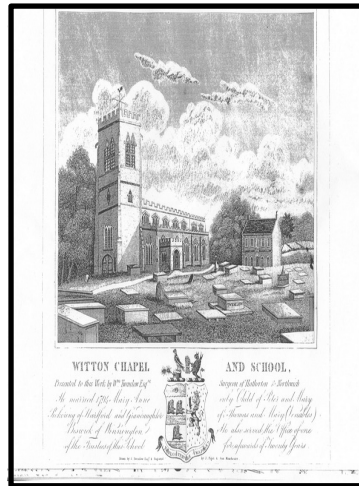


A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST HELEN'S, WITTON



St Helens Witton is the oldest building in Northwich. It is also the most important building both architecturally and historically. In medieval times Witton (originally Wychton meaning Salt Town) was the residential area sitting above the salt workings around the confluence of the Rivers Weaver and Dane.

The building we see now was originally established as a Chapel of Ease or subsidiary chapel to the large parish of Great Budworth about 650 years ago. Saxon or Norman carvings placed inside St Helens suggest that there may have been an even earlier church. The patrons of St Helens for much of the medieval period were the Venables family, Barons of Kinderton. The lower parts of the tower and the nave arcades all date from about 1350.

Substantial works of enlargement took place between 1480 and 1540. At this time the tower and nave were increased in height, the nave widened, the chancel re-built in a rare apsidal form reminiscent of Lichfield Cathedral and the wonderful cambered timber ceiling installed. The continuity of nave and chancel, sweeping eastwards from the tower arch in one majestic space, is emphasised by this wonderful ceiling.



Enriched beams divide the ceiling into square panels which are adorned by intricately patterned roof bosses.

These are mostly leaf patterns but also include salt baskets, golden suns, carved faces and the monogram WV.

These acknowledge William Venables who sponsored the ceiling.



During the Reformation and Civil Wars St Helens lost most of its medieval monuments and stained glass. Further enlargement took place on the north side in the 1880s. The beautiful stained glass we see now is by three artists - Kempe, Wailes and Gibbs - and was installed between 1863 and 1910. The Millennium Window installed in 2000 was designed by pupils from Church Walk School.

The church's original peal of six bells was increased to eight in 1877. The earliest reference to bells in the Church Warden's Accounts is in 1692. Four bells are dated 1712, one 1852, two 1877 with one undated. All eight bells were recast and re-hung in 1910.



If you look closely both inside and outside you will see many curious heads and faces looking down on you. They have seen many baptisms, weddings and funerals of the people of Northwich - their coming together at times of adversity and celebration for hundreds of years.

The church records describe many events in the town's history, including outbreaks of plague and the garrisoning of troops during the Civil Wars, while the soot-blackened exterior reminds us of centuries of salt-boiling.



Who will the faces be looking down on in another five hundred years?