

The Friends of Friendless Churches: Lightcliffe Old Church (St Matthew), Halifax, West Yorkshire

by

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We continue our occasional series on churches vested with the Friends of Friendless Churches with this one on Lightcliffe, one of two residual towers that we own (the other being at Saltfleetby in Lincolnshire). It is also timely as Lightcliffe and Tuxlith Chapel at Milland in Sussex (the subject of the monograph in Volume 44 of the Transactions in 2000) were the first buildings to be conveyed to the Friends – in 1971, some thirty years ago. The church lies 1½ miles north-north-west of Brighouse on the north side of the A649. The Friends are responsible for the tower but not for the surrounding churchyard which rests with Calderdale Council.

HISTORY

The Old Church at Lightcliffe was, in spite of its name, the second of three Anglican places of worship which have served the area, now in effect a suburb of Halifax, since the sixteenth century. It succeeded the Eastfield Chapel of 1529, which lay further up the Wakefield Road. The sole survivor from that is a stone now resited in the belfry of the residual tower. This is inscribed:

Deo et Sancto Mattaeo.
Apostolo Evangelistae
Martyri Sacra
A.O.DC.XXIX

The date of the second church, 1775, was usefully inscribed within the tympanum of the south door although the date according to churchwardens' accounts was cut by one John Sykes during 1826, an endeavour for which he was paid two shillings. The builder was a William Mallinson based in Halifax, the

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evidence being an inscription on a tombstone within the churchyard recorded by Howard Colvin as reading 'In memory of William Mallinson late of Halifax, Mason, who erected this Chappell in the year of our Lord 1775'. Practically nothing else is known about him except that he was almost certainly the progenitor of a prolific nineteenth century architectural practice trading under the name Mallinson and Healey, which specialised in churches.

The bulk of the money was provided by William Walker of Crow Nest from whom the timber was a contribution in kind, generated by his substantial import/export trade with Russia. The stone, ashlar on two sides, coursed rubble on the others, with rubble infill on all four, was Yorkshire Millstone Grit.

As the photographs (Fig. 2) show, St Matthew's was a mid-Georgian preaching box, fairly sophisticated in the proportions and detailing of its flanking elevations, but more provincial and backward looking in the octagonal open stone cupola on the otherwise plain tower. The east end, untouched by the Victorians, was a shallow apse with a Venetian window with delicate Rococo plasterwork just visible in the pre-vandalized view of the interior (Fig. 1a).

With most Anglican churches, Gothic or Classical, there is a hierarchy of external presentation with most visual emphasis being concentrated on the west end. Here, most unusually, the contest between the 'Queen Anne front and Mary Anne behind' was fought out not between east and west but between north and south. The latter was in ashlar with two fine door surrounds with segmental pediments and architraves with splayed bases – the pursuit of symmetry overriding practical functions for one of the doors was a dummy. The ground-floor windows were set within arched recesses and the whole composition was crowned by a strong modillion eaves cornice. The equivalent elevation to the north had no door at all and was constructed in random rubble and even lacked the modillion cornice which was cut off quite self-consciously at either end just a few inches beyond the line of quoins. The reason for this disparity is not clear but the north front is just as visible as that to the south; perhaps the more polite effort faced onto the home or land of a principal donor.

Inside, the fact that the building passed out of use as a place of worship after a century meant that that normal casualty of Victorian ecclesiology, the box pews, remained in their entirety until the vandals set about them. Fig. 4 shows the delicacy with which each side of the pews in the nave were serpentine in order to widen the area for processions towards the east end. Just visible below the organ gallery (which possessed a 1787 organ by Snetzler) is the unusual coat of arms put up in celebration of the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1840 – unusual because it incorporates Albert's arms as Duke of Saxony on the assumption, which was not realized, that this title would be incorporated in the arms of Victoria. (This is one of the few features from the Old Church now resited in the new St Matthew's.)

The interior is of very particular interest to architectural historians for two reasons. First, the delicacy of the quatrefoil columns supporting the gallery confirms them, as observers did before demolition, as being in cast iron. This makes them exceptionally early. Although Sir Christopher Wren was responsible for the use of



Fig. 1a and b
The interior before and after the depredations of the vandals
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cast iron columns as early as the 1690s in the House of Commons, the earliest surviving example of this material as gallery supports is at the church of St James, Toxteth in Liverpool (now owned by the Churches Conservation Trust). And the dates are virtually identical: St James's was begun in 1774 and finished 1775; Lightcliffe seems to have been an exact contemporary. That alone renders the destruction of the body of the church in 1973 lamentable.

The second claim to fame is more indirect, but see Fig. 1a and in particular the pulpits. This is where the loss of the building without comprehensive recording tantalizes rather than satisfies. The photographs confirm that the pulpits are clearly not Georgian – indeed if I was asked to hazard a guess I would date them as several decades after 1875 when the building passed out of use. Leaving that puzzle on one side, what is astonishing is not just that there are two, echoing the medieval balance of the ambos but that one is twice the height of the other. It is almost as if the lower example was meant for the curate alone or, perhaps given the absence of a lectern, for the reading of the lesson. The puzzle is likely to remain unsolved as all physical evidence is now destroyed.

Fortunately the demolition man did not rampage through the churchyard which retains scores of eighteenth century headstones, most of them unfortunately laid flat which will certainly reduce their life. The most distinct examples are shown in Fig. 5. The local art of letter cutting and monumental masonry in the eighteenth century clearly had great fun with elaborated numerals. The motif of the heart recurs so often that it must have been the leitmotif of one particular mason.

The parish decided to celebrate the centenary of St Matthew's by closing it down, at least as a primary place of worship. Under the Rector, George Bagot, a new church of St Matthew was put up just a few hundred yards away, also in Wakefield Road, to the designs of the local architect W. S. Barbour. The cost of £16,000 was met by Major Johnston-Foster. Although the laying of the foundation stone was peculiarly inauspicious in that nine people were seriously injured when the foundation stone, which weighed nearly a ton, caused the crane holding it to topple over onto the crowd, it is chiefly remembered, now that memory has faded, as the repository of much distinguished mid/late-Victorian artwork – including a pulpit and reredos sculpted by J. Birnie Philip, an elaborate font cover by James Clinsty of Huddersfield and a foundation plate situated behind the lectern engraved by Hardman of Birmingham. The capitals and other stone carving are by Charles Mawer of Leeds.

Although the Old Church had been supplanted, the congregation kept it in use, albeit demoted to the status of a mortuary chapel to serve the surrounding churchyard. They also kept up an annual service although following storm damage in the early 1960s this and any regular use of the building came to an end. The vandals and lead thieves smelt disuse and within ten years the vandalism was so intense that the interior (Fig. 1b) was wrecked even to the extent that the Rococo plasterwork was torn off, its demise hastened by the ingress of water left unimpeded by the theft of the delicate ogee-shaped leadwork on the apse.



Fig. 2a and b

The Old Church at Lightcliffe was telling in the contrast between the much more polite and considered southern elevation in ashlar with a complete cornice and its northern counterpart in random rubble, devoid of any doors and almost any frills. Even the cornice is not carried round.

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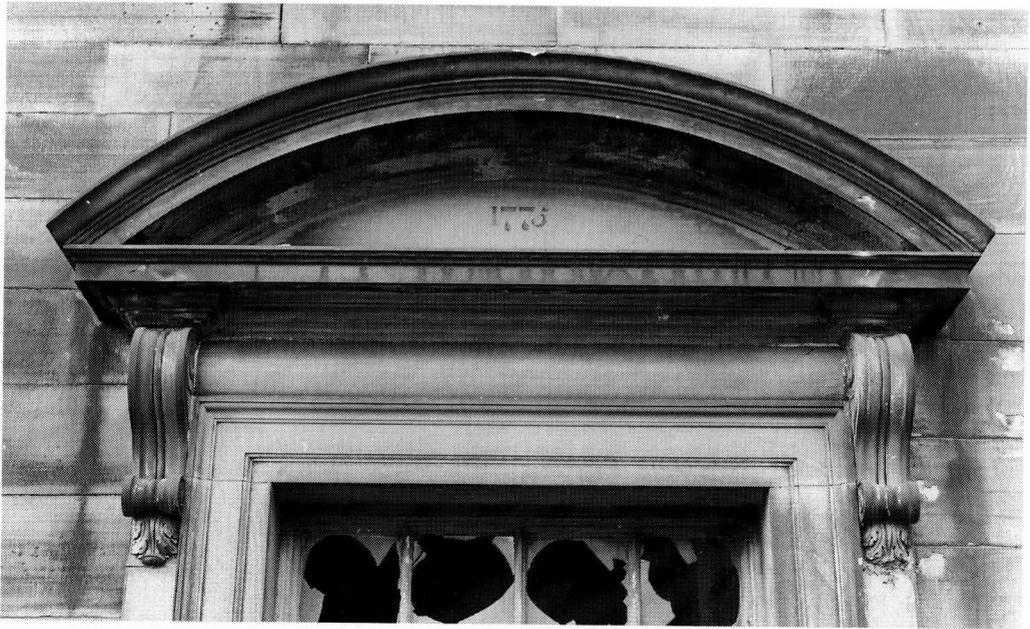


Fig. 3

The south door.

The pediment obligingly contains the date, even if that was not carved until 1826

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THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE FRIENDS

By the late 1960s the condition of St Matthew's was alarming both the parish, which declared itself unable to defeat the vandals, and the ecclesiastical authorities. Its fate became a test case for the newly passed Pastoral Measure of 1969 under which decisions over the fate of disused Anglican churches were systematised for the first time. The Bishop of Wakefield pressed for total demolition in order to remove the danger. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, appointed Chairman of the Redundant Churches Fund set up as a result of the Measure, fought hard at first for the whole building and latterly for the tower alone. The eventual decision, arrived at after much procrastination and some acrimony, was that the tower would be passed for preservation intact to the Friends of Friendless Churches, which Ivor had founded in 1957. The body of the church was demolished at the expense of the Diocese, but the cost of repairing the tower and making good its newly-exposed eastern elevation and that of the flank where the lean-to vestry used to sit was met by the Friends. As this was the first ever vesting with the Friends in the newly established Friendless Churches Trust Ltd (alongside Milland Church, also known as Tuxlith Chapel on the Hampshire/Sussex border), the financial challenge was acute. The money for this rescue exercise was found and the tower was passed formally to the Friends on a ninety-nine year lease on 1st January 1974. The repairs, carried out by Marshalls



Fig. 4

The interior showing the gentle curve to the box pews halfway down the nave and, very faintly, the Royal Coat of Arms of 1840
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of Elland, were first supervised by Dr John Harvey, then based in York and far better known as a great scholar of Gothic architecture. He knew Ivor well from years of service on the Council of the Ancient Monuments Society of which Ivor was then Chairman, but even so his directly architectural career had been limited previously to that of consultant architect to Winchester College. In the last stages of the contract he was succeeded by Dr Tom Marsden of Manchester University. A further programme of repairs, particularly to the cupola, was carried out in 1990, the latter costing £5,800.

The Friends were able to save not just the tower itself of 1775 but the inscribed stone from the predecessor of 1529 in the belfry and, at the lower stages of the tower reached from the internal stairs, most of the Benefactions Board, which was apparently repainted in 1851, and an impressive monument of 1830 showing a mourning classical female figure signed by Richard Westmacott, RA (although which Westmacott was responsible is not clear, whether Westmacott the Younger (1775-1856) or Westmacott the Even Younger (1799-1872) as nothing in Lightcliffe is credited to either man in Rupert Gunnis's *Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660-1851*).

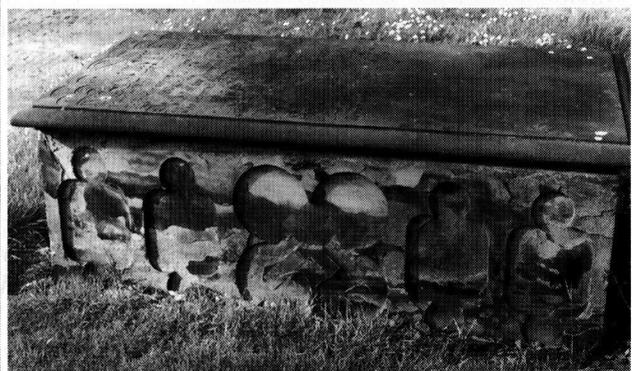
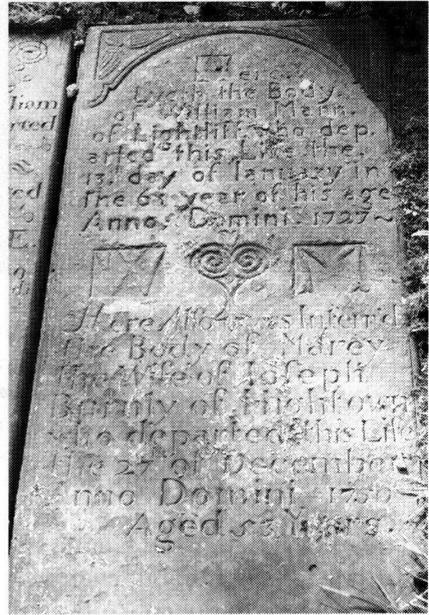
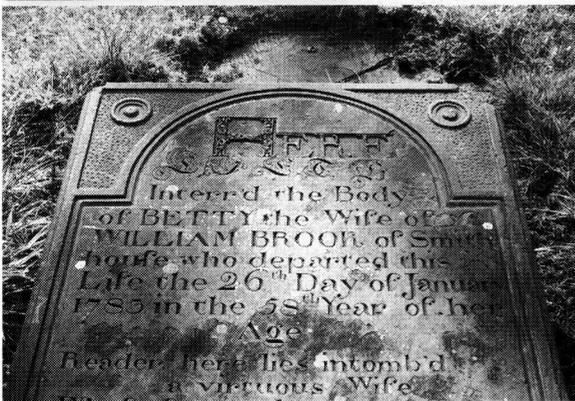




Fig. 6
The residual tower as
it stands now and
as cared for by the
Friends

Fig. 5 (*opposite*)

The huge churchyard at Lightcliffe (not the responsibility of the Friends but vested with Calderdale Council) contains many headstones of great interest, most of them now laid flat. The photographs show those to Thomas Newton of 1684 (with further epitaphs of 1752, 1806 and 1809), Betty Brook of 1783, William Mann of 1727, Mary the wife of Colonel Guest who died 1729 (whose son achieved fame by defending Edinburgh Castle against the Jacobites in 1745 at the impressive age of eighty-five), a schematized gothic chest tomb of the late eighteenth century and, perhaps most intriguingly of all, that to John Whittaker of 16...(half the date is lost) with an extraordinary, almost abstract, design of interlocking foliage and bones beneath

We would like to have saved all the building at Lightcliffe. We have had to make do with the tower, but we are proud to have rescued that which still stands as our northernmost property in a county which the founder of the Friends, Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, loved and which he served for a number of years as MP (for the constituency of Keighley).

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