THE PARISH CHURCH OF SAINT MARY PENWORTHAM

A Brief History of the Church



We are an active Anglican parish church in the deanery of Leyland, the archdeaconry of Blackburn, and the diocese of Blackburn. The church is recorded in the National Heritage List for Englandas a designated GradeII* listed building.

The oldest part of the church is the chancel which dates from the 14th century. The west tower was built in the 15th century. The nave and aisles were rebuilt in 1855-56by the Lancaster architect E.G Paley.

In the churchyard are four structures that have been designated as Grade II listed buildings. One of these is a gravestone dated 1682,and another is a gravestone dated 1686.To the south of the church is a sundial dated 1815.John Horrocks has a second memorial, this being his tomb chest in the churchyard which is also a memorial to other members of his family. The tomb is Grade II listed.[11] The churchyard also contains the war graves of nine service personnel of World War I, and 13 of World War II.

The Priory

The first Priory was built in the 12th century when Penwortham became head of a barony. Baron Warin Bussell married Matilda, who held land in Evesham. They were generous towards Penwortham Priory, which was an offshoot of Evesham Abbey.

The monks of Evesham were not impressed by Penwortham, and they regarded a transfer here as a penance! Over the years, some of the very worst characters were sent from Evesham to Penwortham.

On the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, the Abbot of Evesham leased the manor of Penwortham, the Monastery, Parsonage and so on to John Fleetwood of Little Plumpton near Kirkham. In 1543, Fleetwood bought the estate from Henry VIII, and it remained in the hands of that family until 1746. It then passed through the hands of John Aspinall in 1746 and then to James Barton of Ormskirk in 1749. It finally passed to Lawrence Rawstorne of Hutton in 1783.



Little is known of the Priory in the early days, except that it was made of wood and included a chapel. It was replaced by a Tudor building and later, between 1813 and 1835, by a mansion in the gothic style. This was demolished in 1926 to make way for the first of the private houses on what is now Church Avenue.

Church Exterior

At the end of Church Avenue, where it joins Kingsway and Penwortham Hill there used to be a Lodge. It guarded the main entrance to the rebuilt priory until the turn of the 20th century. Then it was removed and rebuilt at Hutton where it now stands at the corner of Moor Lane and Tolsey Drive.



During the 17th Century, it was the custom to bury the dead to the south and east of the church building, avoiding the other sides, especially the north. This resulted in a series of landslips when unstable ground with graves and under scoured by the river. By 1607 the area between the chancel and the steep bank down towards Narrow Water had shrunk to only eight yards, then quickly to five yards.

Urgent appeals by Bishops and Archbishops, to stop using the unsafe areas, were followed by orders prohibiting further burials to the south and east. There was a small landslip in 1891 and a larger one in 1932. In more recent years, the building of the Penwortham By-Pass caused great concern when it was first proposed, the main worry being the possible effects of traffic vibrations so close to the fragile bank.

Work to rebuild and shore up the wall at the southeastern edge of the churchyard was carried out in 2025 – 2026. This involved removing the mortal remains within graves near the wall, storing them and then re-interring them.



The Lych Gate

The Lych gate was constructed in 1896, given in memory of Mr. and Mrs Hulton of Hurst Grange. It was dedicated the following year by the Bishop of Manchester. The Latin inscriptions over the entrance and exit mean:

"The Lord preserve thy going in" and "The Lord preserve thy going out"

The Tower and Bells

The tower dates from the 15th century and is in the perpendicular style. It has a spiral staircase of 60 narrow stone steps leading to the top of a square tower. On a clear day, this is an excellent viewpoint for looking over Preston and distant areas.

One of the stained-glass windows in the ringing chamber dates fr4om th 18th or 19th century. The clock was there even earlier, and, three hundred years ago, it was part of the minister's job to wind it. In 1959, the sprawling mechanism was replaced by a small electric

1959, the sprawling mechanism was replaced by a small electric motor. There are eight bells in the tower. Five of them date back to 1712. One is dated 1858 and the remaining two 1926. All of them were recast in 1965.
In 1857, workmen, who were making repairs to the vestry next to the tower, lit a fire in the boiler in the cellar. They left it to smoulder through the night, but it burst into flames. The following morning a gamekeeper discovered the vestry completely burnt out. Although the vestry door had been burnt down and the stone arch above it cracked by the heat, there was only slight damage to the rest of the church, mainly to the organ. All the documents stored in the vestry were lost, including irreplaceable parish records.
Later that year, the vestry was rebuilt an refurbished. The total cost was £46.

The Nave

The Nave used to be a long, low building, only as wide as the Chancel. In 1822, alterations were made by raising the roof, adding windows and adding a new gallery along the North wall. Pews in this new part were 'sold' to raise money fo the building work. The marks of the different roof levels may be seen on the wall of the tower facing the Nave as two diagonal lines.
The Gallery used to house organ pipes for the organ which was situated on the south side of the Nave near the Chancel. The organ which was becoming difficult to maintain was sold to a church organisation in Italy. It was replaced by an electric organ.

Recent re-ordering

Between 2009 and 2011 the church interior underwent significant re-ordering to install underfloor heating, as the old oil-fired boiler and associated hot water pipes were in a poor state of repair. The work involved the excavation of the entire floor in both nave and chancel, to allow installation of the new heating matrix. Before this could be done all fixtures and fittings, including pews, pulpit and choir stalls, were also removed. It was discovered, during excavation, that during the 19th century the nave had been extended to allow more room for the increasing population of Penwortham. The enlarged area extended over graves some of which were collapsed graves which and thus threatened to undermine the new floor foundations. Three crypts, containing the mortal remains of parishioners buried before 1856, were also discovered and were investigated by an archaeological team. Skeletal remains were removed for examination and were eventually re-interred in the largest of the crypts before the new floor was laid. The crypts had lain undiscovered since the destruction of records in a fire of 1856.

To overcome the problem of collapsed graves in the nave, piling and concrete frames were installed to support the new floor. The heating matrix was installed and covered by stone flags. All of the flooring, both in the nave and the chancel, is now on one level. . The pews were replaced by chairs and the church now has a light and airy interior, which allows more flexibility of use. During the re-ordering services were held in St. Mary's Church Hall on Cop Lane in the town. Following completion of the work a service of celebration was held on 19th June 2012.[



Before re-ordering



After re-ordering

The Fonts

There must have been a Font before the 17th century, but nothing is known about it. The stone Font which used to stand where the pulpit was situated is inscribed T.R. 1667. It is believed that this was given by Thomas Robinson, Vicar from 1653 to 1654. This may not have originally a Font at all but a plague stone for disinfecting money or a vessel for the Clergy to wash their hands following Communion.

In 1725 this Font was replaced by a grander marble Font, donated by the Fleetwood family. This Font eventually found its way onto the cellar of the old Chapel at Longton where it was found by the Vicar. He placed it in the Chapel and later it was transferred to St. Andrew's Longton, where it is today.

The present Caen stone Font was given by a Churchwarden, Mr Norris of Howick House in 1865. At that time he asked if he could have the 1667 stone Font as a garden flower vase. It was in Mr Norris's garden until his death.
In 1872 Mr Norris's goods were sold at auction and the 1667 Font was amongst the items but no one bought it. The auctioneer took it to his own house and following his death it came into the possession of a local antiquarian who realising its significance, returned it to St. Mary's in 1906.

The Chancel

The Chancel is the oldest part of the Church and still retains its 14th century shape and materials. The walls are of red sandstone and gritstone, but in 1971 it was necessary to reface parts of the walls with reconstituted stone.



Recently major repair work has been done on the East wall and the rood. The Parish raised a great deal of money to do this.

The Chancel has seen changes during the years. As mentioned earlier concerning the Nave, in 1884 two box pews were removed from the west end of the Chancel and were replaced by the back row of choir stall. The front rows were fitted in 1946 to seat a robed choir. Before then the choir sat in pews near the organ at the back of the church. As part of the re-ordering in 2009 – 2011 the choir stalls were removed as was the communion rail. The floor was renewed with the same materials as the floor in the Nave and is at the same level at the rest of the church.

The Chancel windows are all of different dates. The East window is Victorian and was given by the Rawsthorne family, patrons of the Church. The other windows are earlier.

The oak panelling around the East end of the Chancel was installed as a memorial to the men of Penwortham who were killed in the First World War.

The Millenium Wall-Hanging

In December 1997, St. Mary's Junior Church built and donated a crib, the fabric background of which was made by Mrs Joan Singleton, who was responsible for the small wall-hangings in the Church. It was in discussion about the effectiveness of this type of work, and the way in which it enhances the interior of the building, that the idea of this wall -hanging was born. Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Lynda Jenkins felt that the ideal way to celebrate the Millenium would be to invite all the ladies of the parish to work together on a large-scale representation of what the year 2000 meant to Christians.

The first step was to consult the Vicar, Rev Derek Raitt, and to decide on what should be depicted. He suggested the 'I Am' sayings of Jesus, which was adopted as the theme.

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which was adopted as the theme. At this meeting, very rough sketches were made; St. Mary's Church was to be in the centre, surrounded by four scenes, and the whole would be enclosed by a vine. Joan took this away and transformed it into a beautiful scale drawing of the finished article. When this was approved, she enlisted the artistic expertise of Mr. Alan Heald and produced a full-size pattern.

The next step was to let everyone know hat was envisaged and how they could be involved. Information was given at church services, through the church magazine and by word of mouth. All the ladies of the parish were invited to a meeting to hear about the plans, see the drawings and discuss the skills that would be required to complete this undertaking. Forty-five ladies attended the initial meeting, and everyone agreed to participate. There was tremendous interest and enthusiasm, largely generated by Joan's wonderful drawing.

Then came two workshops, held in the Church Hall; some people had never done this kind of sewing before, others were experienced, but it was important for everyone to employ the same techniques, and understand the systems used for completing and returning work. Many novices grew in confidence when they discovered they had been appliqué'ing name tapes to children's clothes for years!



Joan accepted responsibility for the practicalities of acquiring fabric and threads and the organisation of work. This was a phenomenally complicated task; the whole wall-hanging was divided into 'blocks', and each of these sub-divided into tasks. Volunteers each received a small parcel containing instructions, fabric, thread and a time sheet to record how long their work took. They were also given a return date for completions of their allotted task, which may have been to applique a figure or a few leaves, to embroider some flowers or doves, or – most coveted task of all – create a bunch of grapes.

By Christmas 1998, the work was well under way and by April 1999 the wall-hanging was finished. The documented hours for making the hanging were 555.

It was dedicated at the Annual Carol Service on Sunday 19th December 1999.

A more comprehensive history of the church is available on our website:

penwortham-stmary.co.uk - Our History

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