

# History

Christians have worshipped on this site for at least the last 800 years during which time the parish church has dominated the view of the High Street and the town. The Church is first mentioned in 1200 and the Crypt contains Early English lancet windows. In 1258 the patronage of the living was granted to the Abbey of Halesowen which the Abbot exercised until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538. Although dedicated to All Saints as early as 1391, the Church has been known as St. Matthew's since the 18th century. This may have been linked to the Annual Fair Day which operated from the 12th century.

## The Exterior

The best known view of St. Matthew's is probably the West front with the 170 foot soaring spire as seen from the market in the High Street. When approaching the church from St Matthew's Close you can see the contrast between the sandstone of the fifteenth century chancel and the Bath stone which now encases the nave and tower.

Rebuilding and extending the chancel began in 1462. Stone for the new work was hauled from quarries at Brewood and Sutton Coldfield while timber came from the Prior of Sandwell's woods. The parapet and the tracery of the chancel windows were restored in 1879-80. Apart from the great East window the chancel windows were modelled on the one remaining perpendicular-style window which had been blocked up for the vestry and organ loft.

The curious open archway under the east end used to provide an entrance to the crypt and, like that at the magnificent church of St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, was probably built to allow footpath access to both north and south sides of the churchyard since the chancel had been extended to the then eastern limit of the churchyard. This is clear from the view of the church published in 1798. Niches on the east side of the arch may represent openings as an examination of the outside of the wall will reveal. The archway used to be much taller; the ground level has built up over the centuries so that most of the doorway to the crypt is now below the ground.

## The Crypt

The crypt is the oldest part of the church. It consists of two rooms.

The inner or western room has a fine vaulted roof with sandstone ribs. The eastern wall of this inner room contains two very good examples of 12th century lancet windows and traces of what may be a blocked-up Norman doorway. In the back wall of this room there are the remains of an aumbry (a small cupboard, usually near an altar where the reserved sacrament is kept for administering to the sick). The doorway leading to the stairs to the vestry used to lead to a staircase connecting with the chancel above.

The larger outer room is part of the 15th century extension and has a barrel-vaulted roof and a small blocked perpendicular-style doorway leading by a spiral staircase to the north side of the chancel, as well as a wooden door to the archway. There is also a cast-iron plaque detailing the increased seating resulting from Goodwin's restoration; this is almost the same as the plaque in the south porch.

## **The Exterior of the Nave and Tower**

During the restoration of the nave in 1819-21 carried out by the architect Francis Goodwin the exterior of the nave and tower was given a two-inch thick cladding of Bath stone. All the old windows were replaced by larger, perpendicular-style windows with cast-iron tracery.

The spire was restored in 1951 although the earliest restoration was carried out by John Brown in 1669. Subsequently the spire developed such a twist that it had to be replaced in 1779. The tower clock erected in 1865 is the latest in a series beginning with a chiming clock in 1446. When the present clock faces were fitted, that on the western side was given opal glass so that it could be lit at night. At the time the centre of the dial was the largest sheet of such glass to be manufactured. The west door in gothic style replaces a Tuscan portico which had been built in the late 18th century.

The peal of twelve bells includes four dating from before 1553, another before 1656 and another cast in 1674. Joseph Smith of Edgbaston recast the 'great bell' in 1731. By 1775 there were eight bells and they were all recast by Thomas Rudhall of Gloucester. Number 5 is inscribed, "When you us ring, we'll sweetly sing. Thomas Rudhall, Gloucester, 1775". In 1863 the treble and second bell were added and when all ten were recast by Taylor and Co. of Loughborough in 1928 the present Numbers 1 and 2 were added. In 1981 a new 5.25 cwt. sharp second bell in memory of Miss Nellis Homer was cast by Taylor's to make the front eight bells into a complete octave.

Across the road from the south porch stand the memorial gardens designed as part of a general scheme for the area around the church by G. A. Jellicoe, FRIBA, also including the St Matthew's Centre. The gardens stand on the site of the original parish hall. A memorial stone was unveiled by H.R.H. Princess Margaret in 1951.

The lychgate with the text above "I am the Resurrection and the Life" was built in 1927 as a memorial to George and Catherine S. Gill and replaces wrought-iron gates which had had a lamp in the overthrow. The churchyard railings were taken away for scrap to help the war effort during the Second World War. At the foot of the stone steps leading down from the west door of the church towards the town is an open air pulpit of 1922, built here as a war memorial.

The churchyard contains graves bearing the names of many famous Walsall families. To the east of the South Porch stands one of the most interesting inscriptions on a headstone to a former beadle and bellringer. In 1756 this church yard was full so the Bath Street cemetery was consecrated

The large south porch is the main entrance to the church and contains a small ceramic tablet commemorating the restoration of 1819-21, a larger cast iron tablet also commemorating the work of 1819-21, as well as two wooden boards containing an impressive list of incumbents and patrons from 1211 to the present day.

## **The Interior of the Nave**

The nave was completely rebuilt in 1819/21 to the design of the architect Francis Goodwin, following the existing 'footprint'. This work included the present galleries, the slender cast-iron columns as well as the iron window tracery. A three decker pulpit was also installed at this time but removed in 1880. Additional iron columns were added beneath the galleries in the 1830s; this work was designed by another prominent architect George Basevi.

Goodwin also reorganized the nave seating with new pews which were largely replaced with chairs in 1880. The impressive nave ceiling resembling fan-vaulting is formed of moulded plaster.

## **The Octagonal Font**

This belongs to the 15th century although the alabaster rim and lead lining are 18th century, the lead lining being inscribed with the initials of two churchwardens Richard Burrows and Samuel Craddock and a Tudor Rose and a mask with the date 1712. The initials NS may be those of the maker, Nathaniel Short, plumber. The limestone bowl carries the coats of arms of the Beauchamps, other families and on the western face the symbols of the Passion: the Cross and Crown of Thorns, the Sop, the Spear and the Scourges. The font has stood in this location since 1980. The side chapels

There has been a St. Clement's chapel on the north side of the nave since 1468. The chapel was laid out as a war memorial in the early 1920s. St Clement is the patron saint of tanners.

In 1974/75 St. Catherine's chapel was fitted with a screen and a beautiful modern stained glass-window and acts as the children's chapel and creche. There is an impressive memorial to Sergeant Major William Purvis, one of the 600 who charged with the Light Brigade, on the west wall. There was been a chapel here dedicated to St Catherine by 1502.

## **The Chancel Screen**

This was set up in 1915 as the result of a bequest by Mrs Smyth nee Wiseman. A fine example of the Arts & Crafts style it was designed by C. E. Bateman, FRIBA, of Birmingham and was carved by Joseph Phillips who was responsible for woodcarving in the Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool. Its slender columns were designed to ensure that the congregation could see through to the chancel and its east window. Along the screen are five shields which carry emblems of the Passion similar to those on the font. From left to right they are:

- (a) the Pillar, Rope and Scourges,
- (b) the Tunic,
- (c) the Cross, Ladder, Reed and Sponge,
- (d) the Crown of Thorns and the Nails
- (e) the Cock and Money-bag.

## **The Chancel**

The chancel was rebuilt to its present dimensions in the mid 15th century, and was restored in 1879-80 by the architect Euan Christian of London. The tracery of all the windows was replaced and the model for those on the north and south sides was that immediately on the north as you pass through the screen from the nave, which was discovered blocked up and in pristine condition, a fine example of perpendicular work. The east window had been as a round-headed Queen Anne style for a century and a half. This was replaced by the present perpendicular-style tracery and glazed in memory of Sister Dora who had died on Christmas Eve 1878. The reredos represents the Supper of Emmaus, with supporting angels on either side. The piscina, sedilia and stone gospel lectern were rediscovered and restored in 1880. Traces remain between some of the windows of former niches for statues swept away at the Reformation. Three 15th century doorways were found at the 1880 restoration. Two on the north side lead to the crypt, that on the south leads through the thickness of the wall to the churchyard.

The choir stalls contain the finest medieval woodcarving in the old county of Staffordshire. The arm rests and bench ends contain well-preserved 15th century figures and poppy heads. The misericords in the back rows of the stalls comprise one of the great treasures of the church for they probably belong to the period of re-building and re-furnishing of the late 15th century when the town was already thriving.

There are no two identical designs, as can be seen from the following list:

South side, from west to east North side, from west to east

- 1: Foliage · 1: Angel (restored)
- 2: Tree foliage with bird
- 2: Miller carrying sack
- 3: Mask with protruding tongue · 3: Pelican pecking breast
- 4: Grinning mask · 4: Angel holding shield
- 5: Mask with peculiar ears · 5: Leaf
- 6: A recumbent hart · 6: Man in cloak and hood
- 7: Archer - half man, half beast · 7: Double-headed spread-eagled bird
- 8: Archer - half man, half beast (damaged) · 8: Clean-shaven man in belted tunic
- 9: Oak leaf and acorns · 9: Running beast with lion's feet and horse's tail

There is a tradition that the seats came from Halesowen Abbey at the Dissolution in 1538 but there is no written evidence for this.

## **The Organ**

The organ was rebuilt and enlarged in 1952-3 although it was originally built in 1773 by Samuel Green of London, who was the outstanding organ builder of the time. There are more Cathedral and Collegiate organs of Green's construction than any other. Among his Cathedral organs are those of Canterbury, Wells, Salisbury, Rochester and Lichfield and those of New College Oxford and Trinity College Dublin. The hymn tune 'Darwall's 148th' set to 'Ye Holy Angels Bright' was probably given its first public performance on this organ for the tune had been composed by the then Vicar of Walsall, Rev. J. Darwall. There was a major refurbishment of the organ in 1999-2000.

## **Stained Glass Windows**

The oldest stained glass in the church is that of the great west window. The window was damaged by the gas explosion of 1847, and was restored in 1852.

The stained glass in the chancel all dates from 1880 to 1908. The east window commemorates the life of Sister Dora, and is (like most of the chancel glass) the work of Messrs Burlison & Grylls. One window, on the north side nearest to the east end, is by Clayton & Bell.

In the nave, the 'Light of the world' window, near the font, is by Burlison & Grylls (1921), whilst the south aisle windows, the St Catherine's chapel window and that of 'Sir Valiant' in the inner porch are by Goddard & Gibbs, and date from 1960 to 1974. The four windows depicting the four archangels, two pairs directly above the chancel screen, are by Harvey & Ashby (1915).

## **Parish Registers**

Walsall is very fortunate in that the parish registers go back to 1570 and provide a complete run to the present day. In the small Elizabethan town burial records include descriptive names such as 1574 'Old Mother Webbe' and 1576 'Old Mort's wyfe'. A visitation of the plague in 1604 resulted in the death and burial of 'John Hodgett's sone Thomas' (March 10th). Seven others died of plague that year and as a result of this experience the town authorities refused entry to strangers during times of plague. In 1665 there is an entry, 'So few were the burials here in these months (31) so many thousands dyed of ye Plague in London'.

## **The Churchwardens' Accounts**

These also contain many items of interest. For example, the full details of the tenders for the work as well as the agreement with the architect Francis Goodwin show that the lowest tender was accepted (to include Bath stone facing rather than cement) for £6,096; work was carried out 1819-21.

Based on *The Parish Church of St Matthew, Walsall: an illustrated guide and history* (2011) by the late David F. Vodden