

# St Mary's Church, Astbury

## AN ATTEMPT TO RECONSTRUCT ITS BUILDING HISTORY

Andor Gomme

[ *Late Emeritus Professor of Architecture and English Literature at the University of Keele* ]

In 1086, as the Domesday survey records, Newbold [Astbury] had a priest; no church is mentioned, as it is for example at Sandbach, which had both a priest and a church. In fact very few Cheshire villages are credited with a church, but those which at least had a priest may be presumed to have had some building in which he could say Mass. Whether the presence of a priest at Astbury in 1086 was a novelty it is impossible to say; but stone fragments with what appear to be Saxon decoration found near the church or built in to later walls, together with a number of coffin lids which could date from a few years before the Conquest, suggest that Christian rituals had been held on the site for some time; the lower stages of the cross in the churchyard may also pre-date the Conquest. It should be said, however, that records which would give precise dating for any phases of the church's building are almost entirely absent until quite recent times, and almost all the evidence for its history has to be drawn from the existing building and by means of stylistic comparisons with church architecture elsewhere.

No physical evidence survives, however, of any church building before about the middle of the 12th century, when we can assume the round-arched doorway which opens into the north aisle was built: it has continuous roll-mouldings uninterrupted by any capitals and no tympanum. All the evidence suggests that at that time Astbury church was a simple rectangular building without aisles or chancel, and merely a small presbytery. Despite the stone doorcase, the body of the church was almost certainly timber-framed - an early version of the type that has survived from later centuries here and there in western counties of England: the nearest comparable example is at St James & St Paul, Marton, 5 miles north of Astbury; All Saints, Church Lawton, 5 miles to the south, was another, which was rebuilt in brick in 1803 but has kept its stone Norman doorway. Apart from a primitive head used as the corbel to the unfinished arch in the north aisle and perhaps the musicians clumsily re-used as corbels in the west porch, there is otherwise no sign of Norman masonry at Astbury; since all these are clearly *ex situ* there is no certainty that they have always belonged here. (Some unexplained courses of carved stone in the vestry might conceivably be Saxon in origin.)

By about the middle of the 13th century this simple church was evidently deemed inadequate, and the original east end was replaced in stone by an elaborate chancel-cum-sanctuary. The whole of the north and parts of the east and south walls of this survive. The north wall has four bays, the third from the east being narrower than the others, each of which has a two-light window with acutely pointed two-centred arch, single-chamfered order and plain Y-tracery; the narrow bay has a lancet with double-chamfered surround and trefoil head, apparently of slightly later design. Below it is a plainly moulded priest's door and further west a small trefoil-headed lowside-window (identified in the *Penguin Dictionary of Architecture* as "possibly intended for communication between persons

outside the chancel and the priest within; perhaps also for the sanctus bell to be heard outside the church ... formerly, and erroneously, called a leper window"). The priest's door has a skewed internal opening, with a wide splay to the west and none to the east - possibly indicating that at this point a screen originally divided presbytery from the rest of the chancel. Externally a pair of angle buttresses are at the north-east corner; of the similar pair at the south-east the eastward-facing one remains and fragments of the other are visible within the east wall of the present sanctuary; a further abutting buttress is to the east of the lancet window. All the buttresses have a tall square-section pedestal, which at the level of the sill bases gives way to chamfers. At this point a string course runs round all the exposed walls, enclosing the buttresses; a small length of it on the return south wall is now visible inside the church on the north wall of the sanctuary. (The ghost of one side of a sharply pointed window embrasure is visible higher up on the same wall.) The external masonry of the north wall is somewhat rough and ready, but there is a good corbel course below the (later) parapet, decorated with dogtooth, nailhead and other characteristic Early English ornamentation. Inside, the windows and north door have finely moulded segmental rere-arches of a fairly rare form, and an excellent trefoil-headed piscina survives in the remaining section of the south wall.

It seems plausible to suppose that, in a presumed time of fresh prosperity, the new east end was intended from the start as the initial move in a complete rebuilding of the timber church. Once the chancel was finished, it would have been a common practice to turn to the west end and work eastwards so that surviving parts of the old nave could continue to be used for worship in connexion with the chancel; and it seems possible that this work was begun with an additional bay on virgin ground beyond the original west end. In the west wall of the present north aisle, below the later window, is an area of disturbed stonework across which the plinth has been clumsily continued, indicating that there was once a doorway here - which, since it is extremely unlikely that a door would have been made at this place once the church had attained its present size and form, must relate to an early and partial rebuilding of the original aisleless church. This would tie in with the surviving 13th-century section of the north wall west of the Norman door. Most of this is taken up by an incomplete double-chamfered two-centred arch of typical 13th-century form. The most likely explanation of this is surely that it was the beginning of an arcade which was to divide the nave from a new north aisle. The abandonment of this plan could conceivably date from as late as 1282 when Congleton, a growing market town within the parish of Newbold Astbury, was granted burghal status; but its replacement by one vastly more ambitious might have been an aspect of a campaign to anticipate a new charter and therefore date from a decade or so earlier.

Work on this great new scheme must have gone ahead fast, for there is clear evidence that, by the end of the 13th century, Astbury church had a plan form closely similar to that that it has now. Both arcades were almost completely rebuilt nearly two centuries later, but all four of the responds at their ends recognizably belong to the end of Early English; though no two are identical, both of those at the west end have keel-moulded shafts and relate to near-contemporary work in Chester cathedral. Though the responds are not all of the same height they give an indication of the height of the 13th-century arcades - somewhat lower than their successors. The east respond of the north aisle is however a still unresolved puzzle: stylistically, with its cluster of concave bell capitals, it clearly belongs to the later 13th century, and equally clearly it has nothing to do with the arch superimposed on it; yet alone of the remaining work of this period it is built in the pink stone which characterizes the much later recasting of the interior, and its base (like that of its opposite partner) is of the truncated cone form used in both nave arcades. The first pier from the east in the south arcade may also perhaps be a survivor from the 13th century: its capital - the only one on any of the free-standing piers - is identical with that on the east respond, but the pier itself with hollows between the shafts has a characteristic Perpendicular profile, and the capital is therefore perhaps a copy made to create a symmetrical arch.

The masonry of the south wall is not in itself sufficiently distinctive to be dated (and the buttresses appear to be 15th- or even 16th-century, added perhaps to counter a strong outward thrust from the

new flat aisle roof); but most of the south aisle windows have chamfered surrounds like the early ones at the east end of the north aisle; and in the south wall of the Lady Chapel (in this case a piece of recent terminology) are a boldly sculpted trefoil-headed sedile and piscina - distinctly Geometrical, i.e. late 13th-century, in style - which show that Mass was being said at this stage in the south aisle. The south aisle and its arcade would necessarily have been the first part of the enlarged church to be completed, since the old building was still needed for divine service when rebuilding started: once the new south aisle was finished, a temporary wall could be put up between the piers of the arcade and the aisle used for service, at which point the south wall of the old church could be pulled down and the new north arcade built. The order in which this work had to be carried out had an important effect on the recasting of the interior of the church in the 15th century.

The 12th-century church almost certainly had no tower - at most a belfry over the west bay of the nave or just possibly a free-standing timber bell-house - and the ambitious new church clearly needed one. The conventional site at the west end of the nave may have been ruled out by the difficulty of relating it to the latter's exceptional breadth (see below) or by the uncertainty of foundations for a tower of commanding height in the westward sloping ground. However that may be, the site chosen, north of the west bay of the north aisle, suggests that work began early in the new campaign, perhaps before the overall walls were set out. But by this time the additional west bay of the old nave may have been in use, and to allow it to continue the tower was begun not against its outer wall (which, arch and all, would have had to be demolished) but six feet further north, the incomplete arch being presumably blocked by a temporary partition. The masonry of the tower, up to about twelve feet above ground level and perhaps some of that above, is evidently of the later 13th century, and it seems to have been intended from the start that there should be an entry into it from the north aisle, for soon afterward the gap between the two was enclosed by a continuation of the tower's east wall, whose plinth overlaps the west jamb of the Norman door.

The 13th-century St Mary's - and hence the church which later grew in its place - had a plan form which appears to be unique in English medieval architecture. The plan is overall a trapezium, which is eight feet wider at the west end than the east. The narrowing takes place entirely within the central limb of nave and chancel, both aisles being conventionally rectangular (and, because they are, both the east and west walls are shallowly polygonal). At its west end the nave is 40 feet wide between the piers, itself an exceptional figure, slightly greater than that of the nave of Chester Cathedral and only a few feet less than the prodigiously wide nave of St Michael's, Coventry. This enables the west porch to be flanked by large windows within the width of the nave, so that the overall west front is five bays wide - something otherwise found only in churches with double aisles. No clear reason has been put forward for this exceptional plan, but the trapezoidal form has the aesthetic advantage of increasing the apparent length of the church seen from the west end, and the great breadth allows for a very large congregation in sight of the high altar. Remaining in the east wall of the north aisle is a stone which must have set the coping for its roof, at an angle of about 50 degrees to the horizontal - customary for single-framed or trussed roofs. Since at this angle lean-to roofs over the 25-foot breadths of the aisles would mean an inordinately high nave (with presumably blank walling over the arcades), St Mary's must at this stage have been a hall church without clerestory and roofed by three separate sharply pitched roofs. (In its present - Victorianized - form St Oswald's, Lower Peover would offer a nearby rough comparison; the type is common in large, mostly Perpendicular, churches in the south-west peninsula; a refined 13th-century example survives at the Temple church in London.) A further possibly unique feature of the church is the form of the pier bases mentioned above. Though most of the existing bases doubtless date from the later 15th century, the form was evidently set by those of the two east responds - in principle conical, but the cones adapted to follow the mouldings of the piers.

The completion of the tower to parapet level appears to have been a late part of the main 13th-century campaign, perhaps running into the following century: the lower windows with single chamfer are quite primitive, the double-chamfered upper ones more developed, but both sets have

apparently had Decorated tracery inserted. Curiously enough, however, it seems that the section of the north wall of the church between the Norman door and the first stone chancel was not rebuilt during the main campaign of enlargement. The three bays which make up this part of the wall are clearly of 14th-century date: the masonry is quite unlike the wall further east, its plinth and string course are both at a different level, and the three windows have entirely different surrounds - no longer chamfered but moulded in two shallow double-ogees with a fillet between, a typical Decorated profile. Furthermore this wall is not quite in line with the eastern section: it is set about a foot further in and hence, since the inner surface is continuous, is that much thinner. Why should this be? The delay in rebuilding the wall - which was in any event likely to be the last to be tackled - could have been caused by any of several factors: a sudden shortage of stone from the quarry, lack of manpower owing to disease or sudden demands elsewhere, perhaps most probably a need to hold back on costs. If that was indeed the reason, it could well have been important also to ensure that the roof over the old church (which must have been extended and was perhaps reconstructed when the vestry - the first new chancel - was built) was kept. The trusses of this roof will have been carried by posts within the timber-framed wall, which will certainly have been thinner and hence set further in than the 13th-century stone wall to the east, the latter having been built outwards from a consistent inner dimension. The new wall could of course have been made thicker, so long as there was a wall-plate on its inner courses to receive the roof trusses; but this was not structurally necessary, and some economy in stonework was achieved by keeping to the old line. As we shall see, however, there were further important consequences of maintaining the overall level of the whole of the north wall.

It is in fact clear that the great rebuilding scheme was not complete until some time in the 14th century: window tracery in the late section of the north wall is naturally all Decorated; but in addition, though three of the eight windows in the south aisle have Geometrical tracery of a late 13th-century type (in two cases completely renewed recently), the remaining five are all Decorated, and the easternmost is framed in the same manner as those in the north aisle. It is of course possible that new tracery was inserted into old frames, but more likely that two teams of masons were at work simultaneously, one of which was more advanced in its ideas than the other. There was a further major 14th-century addition in the grandiose south porch with a priest's room or treasury on its upper floor lit by a window whose tracery has an unusual horizontal emphasis. The setting-out of the porch was not well-managed: the need for a thick wall on its east side to incorporate a vice stair has led not only to unevenly balanced buttressing but to the unequal shifting off-centre of both the door and the window; in neither case does the apex of the arch lie directly under that of the roof gable. Inside the porch is a stoup with ogee head; another, unusually with a drain, is in the south wall of the Lady Chapel, next to the priest's door. Considerably later, in 1366, a modest bequest to finishing the tower might mean that it then gained its spire though that may have waited until the large-scale works of the following century.

It is generally agreed that the second major recasting of the church, which gives it now its dominant character, was begun latish in the 15th century. The arcade piers without capitals are normally taken to be evidence of a late date, and although there are much earlier examples (in the choir of Bristol Cathedral, for example, before 1330), it seems plausible to suppose that the Astbury design was in some way linked to the work of the lodge which rebuilt the crossing at Chester in the 1480s, where the arches likewise have continuous impost. There may have been some intention at first to continue the traditional form of piers with capitals, particularly if the pier in the chancel south arcade already referred to is confirmed as part of the new work: it is certainly fair to assume that the rebuilding began with the south arcade, starting from the east. But the pattern of the two easternmost bays was quickly abandoned: all the remaining piers in both arcades are without capitals, the arches, with two sunk convex curves dying into the mouldings of the piers, which have tripartite shafts in all four cardinal directions. But the two arcades are not identical: in the south the shaft clusters are separated by concaves in the quadrantals, in the north by flats, and the north arch mouldings are slightly simpler than the south. It seems likely therefore that the two arcades were built by different teams of masons and almost certain that they were not

simultaneous. For there is a further more significant difference between them: the north arcade is approximately one foot lower than the south - the equivalent of one course of stones in the panels above the arches. The absence of any attempt to continue capitals in the north arcade even in the chancel is strong evidence that, as in the earlier enlargement, the south came first. It must have had essentially the same dimensions as its predecessor, since the bays correspond to those in the south wall and the wall-plate is at the same level - necessarily so since for the time being the old roof over the aisle had to be kept. (Dating of the painting of the blessing of St George in the panel over the middle bay of the nave north arcade is material here: Dr. Miriam Gill proposes the early 16th century, with a terminal date of 1528, but it is reported that Anne Hulbert, the conservator responsible for the painting's restoration, put it as early as *c.*1450 - in which case of course the building of the arcades would have to be brought back.)

The wall-plate level of the south aisle, however, is about one foot above that of the north wall: when the enlarged church was laid out in the 13th century, it must have been intended that the outer walls should all be raised; but the delay in rebuilding the north wall and the need to keep or re-use the original north aisle roof led to a compromise. This compromise is most visible when the arcades are viewed together from the west end of the nave. The walling above the arches is framed by trefoil-sectioned horizontal and vertical staves, the latter of which are continued as shafts almost to the apex of the clerestory windows and carry short wall-posts supporting the main roof-beams. When one looks from one side to the other it is immediately obvious that, though the upper horizontal staves are at the same level, the panels on the north side are one course deeper than those on the south; this seen, it is equally apparent that the piers of the south arcade are statelier than those of the north. The north arcade must in fact be a compromise: it was necessary to maintain the wall-plate level of the north wall, which it was clearly decided must be kept as it was; an even lower arcade (keeping to the 13th-century form) would have done this more comfortably and have avoided the rather ugly asymmetrical arches at each end. But it must have been realized that this would have led to a too obvious clash with the already complete south arcade.

From the upper stave upwards all is of necessity equal; but it is not clear at what stage this equality was achieved. The clerestory itself is undoubtedly a later addition, the evidence for which is clearest in the window tracery. It can be taken that the set of large Perpendicular windows at each end of the church date from the 15th-century rebuilding. With the exception of the north aisle west window - a curious maverick design which might even in part be 18th-century - they are of a type: depressed four-centred arches with sub-arches which in all except those of four lights (at the west end of the nave) leave the centre light uncovered; all the main lights have cinquefoil heads, with trefoils in the lesser lights within the arch. In contrast the clerestory windows are throughout uncusped - a feature unknown in ecclesiastical architecture of this area before the early 16th century (cf., e.g., the Crewe chapel at St Bertolin, Barthomley of 1528). The fully cusped great east window which rises well up into the zone of the clerestory seems at first sight to contradict the assumption of a late date for the upper parts of the church. On inspection, however, it is plain that the middle row of this window is a later insertion: obvious injections of quite different stone into the external frame are exactly of a height with this row, the cinquefoil heads of whose lights are of markedly coarser carving to the remainder. A stone to the south of the window some way below its apex shows a straight upper arris at about 20 degrees to the horizontal, indicating an earlier roofline which would have sprung from just above the later clerestory sill. Internally the west wall of the nave shows signs of considerable disturbance; in fact it appears from the extremely irregular coursing that the wall was almost entirely rebuilt in something of a hurry using an assortment of stones of miscellaneous depths; externally here and on the walls of the west porch-tower there are marked changes of masonry some feet below the parapets, implying a break in construction.

The nave and chancel must have been finally roofed as soon as the clerestory was finished; and it is certain that the south aisle roof is from the same workshop and must be its contemporary. The Astbury roofs belong with half a dozen spectacular firred- or cambered-beam roofs in Cheshire - including among the finest Chester St Mary, Northwich St Helen, Malpas St Oswald, and also one

in Denbighshire at Gresford All Saints - suggesting a workshop in or near Chester. So far as scanty records imply, all of these appear to date within a few years either side of 1525 (though others at Cheadle and Disley may be as late as the 1540s). That Astbury's are pre-Reformation is shown by the three great pendant bosses - in form rather of a wasps' nest over the high altar for the pyx, a slightly simpler one over the Lady Chapel screen for a sanctuary lamp, and over the rood-screen an elegant open frame which must have anchored the top of the rood itself. A curious and so far unexplained feature of the nave clerestory is that each wall-post is flanked immediately below the wall-plate by a pair of stone corbels, whose profile is almost that of a Renaissance modillion: they seem now to serve no structural purpose, but could there ever have been ambition to vault the nave? And if so, what sort of members would these corbels have carried?

A date therefore of *c.*1525 seems fairly secure for the last medieval stage at Astbury. The three-storey porch-tower at the west end remains something of a puzzle. The mouldings of the two-centred outer west door are a simplified version of those on the doorway of the south porch and suggest a date not later than *c.*1400: since the main entrance to the 14th-century church was undoubtedly through the south porch, the west porch was probably, like others in this position, designed as a galilee, a vestibule for penitents; its ground floor walls could perhaps date from soon after the main church had been finished, unless the door was reset when the two upper floors were added in the 15th century. These have four-centred-arched windows at both levels and contain two rooms, evidently intended to replace or supplement the earlier priest's room over the south porch; as first built they will have overtopped the nave roof. The porch itself is certainly not in its original condition. The inner doorway appears to be contemporary with the first rebuilding of the nave; the rest is a curious mishmash. Disproportionately large vault springers in the four corners suggest at first sight an intention to build a fan vault with four conoids: they are quite like those in the crossing at Sherborne Abbey. They rest however on four carved figures of musicians which appear to be of *c.*1200: nowadays we admire the blunt toughness of late romanesque figure-carving, but no self-respecting 15th-century mason planning a fan vault would have looked at work that he would have considered crude and hopelessly old-fashioned. Furthermore the springers themselves are a job lot which don't match one another; they are coarsely grouted into the walls and crude depressed arches have been slapped on to the side walls to make rough-and-ready linkage. This looks like further evidence of a hasty cobble, which could even be post-Reformation.

There is ample evidence that the Perpendicular church was never finished. Most serious is the absence of a true sanctuary. The common practice in late medieval churches with aisled chancels was for an extra unaisled bay to project eastward to form the sanctuary. Astbury shows the beginnings of this with the short return walls which flank the altar dais: this brief space is roofed by what is plainly an incomplete ceiling bay. The irregular masonry of the east wall itself shows signs of having been put together in something of a hurry, and no attempt has been made to do more than stop the horizontal staves abruptly when they hit this wall. (One would like to know how the medieval masons would have got out of the problem of reconciling their different levels!) Moreover there are no sedilia or piscina, and no room for them - only a small shelf on the south wall, which might perhaps have held a sanctuary lamp or possibly acted as a credence table. Externally the east end appears when seen from north or south uncomfortably abbreviated.

And then there is the unresolved puzzle over the handsome but astonishingly ill-fitting roof over the north aisle. It is everywhere agreed that it was not made for its present place, and the legend persists that it came from Dieulacres Abbey, near Leek. If it did, it seems likely that at least part of the abbey church remained roofed until the beginning of the 17th century, for inscriptions giving the names of two churchwardens who held office at Astbury in 1619 are carved along the wall-plate at the east end of the north aisle and suggest that it was not till then that the present roof was installed: as the green-man boss reveals, it is undoubtedly medieval in origin. It was evidently repaired in 1704, when two later churchwardens and a freemason are recorded in the same place: the date would fit the wooden cornice beneath a section of the late medieval wall-plate. It can hardly be questioned that the intention of those who provided the nave and south aisle roofs was to

complete the church with a third which would match them, and its absence is all the more remarkable in view of the copiousness of the Perpendicular woodwork - rood screen (its coving largely replaced in the 19th century), parclose screens to the ends of both aisles, several well-carved bench ends all of the late 15th century, and the noteworthy lectern, a corpulent bird which one must assume to be an eagle; it carries something in its beak which has been suggested as a reference to the raven's feeding of Elijah in the wilderness, but it was probably designed to hold the upper end of a scroll banner. Presumably the failure to re-roof the aisle properly is one more piece of evidence either of a sudden cessation of funds or of the pressure of the oncoming Reformation on a felt need to make the church tolerably usable. Yet another is the re-use of a set of earlier (15th-century?) stalls, which have clearly had their backs cut to fit, somewhat clumsily, against the screens. The north porch, which conceivably had replaced a dismantled romanesque one from which the musician corbels might have come, is another mishmash of bits and pieces almost certainly post-Reformation: the two arcs of its outer arch were obviously not designed to fit together.

The date of apparent repairs to the nave roof (1615 inscribed in the upper wall-plate: had it too been over-hastily built?) may well be that of the splendid Jacobean fittings, the font cover, rebuilt pulpit and strapwork communion rail, and perhaps also of the lychgate; the communion table now in the Lady Chapel is likely to date from the Commonwealth; the box pews also, or perhaps slightly later, the church having been ransacked by Sir William Brereton's Roundheads who are said to have used it as a stable and to have made a bonfire of the organ and movable furniture. Since this time the church has changed comparatively little. Victorian scraping under Sir Gilbert Scott (*c.*1857) was fortunately less drastic than in many churches (a small section of lime-washed wall survives on the south side of the Lady Chapel), and there were only two additions of note - Scott's small west gallery, whose columns provide a kind of inner vestibule, and the elegant chancel reredos, the work of the Manchester architect J. G. Crowther in 1866. There is however much Victorian glass, most prominently at the east end by William Warrington (east window *c.*1858, north aisle east *c.*1861) and Ward and Hughes (south aisle east *c.*1872), in all of which the colour clashes are crude and the figure-painting painfully sentimental. The best Victorian window is that over the north door, of unknown authorship. Two rather more interesting expressionist designs of 1920 are in the Lady Chapel south wall. A few scraps of medieval glass which survived the Puritan onslaught are scrambled together in the north-aisle west window.

Of monuments the most noteworthy are the effigy of a 14th-century knight and a tomb chest of 1654 in the Lady Chapel, the recumbent effigy of Lady Egerton († 1599) formerly by the altar but now in the vestry; and, in the churchyard, the 14th-century canopied tomb of Sir Ralph Brereton, recently rather over-emphatically restored by English Heritage.

**Andor Gomme**  
**Church Lawton, 2007**