textbook on English Parish Churches.

EXTERIOR OF THE CHURCH

As explained in the introduction the main building of the church is surrounded by a near circular graveyard.

North Door (the Devils door)ⁱⁱ

There we find a NICHE for the Patron Saint over the Door – occupied just now by a twentieth Century carving of St. Helen, which replaces one probably destroyed during the Reformation.

This door has now become the main entrance to the Church.

West Door

This door leads to a porch, which holds the ropes for the bell rings, and the door is not used very often now.

Boiler House

The present boiler House built in 1754 as a charnel house for the deposit of bones dug up in the churchyard.

The Boiler House door and the South door would have been originally in wood but later (time unknown) changed to softwood and painted white. Due to a benefactor, the church was able to replace the rotting doors, with the present hard wood doors, which will be oiled to preserve them (August 2016).

South Door

The Southwest porch was the traditional entry into a church but custom has neglected it in favour of the North West entrance.

Hearse-House

The hearse house (on the right) is the only part of a probable Tithe Barn, which still belongs to the church. This was built at the South-west corner in 1754 to hold the wheeled Bier, needed for funerals from a distance.

Priest Door

The priest door is situated towards the end of the south side of the church just before the choir vestry.

Other exterior features

One of three gargoyles that is still intact is of a man stretching wide his mouth.

Other carvings of c500 are to be found above the Priest's Door.

The Tower Clock of 1866 strikes the hours.

There is at present a Weathercock on top of the tower.

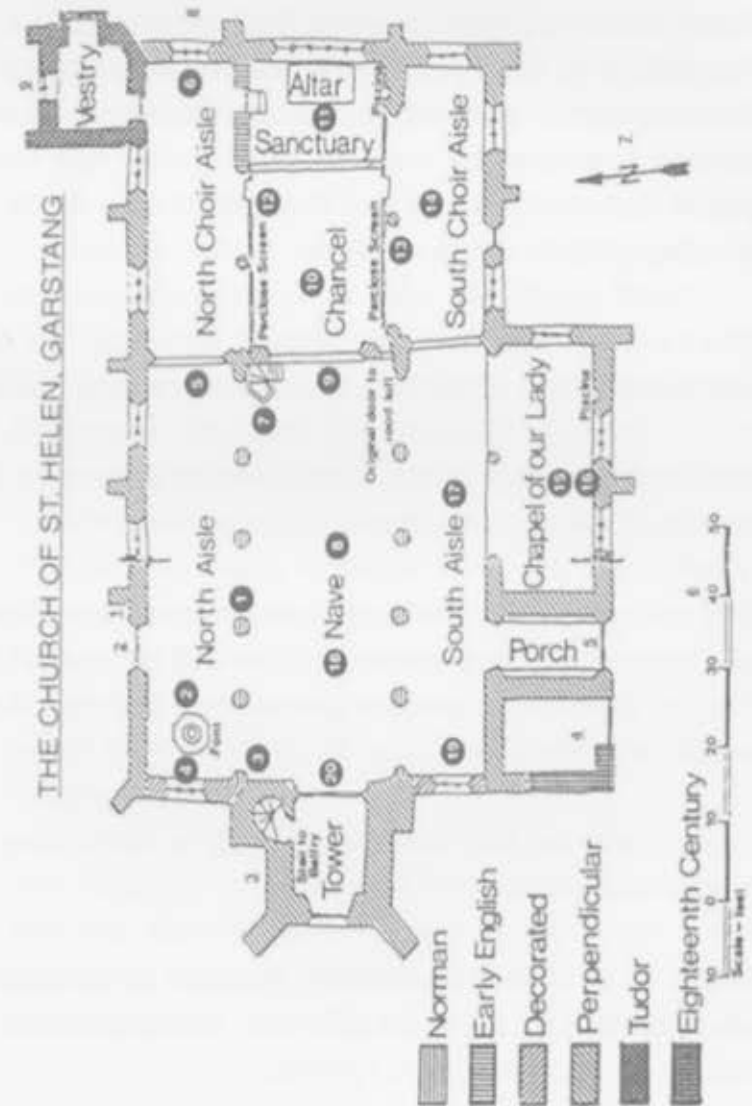
There is a Georgian sundial, dated to 1757 with the inscription 'pereunt et imputantur'. Unfortunately, the face was stolen during the late Twentieth Century.

There is also a Stump of a Mediaeval Churchyard Cross; part of this was incorporated in a new Cross-, which was erected in 1926 to the North of the Church.

The oldest known dated gravestones are those of Elizabeth Foster (1632) and her father. They lie to the East of the Church. A number of Vicars are buried close by.

The Clergy Vestry was added c1600. It had two floors and was possibly an early grammar school, which still belongs to the Church.

On the east face of the tower can be seen the line of the old Norman Roof.



INTERIOR OF CHURCH

1. The pillars to the North of the Nave are probably the oldest part of the church dating from before 1200 AD. These have circular capitals whereas those on South have octagonal capitals. The South pillars are six inches shorter than those on the North. The arches above are Transitional (c.1200 AD) and fit awkwardly on the pillars. This suggests that the stone church had a rectangular pre-conquest nave which was extended in the late Norman period firstly to the North and then later to the South, thus creating a North and South Aisle.
2. The Font was first used on October 25th 1857, an earlier font found buried in the Chancel was sometimes used.
3. The Wall Hanging of St. Helen was designed by Betty Mansfield and made by ladies of the parish in 1987.
4. The West window of the North Aisle has geometrical tracery of a 'peculiar lozenge' shape and is one of the earliest in the Church. None of the present glasswork in the church is earlier than, Victorian.
5. Legion tells us that there is possibly a tombstone of a Norman knight.
6. Grave slabs of mediaeval clergy (not now all in one piece) were formerly found in the Chancel, others complete with swords were of Mediaeval Knights.
7. The pulpit is a specimen of fine Jacobean craftsmanship and bears the date 1646. Originally a three-decker pulpit it was reduced to its present size in the Nineteenth century and restored with some new panelling.
8. The brass Chandelier that hung in the nave until its theft on September 24th 2000 was presented to the Church following the disastrous flood of the river Wyre in 1746 by a grateful contractor. He had been commissioned by the parishioners to build a completely new Church, which was then found not to be necessary. The ancient Chandelier, which used to hang in the Lady Chapel, replaced the Brass Chandelier after it was stolen.
9. The Chancel Arch is horseshoe in shape and also in the Decorated Style of the mid-13th century. It probably replaced a small round Norman arch leading into a small chancel, which could have been oval in shape. The chancel arch bears evidence of having supported a Rood Screen across the top, which was probably destroyed during the Reformation when lighter stones were set into the arch. The underside of steps to the right of the arch would have originally given access to the top of this Rood Screen.
10. The Chancel is separated from its two side aisles by restored flanking screens and by restored misericords or carved supports beneath. Behind the Northern choir stalls (against the Organ) stand Nineteenth Century

painted panels, which were formerly in the private Roman Catholic chapel at Clifton hill near Forton.

11. The Sanctuary before 1939 stood two steps above the chancel with another step to the altar. It contains two 17th/18th century chairs of fine craftsmanship. To the right of the Sanctuary may be seen the original pedestal for the statue of the patron saint with another to the left. On the right wall is a mediaeval trefoil piscine with shelf into which has recently been inserted an ambry for the reservation of the host and wine.

The East Window is a fine example of Perpendicular architecture. The beautiful stained glass was inserted in 1878 at the cost of £213 raised by donations, (offered in the aims box and Harvest Festival collections). The roof of the chancel and the nave was raised to admit clerestory windows in 1811. The old crossbeams record in red that they were built in 1620 at the expense of Robert Bindloss Knight the Lay Rector.

12. A fine example of an early English pillar c. 1230; said to resemble the sole-remaining pillar found in the Chapter House at Cockersand Abbey. At the beginning of the 13th Century, the Abbey was granted the advowson of Garstang Church and supplied a long line of her priests.
13. Masons' marks are to be seen on some of the stonework.

14. The south chancel Aisle (present Choir Vestry) was originally a chantry Chapel dedicated to St. James and founded by Roger de Brockholes in 1499. From 1782 to 1868, this was the site of the massive tomb of the Butler family of Kirkland Hall. The memorial window to the West of the priest's door depicts Christ the Good shepherd and commemorated the Rev Wilson Pedder (vicar 1859-91) who was responsible for major restoration of the Church in 1868.



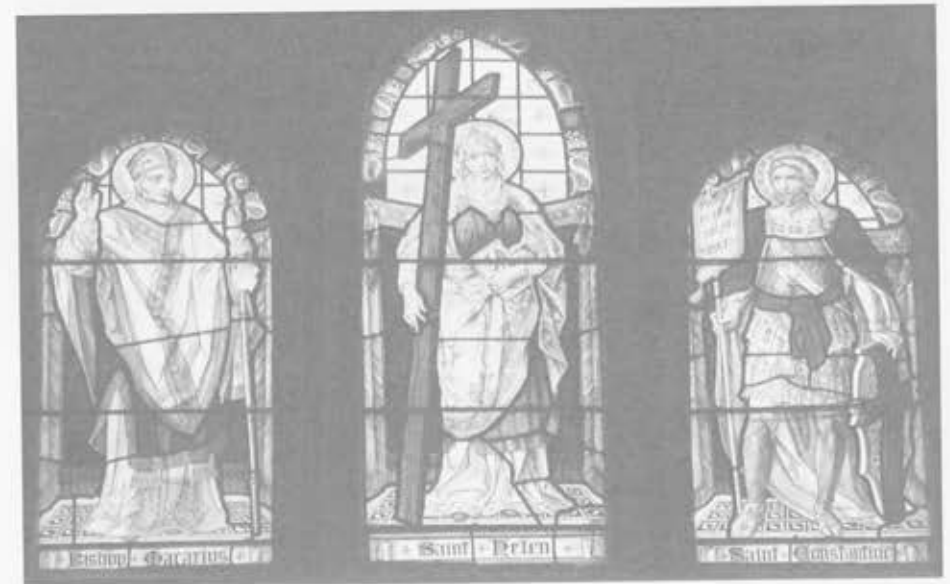
15. The Lady Chapel was completed in 1529 according to instructions in the will of Margaret Rigmayden (died 1516) of Wedacre Hall near Garstang, who wished to found a chantry. The Latin inscription across the top of the South wall warns people about talking in Church. The Lady Chapel was built two steps above the rest of the Church probably to take account of the many burials in the graveyard against the then South wall. It is a fine example of Tudor Church building. The inscription may have been replaced, erroneously when the ceiling was lowered in the Seventeenth century. The ancient piscine with its trefoil head is used for washing the sacred vessels after divine service.

The Stained glass in the East Window portrays St. Helen and her son the Emperor Constantine the Great and her bishop-confessor Macarius.

16. The Wall Paintings, uncovered during the Twentieth Century redecoration, are inscriptions dating from the mid seventeenth Century and are taken from the King James Authorised Version of the Bible. That seen on the south wall of the choir vestry dates from the Fifteenth Century and portrays a bishop.

17. King Henry IV of Lancaster gave four oak trees from his Royal Forest of Myerscough for the repair of the church in 1402. We can still see these massive beams in the roof.

18. Modern hassocks were made in recent years by members of the Church; each has a different design.
19. The West Window of the South Aisle with interlacing tracery is a beautiful example of the early-decorated period (mid-13th Century). It is said to be the oldest in the Church.
20. The tower with its fine Perpendicular arch was built somewhat later. It is one of many irregularities in the Church as it sits two feet south of the centre of the Nave. The tower contains a ring of six bells rung by six ringers from the ground floor. Otherwise, a single ringer can operate the chimes and play hymn tunes.



This next section was copied from a book by Andrew Hewitson, 'NORTHWARD'.

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This was during the choleric outbreak in 1849.....

And on a certain occasion, he evinced quite a strong religious spirit. Government had not appointed a "day of humiliation and prayer" to stay the ravages of the malady, so Mr. Butler-Cole selected the 28th September in the year named as a day to be kept by his tenantry for this purpose; and it is reported that,

"At his request they and their wives and families met at Kirkland Hall, when prayer was offered up, and Mr Cole preached an excellent and appropriate sermon," and that, "in the afternoon he again offered up prayer and preached another sermon."

Owing to a misunderstanding or quarrel with the Vicar of Churchtown, Mr, Butler-Cole opened some sort of a place of worship of his own, in or near Kirkland Hall, and for a while regularly conducted religious services in it. Mr Butler-Cole died in 1864, aged 68 years, and was buried in Churchtown Church yard.

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Churchtown is a neat, clean-looking little village. On the south side of a fine avenue of trees, at the entrance to Churchtown, there is the village school. Taking into account its foundation, it is the oldest school in the parish: it was founded for free education about 1602. The present school, which stands on the site of one built in 1812 as the successor of the original school, was erected in 1876, at the sole expense of Mr Edward Moon, of Aigburth, near Liverpool, who got his early education here, and was a relative-uncle, I believe – of the late Sir Richard Moon, who for many years was chairman of the London and North-Western Railway Company.

....The Parish Church, on the south side of the village, is a very old and interesting building. The exact date of its original foundation is not known; but there was certainly a church here in the 12 century. There are some old, genealogically-striking mural tablets, &c, in the churchyard, chiefly in the eastern portion of it, there are several curious and ancient stones. In the ground, near the principal entrance to the church – north-west corner – there is the stone on which in old times the clerk used to stand and read out notices, &c., on Sunday, after the morning services, for each of which he got a fee of sixpence. Prior to 1863 the church here was in a very dilapidated condition – and had sunk in many places where bodies had been buried a long, low gallery filled the west end, and a large stone vault blocked a portion of the east end, the

roof was ceiled in lath and plaster, and the walls and arches were covered with lime-wash, which had become dingy to a degree. A restoration consisting of the vicar and the churchwardens, was formed in 1864: Mr Albert Simpson of Elmhurst, Bowgrave, acted as honorary treasurer; and subscriptions were gradually obtained to restore the church, under the directions of Mr. Paley, architect, Lancaster. The whole church was re-seated (in oak) and re-floored, the stone-work was cleaned and pointed, and the gallery and plaster ceiling removed. It took about five years to complete the work, and the total cost of it was £1,371 13s, 1d. During the restoration, how to deal with the big vault in the east transept – a vault so large that it blocked the transept from floor to ceiling – was a difficult problem to solve. The vault contained two coffins – one having in it the remains of an ancient lord of the manor, who in his day had been a sort of king in the district. Eventually a faculty was obtained – after due public notice had been given – for the removal of the vault: the two coffins were placed in the ground below the stone shelf on which they had rested, and the material of the vault was, as far as possible, utilised in the restoration of the church. since.. (words missing from page)... restoration scheme was carried out, the church has undergone certain alterations – improvements – in the chancel. Taking the building in its entirety, it is now one of the best specimens of an English parish church to be met with.

APPENDIX

¹The circular churchyard with several yew trees point to its original use as a Druid temple. It was believed by some that the area might have been the site where Christian missionaries from Ireland first set foot in Lancashire at the end of the navigational portion of the River Wyre, which flows, to the Irish Sea some 14 miles away.

²Before and during the Middle Ages, the north face of a church was considered to belong to the Devil and to these people considered heathen. Churches were invariably built to the north of roads and tracks, to ensure their main entrance was on the south side. It was also common for them to be built on pre-Christian sacred sites. Such places were still considered sacred by their former worshippers, who would often continue to visit them. A doorway would often be inserted in the "heathen" north side of the church to allow them to enter and worship on the site. Because of the association of that side with the Devil, the name "Devil's door" became established.

A later and more common purpose, (especially in Sussex) was to allow the Devil to escape from the church. A widespread belief in the middle Ages held that the Devil resided in an unbaptised child's soul; at the baptism, the Devil would be driven out of the child and had to be able to leave. Accordingly, a door was often built into the north wall for this purpose. These doors were often too small to have any real use, and were therefore only figurative, most of the doors that remain have been bricked up—reputedly to prevent the Devil re-entering.



The information in this booklet taken from a photocopied leaflet already used in St. Helen's Church, author unknown.

A booklet by Julie M. Beeden.

'Northward', by Anthony Hewitson, 1900, Landy Pub.