



St Helen's Church Ashby-de-la-Zouch

The Town

With a population over 12,000 Ashby is a small market town in the northwest of the county of Leicestershire. It was once the largest town in the area but nearby Coalville became its larger rival in the 19th century. It is famous for its fine castle ruins (under the care of English Heritage) and was once a Victorian Spa town.

The name 'Ashby' means 'Ash tree farm' or 'Ash tree settlement' and derives from the Danes who settled in the area from the mid 8th century. The rest of the town's name is derived from the Norman French when the town became into the possession of the La Zouche family during the reign of Henry III.

The Hastings family acquired the town in 1464, there was already a castle in the town but the Hastings rebuilt the castle with its large keep (you can still climb the ruined tower with fine views over the town and there is an underground tunnel from the keep to the kitchens). During the Civil War the town was one of the major 'Royalist' strongholds under control of Henry Hastings 1st Baron of Loughborough, after a long siege in March 1646 the garrison and town surrendered and the castle was 'sighted' (basically made ruinous) so it could not be used by any forces.

St. Helen's church can be found where Lower Church Street meets South Street, in a pretty setting with the ruins of the castle in the background. The church dates back to the 15th century, at the time when Lord Hastings was building Ashby-de-la-Zouch Castle. He was beheaded on the orders of Richard III in 1483. St Helen's is a large church with many interesting features. It consists of a nave, west tower, north & south aisles and the Hastings chapel which sits as a transept from the chancel. The church was built in the late 15th century by the Hastings family with a Victorian restoration in 1878-80 by J. P. St Aubyn when the aisles were added.

History

The Lordship,' or Manor,' was given by William the Conqueror (1027- 87) to Hugh de Grentemaisnel for services rendered. Domesday Book (1068) records a priest among the inhabitants and that the church dedicated to St. Helen consisted only of a nave.

Philip de Belmeis ('de Beaumont') brought a detachment of Augustinian Canons from Dorchester (9 miles south of Oxford) to Lizard Grange (A41, 2 miles south-west of Weston-under-Lizard, A5). To this settlement he gave, by charter, St. Helen's Church, lands and tithes.

Richard of Shrewsbury founded a better site at Lilleshall with buildings of wood, later of stone. Thus, St. Helen's association passed to Lilleshall Abbey (1148-1538) and appointments to St. Helen's became the responsibility of the Abbot.

The earlier church was replaced by William, Lord Hastings', magnificent church in 1474. Built at the same time as the Hastings Tower, using sandstone and limestone, it was probably completed by his son, Edward, Lord Hastings

Little damage occurred during the Civil War (1642-49), though pike marks may be seen near the vestry door.

During the reign of Charles 11(1660-88) the church was refurbished, a gallery erected at the west end, c.1670, and the royal coat of arms acquired.



1 The 'New' Pews

In 1829 the old pews and floors were replaced, the front of the west gallery removed and two side galleries erected. The organ remained in the west gallery. In 1878-80 the church was closed for major alterations and services were held in the Town Hall. The side galleries were removed and two outer aisles added. The reredos and royal arms remained; otherwise, the remaining 17th century woodwork disappeared. Adjustments were made to the west window and door; the south end of the Hastings Chapel was renewed; a new vestry was built with room above (the 'Priest's Room'). Re-seating throughout created, structurally, the building we

see today.

The local community raised £13,000 between 1963 and 1968 to repair damage to the roof caused by death-watch beetle, and a further £50,000 for ongoing roof repairs between 1994 and 1996. Work on the roof was completed in 1998 at a further cost to the congregation of £14,000.

In the period 1970-74 the congregation contributed to the floor slabs, replacing the worn dark red and blue Victorian tiles. Interior walls were renovated and guttering repaired, the organ restored and a fine set of kneelers completed.

The 500th anniversary (1474-1974) act of re-dedication reciprocated the generous response of the community, aided by the late Miss Dorothy Cope and the Historic Churches Preservation Trust. 1977 heralded the establishment of 'The Cottage': the Victorian Church Hall (now the Venture Theatre) was sold and a church cottage, redesigned as a community centre with modern facilities, established. The Rectory was sold in 1988 and a smaller, more modern, property purchased for the Rector.

The ASHE LECTURE was founded and endowed in 1654 by Francis Ashe. It made provision for a weekly lecture to be given in Ashby-de-la-Zouch parish church by a 'godly orthodox and ordained minister.' The scheme was revised recently to allow one or more lectures to be given each year. Within recent years lecturers have included:

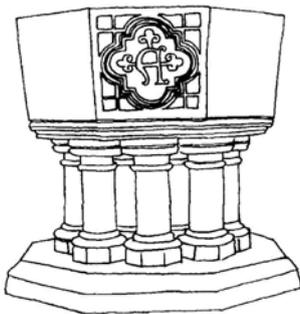
Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher,	Archbishop Donald Coggan
Dr Donald Soper,	Father Trevor Huddleston
Father Michael Hollings,	and
The former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey.	

A Tour Of The Church

The Nave

After entering the church by the north door, the visitor is likely to proceed to the west end of the centre aisle, within that part built by William, Lord Hastings in 1474.

Excluding the two outer aisles (added 1878-80) and looking eastwards, attention is drawn beyond the 15th century arcades, with clerestory, and Tudor ceiling, to the entrance arch to the chancel and to the HIGH ALTAR.



2 The Font

The Pulpit and Font

The pulpit and font also date to the Victorian restoration although there is also an earlier font within the church. The Font, designed by Mr Earp of Lambeth (1878-80), is octagonal and made of a solid block of white alabaster. Mr Earp also designed the alabaster PULPIT, a gift of the Freemasons of Ash by-de-la-Zouch (1878-80). Opposite, the beautiful brass eagle LECTERN is the memorial of Mr Robert Davenport.

The Organ

The Organ (by Kirkland of Huddersfield) was restored in 1935 in memory of the Hon. Gilbert Hastings, afterwards 3rd Baron Donington, by his wife and daughters; and again in 1955 in memory of Harry and Mabel Joyce by their family and was renovated 1970-74. It was rebuilt and electrified in 1986 to an improved specification, including a new console and pedalboard. The congregation and local community raised £35,000 to do the work.

On either side of the CHANCEL ARCH are two Memorial Tablets of World War One. Within this open space concerts are regularly arranged, befitting the fine tradition of Church music and the splendid acoustics. Enough funding was raised to purchase a grand piano in 1997. This is a great asset to the many musical events held in the church.

The Chancel



3 Detail from the cope of Bishop Hollis, displayed by the Altar Rail. Francis Septimus Hollis was Curate in 1913, and suffered, whilst Bishop of Labuan and Sarawak, as a Japanese prisoner of war.

Just beyond the chancel steps is the resting-place of Selina (1707-91), Countess of Huntingdon. Born Lady Selina Shirley, she gave unstintingly to the Evangelical and Methodist Movement. Friendly with both John and Charles Wesley and with George Whitefield she bequeathed the bulk of her property to the support of the 64 chapels she had established throughout the kingdom. Many older nonconformist chapels bear the inscription 'Lady Huntingdon's Connexion' above the main door.

THE HASTINGS CHAPEL

The Hastings Chapel contains some impressive monuments and tombs to the Hastings family. Standing immediately below the apex of the great entrance arch, the visitor will, quite unconsciously, be standing upon the entrance to the Hastings family vaults (closed 1846). Beside the wall memorial to Warner Francis John Plantagenet, 14th Earl of Huntingdon (1868-1939), and to his wife, Maud Margaret (1868 -1954), is the altar table of the Chapel with its carved oak front.

Almost central is the magnificent alabaster table tomb of Francis, 2nd Earl of Huntingdon (1513-61), and of his wife Catherine, niece of Cardinal Pole. Surmounted by a recessed urn,

the wall monument explains how Theophilus, 7th Earl of Huntingdon (1650-1701), caused the Chapel to be decorated in 1698 and the tomb to be restored 'in glorious memory of his most illustrious forefathers.' Upwards, the hatchments relate to the Hastings families. The roof was replaced in 1963-64, except for the cross beams.

A wall monument to the 6th Earl of Huntingdon (d1698) on the east wall with a lion and unicorn holding a shield. Another monument to the 9th Earl of Huntingdon (d1746) designed by Kent and carved by Joseph Pickford and Rysback is a standing wall monument with a obelisk in relief and a vase with a demi-figure of his mourning wife Selina. Selina, the Countess of Huntingdon, who with the aid of the famous preacher George Whitefield introduced a form of Methodism into aristocratic circles. There is also a monument to the 2nd Marquess of Hastings (d1844) in the chapel.

The Screen

This is of wrought iron and work of exceptional grace and skill. It was made and erected by Mr John Joseph Staley of Ashby, from a larger arched wrought iron screen which stood before the High Altar. Apart from the family decoration and spirals, it is worth noticing how three differently angled scrolls of metal (and on occasion, four), are brought to terminate in one stem. Seen from a distance the whole work impresses by its delicacy and lightness.

The Lady Chapel (South Aisle)

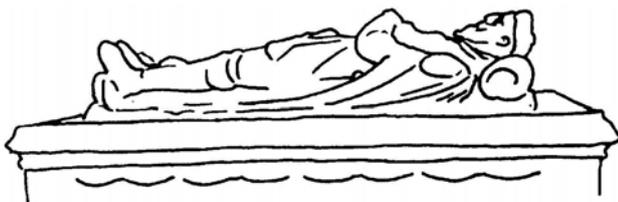
Its establishment is associated with World War 1(1914-1918), with the service and gifts of the Davenport, German, Holden and Rawdon-Hastings families. All the windows within this chapel and in the Chapel of St. Michael and All Angels (North Aisle) represent the combined work of the Victorian artists Lewes, Westlake and Barraud.

There are several memorials within the Lady Chapel: The first is to Rev Arthur Hildersham (1563-1631), Vicar of St Helen's 1593-1631. The Edward Mammatt (1807-60) Memorial is in the recess below the Mammatt Window. Blinded at six years of age and organist for forty years, Edward was the inventor of a machine capable of reproducing either letters or musical characters. In addition, he lectured upon anatomy, astronomy, geology and electricity.

Also remembered here is Dr Thomas Kirkland (d. 1869), of the third generation of Kirklands, medical practitioners, whose total professional service to the town exceeded a century. Thomas Bate (1648-1707) was a mercer in Market Street, his ancestry is traceable to Edward I. It was his son, Revd Thomas Bate (1675-1727), chaplain to Sir John Harpur of Calke and later Vicar of Swarkestone, who donated the Library, mainly of theological books, to the church. (These are now in the care of the Loughborough School of Librarianship). Mrs Margery Wright (d.1623) is also remembered here. In her lifetime she gave £43 to provide gowns, yearly and forever, to the aged and poor.

The Chapel Of St Michael & All Angels (North Aisle)

As the Lady Chapel is associated with World War I, it is fitting that the Chapel of St Michael & All Angels is associated with World War II. Flags of the Royal British Legion and RAF Association are displayed.



4 The Pilgrim Memorial in St Michael's Chapel

The oldest and most famous monument (below the Vavasour Window) in the Chapel is the 15th Century recumbent effigy of a Pilgrim (stated to be one of only two in the country, in an alabaster) tomb within an arched recess. It is

believed to be that of a brother of William, Lord Hastings. Between the Vavasour and Denton

Windows is the memorial to the second Dr Kirkland (Thomas John d,1824), and above this the memorial to the Rev John Prior (1729-1803). John Prior, (Vicar 1783-1792), was also Master of the Grammar School and a distinguished scholar and cartographer. He rebuilt the vicarage.

The higher memorial on the wall between the Adams Window and the north door is that of Dr Thomas Kirkland MD (1722-98), the first of the three generations of doctors practising in the town. A high professional reputation was combined with a love of music and painting.

Two of the carved stone heads within the Chapel represent St Helen and the Emperor Constantine. Strangely, here is the only reference to the Patron Saint, St Helen, found within the church. St Helen, mother of the Emperor Constantine, is said to have discovered the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.

The West End

This is dominated by the CHURCH TOWER (1474) and BELFRY. Of the eight bells, the ancient tenor bell is dated 1571. It was re-cast in 1849. The two treble bells are dated 1814, the third 1741, the fourth 1817, the fifth 1698 and the seventh 1822. In 1886 Messrs Taylor, Loughborough, repaired the bells, re-hung them seven feet lower, and a new bell-floor and frame were provided. New pinnacles (16 feet) were added to the tower in the same year. Refitting of the west window and door took place (1878-80). During 2006, after a huge fund raising campaign and a successful Lottery bid, the bells were removed from the Tower and a new two-tier metal frame was installed. The tenor was recast and two new trebles were cast by Taylors of Loughborough. The bells were out of the Tower for almost a year but the new ten were ready to be rung for Christmas Services that year.

Below the furthest window on the west side is the FONT of the 1474 church; to the right is the ancient PARISH CHEST. To the left of the tower entrance is the unusual FINGER PILLORY, the purpose of which was; 'for the prevention of indecorous behaviour; at once efficacious, by detaining the offender in public view, and by not degrading him to the more severe affliction of being set in the stocks, exposed to unrestrained insult and the inclemency of the elements'.



5 The finger pillory

To the right of the Tower door is a memorial tablet to John German (1844 - 1936), churchwarden for 35 years, restorer of the old font, and donor of a heating system.

At the west end of the nave there is a 300 year old finger pillory which would have been used to punish those who misbehaved in church, an unusual and rare find in a church today.

Acknowledgements

The content of this information document has been taken from various websites freely available on the internet including the Leicestershire & Rutland Churches website and the Treasures Unlocked website.

<http://www.leicestershirechurches.co.uk>

http://www.goleicestershire.com/see-and-do/treasures_unlocked.aspx

Mick McQuade
April 2012