

A hideous and unnecessary aftergrowth...so substantial a deformity. The church restoration of the 1840s

When first built, the entirety of St. Michael's church had a height roughly equivalent to the height of the current chancel. By the time of the Reformation, the high clerestory windows had been added, and the height of the chancel increased. The 1833 view of the church from the north shown in the picture shows the high line of the chancel - at the same level as the current nave. The original roof line can also be seen in the gable. Now a number of drawings exist in the William Salt library of the outside and the inside of the church in the mid-nineteenth century that are of some historical interest. From these it can be seen that at that time, there were box pews throughout the church, including part of the chancel. The main three decker pulpit and reading desk were situated in the south east corner of the chancel, near the current vestry door.



By 1841 however, it was clear that major work was needed on the church and in particular the chancel area. Part of the reason for this seems to have been the lack of care to maintenance given by the Dean and Chapter who were felt to have some responsibility as many of their endowments were within the parish. A request to them for support however seems to have had little effect and an appeal was launched to finance the rebuilding. A church rate was also levied which was probably far from popular. The architect Thomas Johnson from St. John's Lodge was retained and drew up a list of urgent repairs. However, Johnson persuaded the Vestry to go much further and restore the church to the Early English style. In this the Vestry were much influenced by the banker Richard Greene, a churchwarden and also the secretary of the Lichfield Society for the Encouragement of Ecclesiastical Architecture, founded in 1841, which seems to have viewed the early English gothic style as the only acceptable style for churches.

The work that was carried out by a local builder, Mr. J Johnson from Wade Street, was extensive, and to allow this to take place the church was closed from Easter 1842 to July 1843, with the congregation worshipping in the chapel of St. John's Hospital. The roof of the centre aisle was completely replaced, and the roofs of the side aisles extensively repaired. The singer and musician's gallery at the west end of the church was taken down and the organ placed in the chancel. The door on the south side of the church was closed and replaced by a window, and a new north porch was added. Structurally unnecessary buttresses were added to the south aisle. The mausoleum of the Donegal family of Fisherwick Hall was replaced by a stokehole over which a clergy vestry was built with doors into the chancel and the south aisle; and an organ loft was built over the vestry.

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But that was not the end of the matter, The next part of the church in line for restoration to the Early English style was the chancel and further work was carried out to the design of Sydney Smirke. This part of the work amounted, in my totally objective and unprejudiced view, to large scale church vandalism, in the search to make the church conform to a theoretical ideal. The chancel was lowered, with the upper row of windows removed, the walls-plastered and a fanned ceiling built. The side windows became single lancets and the east window was turned into a three-light window, presumably removing much medieval glass. The finished article can be seen from the inside and outside in the figures below.



An interesting illustration of the passions aroused by church architecture at the time can be found in a letter from Richard Greene, the churchwarden and banker mentioned above, to William Salt where he writes that Intends to remove the chancel clerestory, '*a hideous and unnecessary aftergrowth... so substantial a deformity*'. Such were the tastes of some of that time, odd as they might seem to us.

Richard Greene was to influence the rebuilding further. On the north wall of the chancel we find the memorial to his grandfather - Richard Greene, Surgeon and Antiquary (d 1793) who is buried in the Cathedral, and many of the younger Richard's family, who died in the 1830s and 1840s were interred in a tomb in the centre of the Chancel. The hater of the original chancel seems to have taken the opportunity of the rebuild he financed to install a family vault in the process.



Over the following decades the work of the 1840s came to be increasingly regretted. Major repair and restoration work was carried out in the 1890s, with cracks in the Tower being repaired, the lancet window at the west end being reopened, and much of the 1840s work on the chancel undone between 1891 and 1893. The plaster was taken off to reveal the stonework and the ceiling was replaced with an oak roof. The lancet windows at the east end were replaced by a new three light window, but it was not until 1897 that a new stained glass window could be afforded. and finally in 1899 the current clergy desks and choir stalls were added in the chancel, which then assumed its present form, which is very far from being “a hideous and unnecessary aftergrowth”!

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