

Rotherham Parish Church,

The Parish Church of All Saints, Rotherham, is one of the finest mediaeval perpendicular churches in the North of England. The 188 feet tall spire topped with a gilded weathervane has overlooked the town centre for over 500 years.

Three churches have stood on this site. The Domesday Book of 1086 records Rotherham as a settlement of twelve households, with a mill, a church and a priest, meadows and woodland.

Saxon remains are few. Part of a door jamb under the North West pier of the present tower and a piece of stone coffin lid at the west end of the North aisle.

The Norman church, built in the 12th century of Rotherham Red – a distinctive local sandstone from the Yorkshire Coal Measures - was decorated with Magnesian limestone from Conisborough and had a chancel, nave, transepts and a central tower.

Norman remains include sections of the tower piers and carved cushion capitals from the nave pillars used as bases for the pillars in the present nave. The Norman font stands in the Jesus chapel..

For a time, the church was controlled by the abbeys of Rufford and Clairvaux, the Mother house of the Cistercian order.

The building acquired its present form The monks reordered the Norman church In the 14th and 15th Century in the Perpendicular style of architecture..

Chancel.

The chancel has traces of the Pre-Reformation church. Niches beside the East window held statues. On the South side is a Sedilia, seats for the clergy, with a broken Holy Water Stoop on the wall alongside. The priests would dip their fingertips in the bowl and sign themselves with the cross.

The decorated screen behind the High Altar, the Reredos, has Christ at the centre with (from right to left) St John the Baptist, St John the Evangelist, St James and St Stephen.

The ancient stalls date from the 15th Century. The two surviving Misericord are at the entrance to the chancel. The misericord is the projection under the seat, a small rest to support a standing priest during long services. The undersides are decorated with a bearded head and a round smiling face

The two angels at the head of the chancel steps are part of a screen celebrating the Diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897

The poppy heads on the bench ends from the French 'Puppis' for a doll tell the story of the Nativity. At the entrance to the chancel the Archangel brings Mary the news she has been chosen.

The other figures are Mary, nursing the Christ child on her lap while Joseph looks on. The Three Kings bearing the gifts of gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. The detail of the carving shows which King is bringing each gift. All in a procession clockwise around the chancel. The figure of a young boy, facing west bearing a palm frond is a mystery. His identity is unknown.

The chancel roof built about 1512 features the Union or Tudor Rose. Painted and gilded bosses show the Holy Monogram IHS, with symbols of patrons and benefactors.

Monuments, in stone and latten, a copper or brass alloy sheet, celebrate Rotherham families including the Howard's of Effingham. The Earl of Effingham was Lay rector of the Parish.

The East window and Sanctuary furniture was a gift of the Earl and Countess of Effingham during the 1873 – 75 reordering of the church by Sir George Gilbert Scott. Their portraits are on either side of the East window.

The Tower

A letter of 1409 from Archbishop Bowet allowed the vicar of Rotherham to sell indulgences to raise the funds to repair the tower. The letter refers to the Campanile, suggesting that a bell or bells were already installed.

The groined vaulting under the tower is one of the earliest in England. The dark circle at the centre of the vault is a wooden plug. This can be lifted out to raise and lower the bells for repair or replacement. 10 of the twelve bells in the tower were recast and rehung in the 1920s. The last two were installed in 1986.

The heaviest bell, the Tenor, weighs in at 34 cwt (hundredweight), roughly one- and three-quarter tons.

The construction of the vaulting had problems. The tower piers, the huge feet which take the weight of the tower are Norman and are out of line, the sides do not form a square. The intersections of the ribs are decorated with carved leaves and shields to disguise the awkward construction.

In 1642, during the English Civil War, John Shaw the puritan vicar claimed to have hidden in the tower when Rotherham fell to Earl of Newcastle's Royalist troops. Bullet marks in the roof suggest the Royalist troops tried to flush him out.

The Norman roof had a steep pitch, the angle can be seen on the tower inside the church. On three sides lantern windows can be seen below the vaulting. These were built above the Norman roof and looked outwards and lit the space below the vaulting.

On the West side of the tower arches are the corbels that supported the Rood (a image of the crucified Christ). On the wall above, overlooking the Nave was a fresco of the Last Judgement, the Doom painting, showing the sorting of souls on the last day.

Together, the Rood and the Doom made a potent image for the mediaeval worshipper.

Nave

This is where the congregation gathers. The flat tie beam roof is supported by pillared arcades below a tier of Clerestory windows. Constructed during the 15th century the Oak roof has 77 individually carved bosses.

The roof has undergone repairs and maintenance throughout its life. Work carried out in the 1873-75 reordering uncovered evidence of burning and sections pockmarked with bullet holes.

The capitals of the Nave pillars are decorated with foliage with faces hidden in the greenery. The Green Man or Foliate mask is common in mediaeval churches. Its significance is widely discussed. With the skin of the face made of leaves o branches growing out of the mouth and eyes It has been suggested it appears as an image of creation. The word of God commanding life into existence as the Tree of Life.

The Jesus Chapel

The main beams of the chapel roof are decorated with the Sun in Glory, badge of the house of York, to whom Thomas Rotherham was loyal, the five wounds of Christ and the wheel of St Catherine. In the 15th Century before Thomas established the college and chantry of Jesus in Rotherham this part of the church was the chantry of St Catherine. The chantry of Catherine had a priest who was offered accommodation at the college with the Provost and fellows

Several Provosts of the college are buried within the chapel.

The chapel was restored in 1921 as a memorial to the men of the parish who fell in the Great War 1914-1919. On the south wall of the chapel below the memorial to Lieut. Col. Downes is a

handwritten roll of honour. The last name on the third roll is unfinished. The entry is in pencil and only partially inked in.

The East window of the chapel, The Revelation window, was designed by Harry Grylls, of Burliston and Grylls and installed about 1921. It is an early example of a theme he would return too as a Wart Memorial

The Norman font stands in the corner beside the altar. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the chapel was known as St Mary's chapel.

The Present Church

In the 17th century the Pulpit stood under the arch of the tower at the end of the Nave. Large horse box pews were placed in the nave at the dictate of their owner. The scene was chaotic.

In 1746 and 1760 the church was "new seated" and galleries were built around the walls. The organ was built and installed in 1777 by Johann Snetzler. One of the foremost organ builders of his day. He introduced the Diapason stop to English organs. The instrument has been moved twice. In 1843 from the organ loft to the North transept, site of the present choir vestry. Then to the North chapel where it stands today. In 1779, the seats in the organ loft under the chancel arch were finished effectively creating two floors.

In 1873, under the direction of the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, the galleries were removed. The stonework cleaned and repaired. The oak rooves of the Nave and North transept were cleaned and polished.

The South transept roof required more attention and repairs were made in pine instead of oak. The thick resin found in pine protects against insect infestation.

The pulpit was moved to the North side of the nave and the chancel was reordered. Scott recognised the importance of the mediaeval stalls and preserved them. They are the oldest examples of carved woodwork in the church.

The return stalls reveal the origin of Al saints' collegiate status. The college was a group of like minded individuals working together as colleagues. A use of the term that predates the recent use to describe an educational establishment. The church in Rotherham was a college of monks.

The Pulpit, made in the early 1600s by the Rose family, joiners of Greasbrough is an attractive wine glass design. The canopy, a sounding board, was added around 1700. In Victorian times speaking

tubes were added between the pulpit and the front pew of the nave, to benefit those with hearing difficulties.

The brass eagle lectern was given to celebrate the church reopening after Scott's reordering in 1875.

The Victorian font, at the East end of the North aisle is in memory of William Newton, vicar during the Scott reordering. Well liked by the people of the parish he died, aged 42, of pneumonia contracted after falling from a horse. The stained glass window in the Jesus chapel depicting the four gospel writers was installed in his memory, by public subscription.

The Nave Altar pace, designed by Ronald Sims, was built in 1994 with modern limed oak furniture. The pulpit and lectern changed places to create the church's present layout.

Churchyards, Monuments and Memorials.

There is evidence of Christian burial on this site since Saxon times. A fragment of coffin lid inscribed with the outline of a sword is part of the wall at the West end of the Nave. Burials have taken place inside and outside the church, although many monuments outside have been moved from their original locations. The churchyard was closed for burials in 1854.

Over 500 burials were recovered from the North side of the churchyard in 1932 when All Saints Square was built. They were re-interred in Moorgate cemetery.

The churchyard was landscaped after the Second World War as part of the preparations for the Festival of Britain. The gravestones were removed but the burials remain under the ground. The latest work on the churchyard was completed in 2011.

Inside the church, in the North chapel stands an altar tomb to Robert and Ann Swyft.

On the East wall of the South transept stands a memorial to Samuel Buck by John Flaxman, R.A. Flaxman designed the blue jasper ware for Wedgwood and was head of the company's Rome studios. He was the first professor of Sculpture appointed to the Royal Academy. The Buck memorial is the only memorial with three figures ever worked by Flaxman. The figure represent Samuel Buck's widow and daughters.

On the wall opposite stands a marble monument depicting "Faith". Below her on the tablet are the names of fifty who died at the launching of a vessel from the Providence Dock at Masbrough on the 5th of July 1841. The stretch of canal where it happened is now overlooked by Rotherham Central Railway station.

The Chapel of Our Lady on Rotherham Bridge

Chantry chapels were a familiar part of the spiritual landscape of the mediaeval world, only a small number remain. The Chapel of Our Lady is one of a handful of bridge chantries in England.

Its origin is dated from the will of a grammar master of Rotherham, John Boking, who left three shillings and four pence to the chapel to be built on Rotherham Bridge. His will was proved in 1483.

It served as a chapel until the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Abolition of Colleges and Chantries Act of 1547.

Afterwards it became an alms-house under the authority of the Feoffees of the Common Lands of Rotherham.

It suffered damage during the English Civil War when the Earl of Newcastle led a Royalist attack on the town in 1642.

In 1779, the Deputy Constable moved in, paying £5 a year in rent and prohibited, by his rental agreement from selling ales and spirituous liquor. He lived on the ground floor with rooms above and the cellars were used as a jail. Two doors from the cells remain downstairs.

It may have served the town as a jail until the middle of the 19th century. Briefly it was a dwelling and then opened as a tobacconist.

A petition from the people of Rotherham in 1900 called for the chapel to be returned to its original use and in 1913 Sir Charles Stoddart bought out the tobacconist. The Feoffees handed the chapel to the care of the Parish church in 1916, conditionally that it be maintained as a place of worship.

It was reconsecrated on the 7th July 1924 by the Bishop of Sheffield, The Right Reverend Leonard Burrows. Church and Civic dignitaries led a procession from the Parish Church to the newly restored chapel for the service.

It serves as the Lady Chapel for the Church of All Saints, Rotherham (Rotherham Minster) and is an integral part of the worship in the parish.

A Town Centre Church

Grand in design and execution, the role of All Saints is that of any Parish Church.

To serve the spiritual needs of those who live within its Parish boundaries or enter its doors.

To greet the new arrivals, celebrate their marriages and achievements and say farewell to the departed. This role is extended by its location at the centre of the town to play a part in the civic life of the town and borough.

Rotherham Parish Church is held in great affection by many Rotherham people. We hope you will enjoy, cherish and respect this place as many have done through the centuries.

©Martyn Taylor 26th July, 2019.