

SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WIGAN PARISH CHURCH (Revised 2023)



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Introduction

This short paper explores the historical development of Wigan Parish Church (All Saints), concentrating on trying to identify its origins and then the sequence of buildings that have occupied this site for probably a thousand years or more.

It was originally motivated by a curiosity over the odd and unusual layout of the current building, including the very peculiar north- eastern position of a large tower and very short chancel. It soon became apparent that these features dated from medieval times and a more ambitious approach aimed at exploring its historical development became necessary. (1)

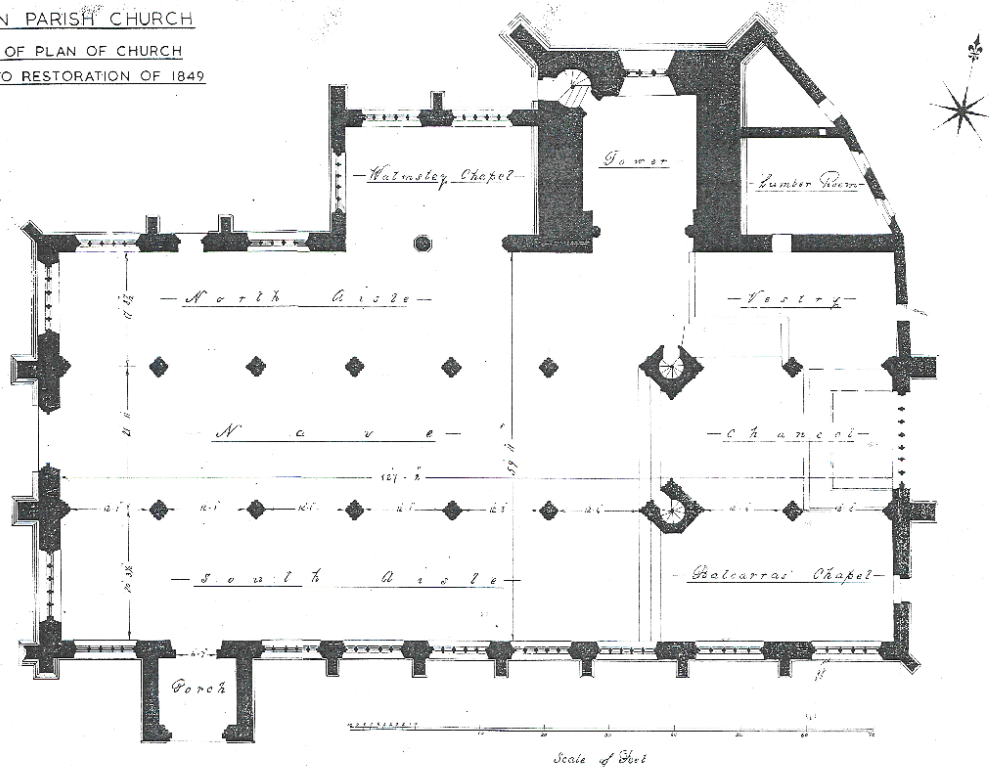
This quest has been firmly based on a review of existing historical sources and a close examination of the current buildings. However it has also sought to link this to the wider study of parish church development, including work on its Lancashire context. (2) It is through this diverse combination of sources that progress in understanding is sought. Despite this comprehensive approach, all too often there is a lack of clear verifiable evidence upon which to base opinions. Therefore the views expressed are often open to challenge. Despite this, it does provide a better picture of the development of the church than existed before.

The Current Building

The site of All Saints church occupies the crest of a hill in the centre of Wigan. It was the original church in the town and was first mentioned specifically in the records in 1199. (3) However it is thought to be a much older foundation. The present church was largely rebuilt in Victorian times (1845-50) but was essentially an improved copy of its predecessor. (4) This is shown in the attached plan of the pre 1840s building, which apart from the current vestry had an identical floor plan and dimensions. Indeed the Consecration Report of 1851 stated "all the principle features and proportions of the old church have been rigidly adhered to, but they have been renovated in better style and made more beautiful in their detail. (5) Some changes in detail were made such as the removal of the west door and in its window tracery, but it also incorporated important elements of this earlier church within it, most notably its tower, the rood turrets, most of the roof and the Walmesley / Gerard Chapel. In style it is an example of late Perpendicular and is described within the Buildings of England Guide, as "a big handsome church but is more impressive outside than inside". (6)

Originally it was the centre of a large ancient parish covering Pemberton, Billinge, Winstanley, Orrell, Upholland, Dalton, Ince, Hindley, Abram, Haigh and Aspull, covering some 45 square miles. (7) Initially it would have been the only church in this area, until the founding of Upholland Priory in 1307. (8) In medieval Lancashire this arrangement of large multi township parishes was typical, but what was not common was the Rector of Wigan was also the Lord of the Manor. (9)

WIGAN PARISH CHURCH
 COPY OF PLAN OF CHURCH
 PRIOR TO RESTORATION OF 1849



Likely Origins

There are two contrasting existing narratives on the origins of this church. The first of these date from Victorian times, with the assertion that it was built on the site of an old Roman temple. (10) This was based on a belief that Wigan was the former Roman settlement of Coccium, by the discovery of a Roman altar in the church structure and the much-quoted advice of Pope Gregory to St Augustine to reuse Pagan sites. (11) This claim cannot be ruled out, simply because the site has had no serious archaeological attention and very significant Roman evidence has been found on the slightly higher ground adjacent to the church. (12) However the Victorian presumption that this could indicate continuous Christian occupation of the site since Roman times can effectively be dismissed for a number of reasons. Firstly it has been found that even where churches have been built on Roman sites there has been a significant gap in occupation between Roman and early Medieval times. (13) Secondly there is currently a lack of evidence of early Romano British Christian activity in the North West region. (14) This is not surprising as this was a sparsely populated military zone with little civilian development. Indeed only a small handful of sites nationally are considered candidates for a continuous linkage from Roman times to the present. These tend to be outside built up areas and associated with burial sites. (15) Finally the Roman altar was likely to have been built into the structure during the 1620 rebuilding of the chancel. There is therefore no certain link between this find and the site of the church, although it is certainly possible.

The second established view is based on a more modern perspective. It links local evidence with the accepted "Minster" model of how the church expanded in the early Middle Ages. (16) According to this view, in England the early Christian message was spread from a few large and well resourced Anglo Saxon "Monesterium" or Minsters generally associated with and found on Royal estates. From these early centres other more local sites then began to develop and which eventually became the comprehensive system of local parishes found in the later Middle Ages. Most of these later churches were built and maintained by local Manorial Lords. (17) Based on this background it has been suggested that as Wigan was held by a powerful Rector and had proprietorial links to the Barony of Makerfield, its origins may have been as being founded as an early Manorial Church in the late Saxon period. (18) This view is supported by the overwhelming

opinion that Wigan is the church of the Manor of Makerfield mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Book. (19)

On the surface this Manorial church origin is logical and seems to explain the emergence of the church in Wigan. However there are a number of major issues with this viewpoint. Firstly it should be noted that before the Norman Conquest the area of Makerfield was thought to have been a Royal estate and the insertion of a Lordship would have been post 1066. (20) Hence for Wigan to have been founded by a local Lord it would have been founded later than assumed. If this was the case Wigan could not have been the church mentioned in the Domesday Book, which would go against the strong prevailing view.

However the second point challenges the whole validity of using the Minster model in this part of the country. Lancashire and indeed significant parts of the west of England was under the control of the Britons (Welsh) for significantly longer than most of the England. (21) Hence it would almost certainly have been Christian before the coming of the Anglo Saxons. Whilst the reality of this area being sparsely populated always needs to be acknowledged, surely this would imply an earlier Celtic structure of church organisation not recognised by the Minster model. It should be stated that the evidence for this earlier pattern is much fainter in the North West than in many other areas such as Wales. However this should be expected as it was quickly suppressed by Anglo Saxon control. Evidence for such a pattern in the sub region includes the finding of an early Christian cemetery, the absence of pagan Anglo Saxon burials and the widespread existence of circular churchyards in many local older churches. (22) Such a pattern of churchyard is extensively found in Wales and thus can be a possible indicator of Celtic origin, although this is by no means infallible. (23) However the best indicator is seen as the regional existence of a number of the "Eccles" place names in the sub region, which is firmly interpreted as indicating a Celtic church site. (24)

Indeed the pattern of Christian development is made even more complicated by the strong Norse influences from the early 10th century. These incomers were largely Christian, with Irish influences and associated with the various Kirby and Crosby place names. (25) All of this suggests an early pattern of churches or holy sites that changed, as political control between the Celts, Norse and Anglo Saxons shifted in this region. (26) A good indicator of this argument is that many locations that can be identified as having an old Christian origin from their place name (e.g. Eccleston, Kirkby, Crosby, and Eccleshill) had either no church or a minor one by Norman times. (27) What is clear in this evidence is that Christian development in this region is complex and is currently under researched. So were does this leave the likely origins of Wigan Parish Church?

From evidence already discussed, it seems clear that the Wigan Church can be seen as existing at the time of the Domesday Book in 1086 and this source discusses its land endowments in Edward the Confessors time (1042 onwards). (28) However it has been noted by a number of sources that in south Lancashire there is a very close association between the presumed original pattern of Anglo Saxon Mother Churches and the ancient Hundreds (Wapentakes) in the area, each having two or at most three parishes in each. This is interpreted as a pattern that was imposed by Mercia when it gained control of the area after previous Northumbrian and Norse influences. Writers have included Wigan as being one of these mother church centres along with places such as Prescott, Winwick, Warrington, Blackburn, Leyland and Manchester etc. This would indicate very strong evidence of the Wigan Parish as a territory back to before 940. (29)

However it is also very possible to speculate about the site being significantly earlier, especially if one starts to link the cluster of Celtic place names in the immediate area (Wigan, Ince, Bryn etc.) as being evidence of Makerfield being a late surviving British district. (30) If you then add in the possible relocation of the administration of Makerfield in later Saxon time to Newton, but the Church of the Manor almost certainly being in Wigan, it starts to get interesting. (31) When the remains of a circular churchyard south of the current church can be traced, its position on a defensive hill adjacent to a river, located on a Roman road and within a former Roman settlement, the notion of a very early site develops into a real possibility. (32) However it needs to be added that unlike a number of locations locally there is no specific place name link with a church and the role of Winwick another ancient church site in Makerfield also needs to be understood (named separately in Domesday). Also the late identification of the name Wigan in

records (1199) is surprising and the sparse population in the area, all point in a different direction. (33) In summary a case can be made on circumstantial evidence for Wigan as being a Christian centre from late British times (7th century) but this is uncertain and needs much more evidence. However based on the earlier analysis on parish boundaries and Saxon Mother Churches it would seem to be reasonable to claim a date from at least the first half of the 10th century.

Unfortunately the sites form at this early stage is also not known, as they often started as no more than a simple enclosure with a preaching cross rather than a building. If this occurred in Wigan the cross was often located south of subsequent buildings hence near the current Cenotaph. (34) Early writers promote the view that Wigan in these Anglo Saxon times was a significant town enclosed by walls. (35) However there is no evidence to these claims and it is arguable whether any long lasting "Burhs" existed in the whole of what became Lancashire at this early period. (36) This is a further reflection of the areas poverty and marginal importance at the time. Thus it is likely that Wigan would have at best been a tiny hamlet with a small church serving a wide defined area. It is likely that at this time any church structure would have been made of wood rather than of stone, although some early references from the 16th century dispute this. ((37)

With the coming of the Normans many churches began to be rebuilt in stone, in a wave of activity known as the "Great Rebuilding". (38) This probably happened in Wigan but the only possible evidence are Victorian descriptions of an early Norman door arch found in the church during the rebuilding works of the 1840s. (39)

Upon archaeological investigation the remains of these earliest structures have generally been found towards the western end of the current structure. This is because most churches expand eastward over time. (40) In Wigan's case there are some doubts to this, as it lacks an early western tower, which makes the rarer western expansion possible. Also the bulk of the earliest remains in the church in Wigan are towards the east. There is also a historical claim (account in 1695) that the chancel originally extended further east in medieval times. (41) Also Edward Paley the main Architect of the church in the 1840's rebuilding expressed the view that the tower originally formed the northeast corner of the medieval church and it had subsequently been repositioned westwards. (42) The truth of these theories is hard to untangle and without archaeological evidence it is impossible to know. However there is evidence from plans, drawings and descriptions that seem to indicate 14th century work on the western end, which is clearly later than the tower or the rood turrets. (43) This possibly points to western expansion, but it may have just have been a rebuilding. However the theory that the church was largely repositioned in a westerly direction from the 13th century doesn't seem likely, as it seems to try to explain why the tower was built in a very eccentric location. It ignores the close proximity of the market place, the possible remains of an ancient oval churchyard and the early rood turrets (signifying the junction of the chancel / nave) that point in a different direction. Whilst it is speculative a typical church from this Norman period would have been a small stone building with a simple nave and apse. However it needs to be stressed that nothing remains of this structure and its precise form can only be guessed at.

It is then again not known whether this structure was extended or developed into a larger building during the twelfth century. A number of previous writers have contended that such a large Romanesque or Norman style church existed in Wigan, with Victorians emphasising what is almost certainly a fantasy of a large cathedral type structure. (44) More recently the development of a large Norman aisled building has been put forward, evidenced by a report of circular foundations underneath some of the current columns. (45) This claim is also probably wrong for two main reasons. Firstly the original source of this evidence attributes these features to the first pointed gothic style (thirteenth century)(46). Secondly most parish churches of the twelfth century didn't have aisles, with only important large buildings having such features. (47) As previously stated Wigan seems to have still been a relatively small settlement at this time and located in a poor "frontier area" it would be a major surprise if it had supported a large church at this time. (48)

However there is one piece of evidence that is intriguing and this is the image of a church on the Wigan Medieval Seal. It shows a building with what appears to have a central tower with a chancel and nave to each side. (49) It also shows a tower entrance and what appears to be a triangular window opening. If this was a representation of the Wigan church it would transform our views as its central tower signifies an early tower with most examples being of the Norman era. However a triangular opening and tower entrance into the church could even signify Saxon origins. (50) Whilst it would be easy to claim this as being evidence of a substantial early church it needs to be pointed out that this seal seems to have originated in the 14th century, which is significantly after elements of the present church including tower had been built. Also there is very little evidence in this region for larger Saxon or Norman structures. (51) Hence it might not represent the Wigan church or it might have related to thoughts of how the early church might have been perceived well after it had been replaced.



The Great Medieval Church

From these small beginnings, Wigan seems to have grown in stature over time. This was no doubt helped by the increase in population and activity in the region from the twelfth century onwards. (52) It was also well placed on the main road north and helped by nationally prominent Rectors (generally absentee) who were Lords of the Manor in whose interest it was to develop the town. (53) Thus an early Royal Charter was obtained in 1246 that formally established Royal Borough status and a market. (54) In reality this probably reflected what was already established, but it did secure very significant freedoms. At the same time there seems to have been major development and enlargement of the church. This would have taken many years to complete and we know all of this because key elements of this church remain today. For example the lower tower dates from around the mid thirteenth century, with the rood turrets possibly following a little later. (55) This growth is also reflected in the Papal Taxatio which valued churches in 1291, showing Wigan to be wealthier than many of its neighbours, if not in comparison with major centres such as Lancaster (£80) or Manchester (£53). (56)

Wigan	£33-6-8		
Standish	£13-6-8	Prescot	£40-0-0
Bolton	£13-6-8	Ormskirk	£13-6-8
Leigh	£10-0-0	Eccleston	£10-00
Winwick	£26-13-4	Warrington	£13-6-8

The attached drawing at the end of this report provides a representation of how this enlarged church looked around this time. Because of the remaining features, it means that we can be a little surer of its likely style and shape. It was built in what is termed the Early English Gothic style, in red Triassic sandstone. This distinctive stone is used in Chester and Liverpool Cathedrals and still survives today insitu within the tower and turrets. It is also randomly present in the nineteenth century building, being recently exposed when internal work has involved removing the internal plaster. (57) This supports the notion of the recycling of some of this original material within the various rebuilding's. What is strange is this Triassic stone is not local when plentiful good quality Carboniferous sandstone can be found in the Wigan locality. This may have been because local stone was not available at this time or that the soft Triassic stone was easier to work. However it would have been transported to Wigan. Surface outcrops occur as close as Ashton in Makerfield, but it is known that significant medieval quarrying of this stone occurred around Mawdesley. This is a likely as a source, almost certainly using the River Douglas to transport it to Wigan. (58)

In size this church would probably have been approaching the length of the current building and it is from this time that many of the current buildings unusual features originated. Thus it developed the current narrow central aisle, which possibly grew from the original Norman plan. Also because it built the massive rood turrets that are still in existence it is effectively responsible for the very small chancel and large nave we see today. Indeed from a survey of Lancashire Parish Churches (south of the sands) Wigan's medieval size seems to have been only exceeded in the county by the Collegiate Church at Manchester and by Lancaster Priory. (59)

The most interesting feature of this enlarged thirteenth century church was the lower portion of the tower that still exists today. This feature is of major interest as its bulk and its position make it highly unusual in this area. From the older Lancashire church survey, Wigan has the earliest surviving tower fabric in the county and also with a 10m base, it was by some margin the most substantial tower in medieval Lancashire. (only rival would have been Warrington but this didn't survive) Indeed it was only some 300 years later that Ormskirk's tower built to house the bells of Burscough Priory marginally exceeded Wigan. (60) Admittedly some towers have been totally rebuilt since medieval times, but old drawings of many of the pre existing churches that no longer exist such as Preston, Bolton and Blackburn show relatively small towers.

The towers north-eastern position in relation to the church is also eccentric. In the vast majority of medieval parish churches the tower is most commonly built at the western end of the church or in a minority of cases in a central position between the nave and chancel. (61) Whilst in certain parts of the country especially in the south and west small numbers of medieval north eastern towers do occur they are very extremely rare in the north and east. Nationally such towers were built in eccentric locations for a range of reasons including ground instability at the western end (no evidence of this) a rebuilding of a collapsed central tower (possible), the already discussed shifting of the churches position or because it was the most economical solution in a partial rebuild. (62) However some previous writers have put forward the idea that the Wigan tower was built for defensive purposes (possibly originally detached from the church). (63) This occurs in the Northern Counties and Welsh Marches, but is not common in Lancashire. However it would explain its bulk (walls 2m+ at base) and size. (64) Further work is proceeding at Wigan to try to cast light on the construction of the tower.



As shown by the still surviving tower arch, this thirteenth century church also had a north aisle of similar dimensions to the current building. Generally archaeology finds that the northern aisle was generally built earlier than a south aisle and this seems to have happened in Wigan. (65) This is also evidenced by the varied widths of the two aisles (south aisle significantly wider) and the different locations of the entrances to the early rood turrets. On the northern side, the rood door faces the aisle, whilst in the south the door faces the nave. This strange arrangement suggests that the south aisle didn't exist when the turrets were built. It also is unlikely to have had either of the side chapels and it certainly didn't have the Walmesley (north chapel) given the location of the blocked up thirteenth century window in the tower. Hence whilst this early church bore little resemblance to the later medieval and current building it did have a profound effect on its layout.

This expansion of the church was considerable in the 13th century and this probably reflected the increased prosperity of the town. Indeed given its scale (especially the tower) a major benefactor financing its development would seem probable. It is early for local guilds, so was likely to be a wealthy individual. Could this have been John Mansel who was Rector and Lord of the Manor in the mid thirteenth century who was responsible for Wigan's Royal Charter. He was the Kings Chief Minister and whilst clearly an absentee landlord it would have been in his interest to promote the town. There is no real evidence to support this theory but in reality very significant funds were spent on the church at this time.

Clearly nothing is known about the interior of the church at this time. However most churches would have had a simple earthen floor and no seating. There may have been some interior

decoration in the form of sculptures and Christ crucified over the rood screen. There may have also been paintings on the walls typically of the last judgement or bible scenes. (66)

Due to a lack of physical remains, the subsequent development of the church is then again difficult to follow. However possible details in the Decorated Gothic (fourteenth century) can be traced at the western end of the church. Victorian accounts recall the great western window of being in this style and this is supported by a reticulated window tracery (typically of this age) in drawings of the pre 1840s church. (67) Indeed the narrower shape of the current window (not the tracery) is also reminiscent of this age. Interestingly on the southwestern corner of the 1840s church an angled buttress as opposed to the later diagonal ones was also present. Taken together all these points support a suggestion that in the fourteenth century a new south aisle was built along with an elaborate western end to the church. This could have been a rebuilding of an earlier structure or perhaps was a western extension to the church. Its architectural style would fit well with the known founding of the Bradshaigh / Crawford Chapel in 1338, which may well have been associated with these wider works. (68) In any event this would have resulted in a church almost as large as it is today. Given the style of the remaining arcades and piers the Walmsley (Gerard) chapel was probably first built in the fifteenth century and this resulted in the blocking of the west window in the tower. Again from the survey of Lancashire churches in floor area this church was in medieval times exceptional in the county. (69)

The Development of the Very Late Medieval Church

The next phase of work would have involved the rebuilding and modification of the church in the then more modern Perpendicular style of architecture. In essence it saw the emergence of the style of church we see today. This was again a major undertaking with existing features such as the rood turrets the lower tower and many of the walls being left in place, but the columns and many walls replaced to create the clerestory and flatter roof. The tower was also significantly raised in height. This phase of development used local coal measure sandstone that can be still seen in parts of the tower. There is evidence from later descriptions that some of this work was incomplete and of poor quality. For example the decorative battlements were only in place on its southern side, whilst even today the quality of the masons work of the thirteenth century was far in excess of this late medieval stonework. It is also noticeable that there are few complete examples of Perpendicular architecture in Lancashire presumably due to the expense involved in this relatively poor area (70)

Exactly when these extensive works were carried out is not recorded, although they were probably done over an extended period, possibly funded by the local guilds. Its overall architectural style suggests a date of the fifteenth century and until recently it was assumed that this was when the building occurred. However more recent writings on Lancashire churches have shown that they lagged behind the national position with most examples of this type being much later. Indeed details within the tower have been tentatively dated as being as late as 1525-50 with a suggestion that it was built by the same team of masons who carried out work at Winwick, Ormskirk and Sefton churches over this period. Similarities have also been traced between the remaining original windows within the Walmsley chapel (not altered in 1840s) and those in Sefton Church. (71)

From this compelling evidence the extensive works to create the Perpendicular style church seem to have occurred significantly later than assumed possibly carrying on up to the Reformation / Catholic revival under Mary. Given this date it is perhaps surprising that no records exist for this work. The comprehensiveness of these works is in further doubt, as we know from contemporary accounts that by the later sixteenth century the chancel was in ruins and couldn't be used. (72) This could have been for a number of reasons. Firstly it may have been that this part of the building had not been restored before the Reformation and given this event relegated the religious role of this part of the building, it was left to deteriorate. It could also indicate that the Rectors who were responsible for this part of the building were unwilling to pay for its upkeep and maintenance. Either of these explanations is supported by national evidence of a massive reduction in church building expenditure. (73)

However in Wigan there is also a possibility that the Chancel could have suffered some catastrophe. There is a long-standing tradition that talks about this part of the church being destroyed by fire at the time of the Reformation. (74) A reference to this possible event can also be found within an old crude drawing of the church. Again this old drawing and account by Kuerden in 1695 includes a claim that the former chancel was longer than that rebuilt. (75)

Other work completed at this time or possibly a little later involved extensive works to the Walmesley Chapel. (76) This was formally owned by and named the Gerard Chapel. (Lords of Ince) It is interesting, as this was not rebuilt in the 1840s. It also retains the probably earlier medieval column and arches that separate it from the church.

From descriptions of other churches at this time and from fragments of local evidence it is likely that the interior of the church was whitewashed. (77) However it would have also had strong coloured wall paintings, sculptures (one possibly in the niche in one of the nave columns, carved angels (one impressive example remains), new stained glass (fragments reset in Walmesley Chapel) and a highly decorative Rood Screen with Christ crucified above it (documentary evidence). There was also a wide array of copes and vestments for the priests. (78) All of this designed as a theatre of ceremonies for the mystery of the mass and communal displays during holy days. Additionally locations such as the south porch and on occasions the nave would have been used for oaths, contracts, resolving disputes and marriage negotiations.

All of this decoration (that was probably barely or only partly finished) and ceremony would have been firstly curtailed and then destroyed as Protestantism took hold. Evidence at Wigan seem to suggest that this took time to occur as accounts of the rood being taken down and the timber being used to form seating and references to stained glass occurring in the 1590s. (79) This is surprising given a strongly Protestant Rector but may have reflected the strong Catholic sentiment in South Lancashire. (80)

From this period onwards, the pattern of building works is generally known. The ruined Chancel was rebuilt by Rector Bridgeman and completed in 1620. He was responsible for the steps leading to the high altar and it is thought that it used the existing foundations / lower walls. (81) It was known as the Bishops Chancel as the Rector had by then also become the Bishop of Chester, but he retained his position at Wigan. The attached drawing provides a representation of the church at the end of these works. It is known that this is fairly accurate since old drawings and a floor plan exist of this church. (82) The only doubt in the drawing was the state of the Crawford Chapel (Bradshaigh in 1620). It is known that following the Reformation (and possible fire) it fell into disuse and became unusable. Whether it had a roof and the state of the walls in 1620 is not known. However the Bradshaighs carried out some works in 1625 but it was only in 1719 that it was completely restored. (83)

As already stated, this church was very close in style to the current church and had the same dimensions and proportions. However from descriptions it was far cruder in its features and suffered from being an amalgam of different periods remodelled in the Perpendicular style. (84). One also gets the impression that many of its features were of inferior quality. The interior was quite different to before the Reformation. Whilst still whitewashed almost all of its glazing was of plain glass (some heraldic coloured glass in east window) and it had a very prominent pulpit installed in the nave. Some plain benches were installed and Rector Bridgeman procured a large organ. (85) Apparently considerable damage was inflicted during the Civil Wars including the ripping out of the organ and the destruction of most of its records. (86)

However by the eighteenth century this internal pattern had changed again, with descriptions of it being full of wretched and raised wooden galleries of all shapes and sizes. These stretched throughout the whole building including areas under the tower. Also the organ (refitted in 1709) and a singing gallery were so big that they almost blocked the nave from the chancel and even the high arch had been cut away to make it fit. (87)

The Victorian Redevelopment

This Perpendicular style church with its major elements dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century remained intact until the 1840s. There had been reports of structural issues dating from 1810 with some limited work undertaken but it was clearly in a very poor condition. In the autumn of 1844 the Churchwardens called in two architects who reported that it was unsound and in poor condition. (88) The rebuilding that was started in 1845 was essentially a copy of the church it replaced with the same dimensions and style. However it had better detailing and was transformed internally. It retained the old tower and turrets (probably the oldest parts), as well as the Walmesley Chapel. It also reused much of the old stone with reports that the main columns were carefully taken down re chiselled and put back in the same position. The medieval roof timbers were also reused in the nave. The outside of the new parts was clad in Longridge sandstone and the western door was not replaced. Finally a new vestry was built adjacent to the tower. (89) This rebuilding therefore was conservative in nature and whose aim was to produce a better copy of the existing church. This leads to the question of why did this occur.

The established answer is covered in the various guidebooks on the history of the church. (90) In summary these stress that the church was in a ruinous position and that architects proposed building a totally new church possibly in a more fashionable style. (Romanesque /Decorated Gothic was then popular) Following this move there was a rebellion against pulling down the old church by the parishioners who rejected the scheme. It was only with the “well timed zeal” of the Churchwarden Hon Colin Lindsey that a compromise was reached, namely a rebuild that largely copied the old church. This explanation has been accepted over the years.

However, recent research and new source material paints a far more complicated and interesting narrative. Firstly the evidence tends to show that the decision to rebuild the church as a better copy of the existing building was taken by two of the most powerful men of the district namely the Earl of Balcarres and the Rector Sir George Gunning. This is clearly shown in a letter from the Earl in January 1844, which set out his thoughts to the Churchwardens. (91)

Secondly considerable opposition to their plans occurred. This was not from parishioners in the modern sense of the word. It was from the ratepayers of the Parish, as the works were to be largely funded from the Church Rates. (92) This was a compulsory charge levied on propertied residents to maintain the church. Indeed this caused the plans to be rejected by a series of Vestry Meetings. These were important because individual ratepayers had the ability to vote for or reject any proposals. Agreement was eventually given by the Vestry to raise £3000 on works. This was sufficient to repair rather than rebuild the church. (93)

This decision was never enacted, with the Rector immediately appointing Colin Lindsay, the son of the Earl to the position of his Churchwarden (the other warden was elected). The Wardens then decided to raise monies for rebuilding via public subscription, which didn't need Vestry approval. (94) Following this, the works began on rebuilding part of the church in 1845. However this was restricted largely to those portions, which were the responsibility of the Earl (his chapel) and the Rector (the chancel). (95) It was only in 1848 that the demolition and rebuilding works to the main body of the church commenced. Contemporary sources state that the Vestry Meeting gave its approval after it was realised that the foundations of the church had been extensively undermined by extensive burials. (96) This might have been so, but the raising of over £5500 from voluntary subscriptions and a loan of £4540 from the Public Loan Commissioner that massively reduced the immediate burden on ratepayers seems more relevant. (97) In any event the church was completed in 1850 and re consecrated by the Bishop of Chester. (98) Further works were commissioned in 1854 to improve the churchyard and in 1861 the tower was raised in height to accommodate a clock room at a cost of £1000. (99)

As a result of this process, like most Lancashire towns, Wigan possessed a rebuilt Parish Church. However unlike most this was neither about enlarging the church nor about developing a more fashionable style. It was about trying to return it to how it looked when it was completed in medieval times and the whole enterprise was conservative in outlook. It means that its form is at

times considered as not having the correct proportions and perhaps internally dull. (100) However it still has significant older features and it has the feel of its older predecessor, with all its idiosyncrasies resulting from being developed over hundreds of years. This close connection with the past has not always been recognised. The esteemed original Buildings of England series failed to appreciate its linkage, describing the building in terms of its Victorian architects Sharpe and Paley rather than it being an enhanced copy of its predecessor. (101) Indeed besides the preserved older parts of the church, there is a clear retention of features of the old church within the rebuild, such as the general layout, different aisle widths, the shape / location of the windows etc. There are also tantalising design details that seem to relate to the older structure. These include the use of different roof corbels and brackets in the north and south aisles, Hebrew inscriptions in the north aisle, the niche in the nave and the use of "Decorated period" motifs at the western end of the church.

In many ways the biggest difference between the old and the new church was its interior decoration. It replaced the plain "Protestant" interior with its jumble of seated irregular seating, the organ effectively blocking off the chancel and its very prominent pulpit in the nave. In its place a new organ was fitted, it was equipped with choir stalls and the view to the high altar cleared. A new pulpit installed and uniform pews throughout the church fitted. Add the installation of a Reredos, extensive stained glass, high quality Minton tiles, an elaborate Baptistry, and elaborate carvings by noted craftsmen and the attempted return to how the church looked before the Reformation was underway. (102) Much of this move seems to have been down to Colin Lindsay the enthusiastic Churchwarden and son of the Earl of Balcarres who was instrumental in fund raising and was an early supporter of Tractarianism. This movement was aimed at restoring the beauty of holiness and more 'catholic practices' to the Church of England. Indeed he eventually became President of the English Church Union. (103) These trends were further enhanced by the painting of the Reredos / Pulpit, more stained glass and the installation of a Chancel Screen, all encouraged by a series of Rectors influenced by this Anglo Catholic movement.



An interesting point about the rebuild was its cost. Records show that it totalled £15,065, but a significant part of this total relating to costly internal fittings, new organ and craftsmen rather than its structure. (104) Hence it is ironic that after the intense arguments at the start of the process over finance, that lavish spending on these finishing's was then allowed. This was not without criticism, but was probably due to the amounts raised in voluntary donations and in the loan set against future Church Rate income. (105) The latter was a fortunate decision, as the loan was never paid off. This was due to legal changes in the obligations on other churches in the Parish and in the national decision to abolish Church Rates in the 1850s. As a result of a long running legal case and decision in favour of the church, the vast majority of the loan was never repaid. (106)

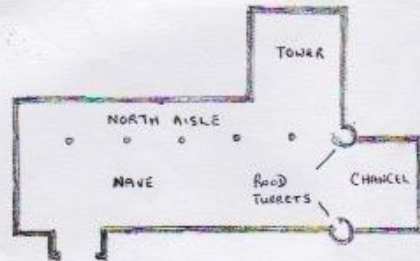
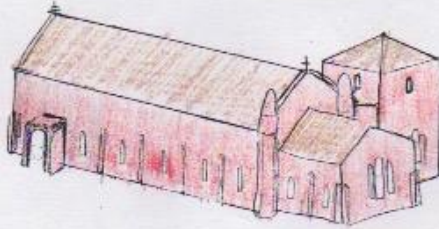
Since the rebuilding there have been major restorations in 1898-1902, 1922, 1947-57 and in 2004-06, all excellently documented in the church guide and website. (107) Whilst there have been internal developments such as the whitening of the interior and the installation of a nave altar it essentially remains the church created in Victorian times. In many ways it is typical of many churches and older buildings, which are dominated by modern notions of 'preservation'. This is at odds with attitudes in the past that were generally more aware of adapting buildings for new times than we are today. However it is a much-loved building with an active Christian presence that aim to keep it in good repair and extending its relevance to the wider town community.

Conclusion

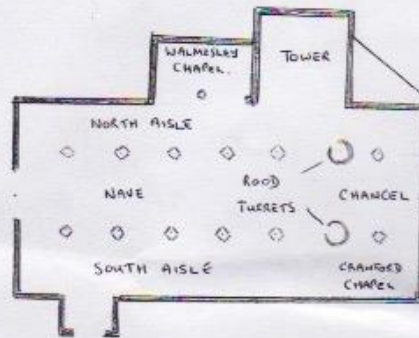
This account is incomplete and at times speculative in nature. It also probably simplifies reality with recent writings consistently showing that the modifications made to buildings tend to be greater than previously imagined. Despite all these reservations, its hypotheses do seem to fit the fragments of local evidence and the wider generalisations available from national and regional church building patterns. It therefore provides the best view of the past development of this intriguing parish church based on current knowledge. However it would be wonderful to be proved wrong if more evidence became available.

Appendix 1 Representations of Wigan Parish Church

Possible view of the church around 1320



Possible view of the church around 1620



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- (16) B Blakeman (1996) *Wigan: A Historical Souvenir* p18: Sutton
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- (20) JJ Bagley (1976) op cit p21
- (21) J Blair (2005) op cit p18-28, A Crosby (1998) *A History of Lancashire* p25: Phillimore
- (22) R Pollard & N Pevsner (2006) pxxxx
- (23) R Pollard & N Pevsner (2006) op cit p17, A Winchester & A Crosby (2006) p169
- (24) For historical records see JJ Bagley (1976) op cit p23, For Eccles explanation see J Blair (2005) op cit p 24, NJ Higham (2004) op cit p27
- (25) A Winchester & A Crosby (2006) *England's Landscape: The North West* p168-169 Collins
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