

Sandbach History Society: Report of the October 2024 meeting

Speaker: John Higgins

At the October meeting of the Sandbach History Society, a member, John Higgins, gave a talk about the research he has been doing over a number of years into the history of St Mary's Church, Sandbach.

Mr. Higgins said that it was fifty years since John Minshull published his book "St Mary's, Sandbach: A Short History and Description." With more material becoming known, and some being re-interpreted along with easier access to information, he felt that now is the right time to revise and update it. He said this important book had both inspired and provoked him to conduct further research. Mr Higgins also mentioned previous histories of Sandbach by George Ormerod (1819), John Earwaker (1890) and Cyril Massey (1958). He also said he was grateful to Richard Vickery for work on the stained-glass windows and memorials and Peter Merrill for work on servicemen connected with the church for sharing their research. Mr. Higgins has conducted in-depth research to ensure that, as far as possible, the information is correct, and the sources are identified. He has been keen to separate fact from local mythology.

Mr. Higgins' talk consisted of a number of topics which he called pieces of the jigsaw which fit together to form the history of the church. First he addressed the issue of the age of the church. He said that the impressive 9th century Anglo-Saxon crosses point to there being a minster or monastery in the area from where priests would go out to preach the gospel. It is not clear when the church was built but Mr Higgins said that the style of the building, known as Perpendicular Gothic, indicates the late 14th to early 16th century. There was some extensive restoration undertaken in the first part of the 17th century when a new oak panelled roof was installed, and new pews and other woodwork were put in place. References to the church building are few until the 19th century.

When the Rev John Armitstead became vicar in 1828, he inherited a building that was in a poor state, and it was clear that changes would need to be made. At that time, the church had box pews, side galleries, no separate chancel and the altar was obscured by a huge pulpit. The emphasis was on preaching, and holy communion was only taken four times a year. The tower was becoming increasingly unsafe, while the vicarage was in a poor condition and John Armitstead refused to live in it.

In 1846 it was decided that the church needed to be substantially repaired and restored and the tower, which was now unsafe, would need to be demolished and rebuilt. The architect, George Gilbert Scott, was commissioned to design and oversee the work. He was a proponent of the Gothic revival movement which believed that church buildings, liturgy and ritual should be returned to pre-Reformation styles. This style was the focus for his many projects from Sandbach Church to the Albert Memorial in London.

From 1847 to 1849 the work involved repairing the wooden roof and replacing the lead, extending the church at the east end, and re-dressing the internal walls. The outer walls were cased with new stone. The tower was rebuilt as an exact copy of the old tower. The box pews and the side galleries were removed, and new open pews installed in the nave, side chapels and the west gallery. According to the plans the capacity of the church was 1014 including 200 seats for children in the west gallery. Mr. Higgins commented that this figure seems rather high, bearing in mind that the current capacity of the church is reckoned to be around 400, and that perhaps Scott was keen to demonstrate that the loss of the galleries did not affect the number of seats.

Mr Higgins said that the inscription above the west door of the church from 1849 states that the church was “rebuilt” rather than restored. This may be because at that time it was regarded as a new building rather than an update of the old one. Scott removed original work, replacing it with a copy of what he thought it may have been. Seen through the perspective of the twenty-first century, he could be considered a cultural vandal, but in the nineteenth century the focus was on having a new church and not on retaining material from previous times.

Other pieces of the jigsaw relating to the history include the fact that the steps at the top of the tower are well-worn compared to those at the bottom. Logically it should be the other way round as the lower steps would have been used continuously by the bell ringers but those at the top would not. One suggestion is that the builders recycled old worn steps at the top in the construction knowing they would not be used very much.

Mr Higgins mentioned that the stained-glass windows in the church date from the restoration or later but there are many older stone memorials which go back to the early 1700s. In the south porch he discovered a memorial to Sarah Sibson who donated £250 for its rebuilding in 1849, after it had collapsed. This was in memory of her father, Rev. John Sibson, who was curate from 1760 to 1796. This porch, at one time, would have been the main entrance to the church. There is also a very prominent memorial to John Armitstead on the north aisle wall, paid for by Charles Hilditch Rickards, a generous benefactor to the church.

As a result of the restoration of the church, St Mary’s now has two stone fonts. One, which dates back to the 17th century, is octagonal and decorated with acanthus leaves and flowers. It was described by the antiquarian Samuel Lysons in 1810 as the most remarkable font in Cheshire and his sketch of it is now at the British Library. The other, made in the Perpendicular Gothic style, was donated in 1859 in memory of a curate of St Mary’s, the Rev. Robert Batty. Mr Higgins suggested that the new font replaced the old one as it was seen to be more in keeping with the style of the restored church. The old font was removed and in 1891 was to be seen in a garden in Bradwall Road being used as a flowerpot. It was finally returned to the church in the middle of the twentieth century and now there are two fonts in the west end of the church.

Mr Higgins mentioned various other aspects of the history of St Mary’s that he is researching. These include the churchyard, the clergy, the church bells, church music and the charities. He writes a regular column in the church magazine, Challenge, covering historical topics and plans to publish a book next year which will be a useful resource containing, in detail, all the aspects he has covered. He said that “The History of the Stained-Glass Windows of St Mary, Sandbach” by Richard Vickery and “St Mary’s Church Remembers” by Pete Merrill and John Austin are available from the church, price £5 each.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on Tuesday November 5th at 8.00pm at Sandbach Library when Pauline and Stephen Minshull will give an illustrated talk about old Sandbach. For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk> or contact Aileen Thompson at 01270 760810 or e-mail her at aileen.thompson@btinternet.com

Photographs



St Mary's Church – 1894 (Tomlinson)



George Gilbert Scott (Wikimedia)



Memorial to John Armitstead

in St Mary's Church



The old 17th century font

