

Introduction

St Mary's Church at Astbury has stood on this site, in one form or another, for many centuries, It has been described by Raymond Richards, FSA, as 'one of the most beautiful churches in the county'. Its exterior, dominated by the detached tower and lofty spire, evokes the admiration of the beholder, and this is increased when the majesty of the interior is surveyed. FH. Crossley, FSA, described the church as one of the glories of Cheshrier it runls next to the Cathedral and Nantwich in size and possesses more complete ancient fittings than any other church of large scale in the country.

The church stands on the highest point in the locality and is surrounded by a rural community.

The area covered by the 'original' Parish of Asthury may be said to be one of the oldest habitations of man in the County of Cheshire. There is evidence from the Neolithic Age, Bronze Age and the Roman period. The Neolithic Age (eirea 3000 to 1900 BC) is represented by a prehistoric trackway on the ridge of Mox Cop which led from the lowlands to Arbor Low and the Peals and to the Bridestones on the Cloud. A stone hammer has been found at



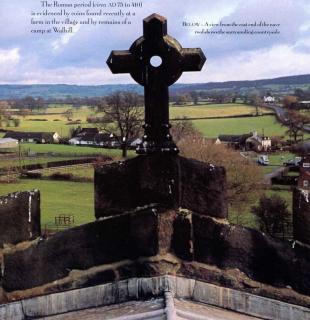
Moreton, stone duerns of various periods at Congleton Edge and a flint arrowhead at the Cloud.

From the Bronze Age (circa 1900 to the Cloud and another which formerly existed on Mow Cop. Burials have been dug-out canoe at Ciss Green and imple-

500 BC), there are remains of a hill fort on found at the foot of the village, as well as a ments at Conéleton.

The earliest parts of the church go back to Saxon times, and while there is substantial work surviving from the Norman and Early English periods, it was in the fifteenth century that the church evolved to take the form in which the visitor sees it today.

In the churchyard is the canopied tomb of the Venables family (circa 1350) which, while you are here, is well worth a visit.



Interior

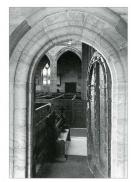


The Astbury Devil nestles in the north-west corner of the west porch. He is portrayed as a horrible writhing dwarf, apparently being resisted by the figures in the three other corners, representing the Blessed Trinity, who are trying to drive him away.

In the north aisle, by the north door, is a notable roof boss depicting the Green Man or Jack-in-the-Green, a pagan lertility symbol adopted by the Church to represent new life. Young branches spread from his







TOP – The Astbury Devil ABOVE – The font CENTRE RIGHT – The Green Man RIGHT – The north door mouth and on the top of

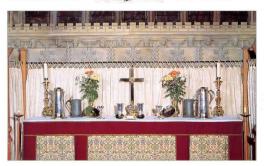
The font and cover – part of the furnishings installed at the restoration of 1610 – is placed so that the congregation can share in the ceremony when a soul is received into Christ's flock and signed with the cross, a mark of God's loving accordance.

The north doorway into the church, with its semicircular arch, is part of the Norman building. Within are the box pews, another of the restorations of 1610.

The north aisle roof is not the original of the Early

Enólish church. From the way it fits, it appears to have been brought to Asthury from some other church, and it has been suggested that it came from the dissolved Cistercian abbey of Dieulacres, near Leek. The roof is elegantly supported by angels, one of which has wines the opposite way to the others. On the high altar is the church silver. It must be emphasised that the silver is not kept in the church but in a bank vault.

ABOVE – A north aisle angel BELOW – The high altar



The Communion vessels and pewter date from the Elizabethan period and are therefore rather fragile. The two large wine vessels were a gift from the Shakerley family in the early eighteenth century.

An eagle in black oak serves as the lectern and dates from the early seventeenth

century. The engle is reputed to be one of the highest-flying birds, hence its use so often for lecterns. The carving is rather stiff and formal, and is one of the few wooden engle lecterns in existence.

On the north side of the nave, beneath the clerestory windows, is a lifteenth-





ABOVE - The leetern ABOVE RIGHT -The nave roof RIGHT - The wallpainting



century wall-painting, showing the Blessed Virgin blessing St George before his battle with the dragon. There is no other known example depicting this scene in St George's life.

The nave roof was extensively restored in the Jacobean period, as can be seen from the inscriptions round the cornice. A further major restoration tools place in 1929.

Of particular note are the intricately carved wooden roof bosses. Above the high altar is the mounting for the pyx, and above the rood screen that for the rood, which was presumably removed in Cronwell's time.

The visitor is taken aback by the sturning stained glass windows in St Mary's Church. These are both the most interesting and the most disappointing subjects connected with the church. On the one hand there is a great collection, but on the other we are confronted with evidence of wholesale and ruthless destruction.

All that remains of the mediaeval glass are fragments placed in the window in the north-west corner by the font. The more modern glass, forming the great east window, was installed in memory of the Reverend Offley Crewe, rector of Asthury from 1850 to 1850. It shows the life and history of Our Lord from the Annunciation to the Crucifision, and at the top T le is seated on His throne attended by the Apostles, the tracery above being filled with another.

The east window in the Lady chapel shows the Transfiguration, and the east window of the chapel in the north aisle (the choir vestry) depicts the Fall and final conquest of the Dragon. The first window in the north wall shows the Good Shepherd, the next three are in memory of members of the Wilbraham family, their design being appropriate to their Early English surroundings.

The next window to the west in the north aisle shows the laying down of the Cross to receive from Christ a magnificent-



ABOVE - The great east window

by jewelled Crown of Life. The next shows the house of Martha and Mary at the ruising of Lazaruss Thy brother shall rise again. The succeeding window and the one by the north porch represent scenes connected with the Nativity and the presentation of Christ in the Temple.

The next window in the south aisle depiets the raising of the son of the Widow of Nain, the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage, Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. His mockery by the Roman soldiers, Christ earrying His cross, and His







PREVIOUS PAGE - The nave
TOP - The box pews
ABOVE - The Lady chapel
ABOVE RIGHT - The south aisle roof
RIGHT - Astbury church and Old Moreton Hall

appearance to Thomas. The windows adjacent in the south aisle are an unusual feature as in them is represented Asthury church and Old Moreton Hall in the lower portions. At the eastern extremity of this south wall is a window depicting the Resurrection and the appearance of Our Lord to Mary Magdalene in the garden.

Moving west on this wall, the next window is the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, which was installed in 1920 in memory of the Shakerley family. Next to this is a similar window of the same period, showing Christ receiving the children: Let the children come unto Me. Moving





through the screen, continuing towards the west, the nest two windrows were removed from St Peter's Church, Birkenhead, before its demolition, and installed here in 1993. The first pair show the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary and the visit of the Wise Men. The second show Our Lord with St Peters 'Do you love Me?' and 'Feed my sheep.'

The next window in this wall, adjacent to the priest's chamber, is in memory of a late rector, the Reverend R.A. Corbett. The figures are Joshua, the Warrior, and Aaron, the Priest

The items of fixed woodwork within the church are particularly interesting. The box pows date from the Jacobean period, about 1610, and are complete and in good condition, still keeping the draught from your feet.

The south aisle roof is rather spectacular with many carved wooden roof bosses. Above the screen is a pendant, similar to that over the high altar, and it appears to have been intended for the suspension of a pyx. This is supported by cherubim bearing

the instruments of the Plassion: Cross. Vessel containing vinegar to drinh. Crowing Coeh. Spear and Sponge on a Reed. Hammer and Pincers. The Three Nails (short ones for hands long for feet). a Seamless Coat. Lantern. Vessel containing Wine and Myrrh. Ladder. Dies bearing the numbers 1, 2 and 3 (respectively. Pillar Cord and Seourges and Crown of Thorns). Sword and Staff. Thirty Pieces of Silver and Serol II Evidence.

The magnificent chancel serven is composed on ten double-panelled areades, filled above and below with pierced Gothic carving. Above the areading, fan tracery swells out the structure until the top becomes so wide that formerly it was furnished with several rows of pews.

The altar rail is a beautiful specimen of Elizabethan woodwork of the best period and desión.

The reredos, of Caen stone, behind the high altar, was placed there by public subscription as a thank-offering for deliverance from the cattle plague in 1866.

BELOW - The church choir



Exterior

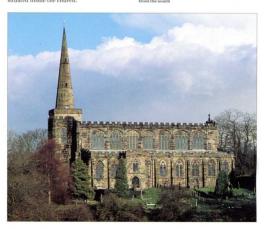
A side of the church rather difficult for the visitor to see is the south, with its magnificent elerestory windows, and the south porch and priest's chamber above. Here, before the building of a rectory, successive rectors of Astbury would have lived. Being monlast they would have been used to living in one small room.

Other features of note include the great west door and stately tower above, the spire (rebuilt in 1828 to replace an Early English one destroyed by lightning), the massive battlements and the canopied tomb. The tomb with its recumbent ligures, belonging to either the Brereton or the Venables family, is of thirteenth-century date. It is thought that at one time the tomb was situated inside the church.

The yew tree is so old – up to 2,000 years, in fact – and leans so far that it has now to be propped to prevent its falling over. The tree easily predates Edward III's Act of Parliament requiring the planting of yews in churchyards to supply the bows for mediaeval archers.

Grotesque gargoyles were a feature of many early churchess they acted as outlets for rainwater from the roof and at the same time, by being ugly, they hept away evil spirits and devils. Those projecting from the tower represent devils fleeing from the sound of bulk.

BELOW - Astbury church







LEFT - The west door LEFT BELOW - The canopied tomb ABOVE - A gargoyle BELOW - The yew





RIGHT - The bellringers BELOW - The church from the village green



The bells summon people to services for worship. In 1538 there were four bells in the tower at Astbury; these were replaced between 1627 and 1637 by Paul Hutton of the Congleton Bell Foundry. In 1923 the bells were recast into a ring of six by John Tiklor & Company of Loudhborough.

The church has two towers: one

contains the bells, supports the spire and is almost detached from the main building, while the other (the peel tower) is at the west end of the nave.

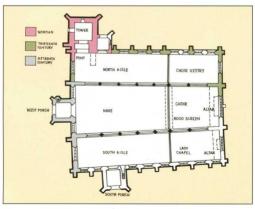
In its idyllie setting, St Mary's Church must be one of the finest examples of a mediacval church anywhere in the country, certainly in the County of Cheshire.





Left – Above the west door, inside the church, are the arms of King Charles II.

Below - As shown in the plan, the church is S feet wider at the west red than at the east, giving an added vision of perspectives ayou enter - all east this some explanation. Another is that, with the extension of the building in the late fifteenth eventury, the dedication was changed to St Mary and the alignment of the body of the church altered to coincide with survise on St Mary's Day, thus giving this unusual effect.



^C 1995 The Rector and Wardens of St Mary's Church, Astbury Published by Old Vicarage Publications, Reades Lane, Congleton CW12 3LL Printed by Jarrold Publishing, Norwich, 1/92

