

PARISH CHURCH OF ST LEONARD, DOWNHAM HISTORICAL NOTES

A village community has existed in Downham for many centuries. A very ancient road which was certainly here before the Romans came, runs through Downham and 'indeed, we know from other evidence, that there was a village here before the Norman Conquest.

The Lordship of the Manor of Downham has been held by the Assheton family for more than 400 years; Richard Assheton having bought the Manor three months before Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558. Richard was a younger son of Ralph Assheton, of Great Lever, a direct descendant of the Asshetons of Ashton-under-Lyne and Middleton, who had been landowners in Lancashire since before the conquest.



St Leonard's before 1800

No-one knows how long there has been a church here. In the 1910 rebuilding traces of what were thought to be Saxon or early Norman foundations were found. The fact that there is a field within the parish called Kirkacre - a pure Saxon word - gives further reason to suppose that there may have been a church here in pre-conquest times. A conservative estimate of one thousand years appears to be justified.

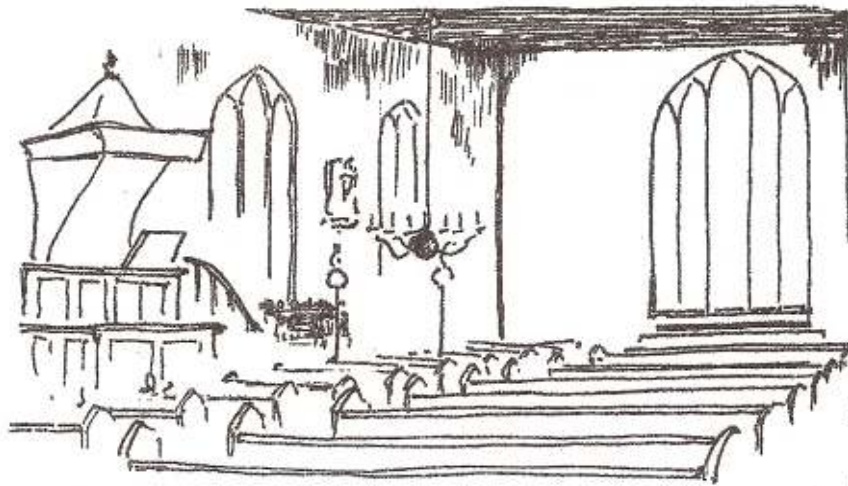
The present parish of Downham comprises the townships of Downham (population c160) and Twiston (population c60) an area of rather more than 3,000 acres. It was once a parochial chapelry of the parish of Whalley although, as has been hinted, there may have been a chapel in Downham before the foundation of Whalley Abbey. In early days the parish of Whalley extended over a great part of East Lancashire and, when the Cistercian Abbey was transferred from Stanlaw, in Cheshire, to Whalley in 1296, the Monastery became responsible for the various chapelries within the parish of Whalley.

Thus it was that the people who came to Downham Chapel for the ceremonies of baptism, marriage and burial were drawn not only from Downham and its nearby townships and hamlets, but also from, a wide area

which included Sawley and Slaidburn, across the neighbouring border with Yorkshire, Whitewell near the Trough of Bowland, and such places as Newchurch on the other side of Pendle Hill. The chapel was looked after by four wardens, who were elected annually. By local custom there are now three.

At the time of the transfer to Whalley, the Whalley Abbey Coucher Book (Register of Deeds) showed the altarage, or fees paid to the Priest in Downham, to be worth four marks - about fifteen hundred pounds in today's money - and the tithes of Downham and Twiston were worth ten marks - £3,600.

The patronage of the living is held by Lord Clitheroe, who lives at Downham Hall.



St Leonard's about 1800

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A Wesleyan chapel was built in 1816 on the opposite side of the valley to the church in Downham. It was sold in 1946 and, with extensions, is now in use as the village hall.

A school in Downham is mentioned as early as 1653, kept by the priest. A school, free to the children of the township, was endowed by the will of Ralph Assheton, who died in 1705. The present school was built by William Assheton in 1839 and is currently used for a pre-school group.

THE PRESENT BUILDING

The tower was probably built in the fifteenth century but the body of the church has often been restored and at least twice entirely rebuilt. The early nineteenth century plain gothic style was replaced in 1910-11 by the present beautiful building designed by Sir Mervyn McCartney at the instance of Sir Ralph Cockayne Assheton.

On the west wall, just inside the double entrance doors, is a small window depicting St. Leonard. Downham Church is dedicated to St Leonard as are many other village churches in the north of England because of his legendary care for country folk. He was also, traditionally, the patron saint of prisoners and his heraldic emblem is a broken chain or fetter. Leg fetters are also depicted on the kneeler in the vicar's stall. This window - and the pulpit - are in memory of Richard Orme Assheton and date from 1911.

The tower, is in the perpendicular style and has a moulded doorway and traceried windows. It contains an angled staircase which terminates in a battlemented parapet with four small pinnacles. Four curious gargoyles, of great projection, start from the face of the parapet. The west window is of three cinquefoiled lights and tracery under a sharply pointed four-centred arch the mullions alone being new. The belfry windows are pointed and of two cinquefoiled lights with hood mould over. These have been partly restored.



In the tower are hung five bells, three of which are old and two more modern. The three old bells were said to have been brought originally from Whalley but this is not so. It is almost certain that the old bells have been in the tower since it was built.

The bells are dedicated and inscribed as follows:

The first to St Augustine - Vox Augustini sone! in aure Dei
The second to St Margaret - Sta Margareta ora pro nobis
Both St.. Augustine and St. Margaret bear marks attributed to John
Walgrave, a bell founder of the fifteenth century.
The third to St Katharine and was originally dedicated
Sta Katharina ora pro nobis
After being recast in 1881 it was reinscribed
St Katharine MDCCCLXXXI

The use of the old form of numbering did not compensate for the loss of the

original inscription - for the prime purpose of church bell ringing is to call the people to worship.

It is interesting to know that when St. Katharine was recast the metal was mixed with the metal of Great Paul, then being recast for St. Paul's Cathedral. So it is that the present St Katharine has some of Great Paul and that some of the original St. Katharine is now in St Paul's Cathedral.

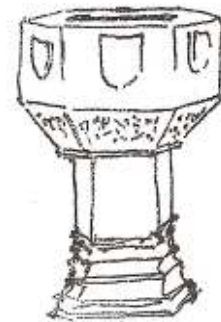
The fourth and largest bell was cast by Taylor, of Loughborough, who also recast St Katharine, and was given by Ralph Assheton in 1881 to celebrate the coming of age of his son, Sir Ralph Assheton.

It was this Sir Ralph who presented the fifth and smallest bell, also cast by Taylor, to celebrate his and Lady Assheton's golden wedding in 1948. It is inscribed O Come all ye Faithful.

At the time of the reformation, in the reign of Edward VI, some attempt was made to remove the bells.

In 1999 a new ringing chamber was built into the tower to commemorate the Millennium.

The font, sited near the entrance to the church, is of late perpendicular style and is probably, therefore, about the same age as the tower. It is octagonal, with a shield on each side. Six of the shields are blank but one is carved with the Legs of Man and another has a chevron between three fleurs de lys.



Near the font is the War Memorial dedicated to those who gave their lives in the 1914-18 war and two Rolls of Honour, which reveal that no less than 62 residents served in the armed forces in the two world wars.

Close by the Memorial are four old wooden staves, the badges and tools of the churchwardens. Near them are three, modern, silver-tipped staves, the gift of Mr. & Mrs. Edwin Croft: in 1972.

High on the wall immediately to the north of the font is a tablet commemorating Sir Ralph Assheton, who entered Parliament as Member for Clitheroe in 1630. He it was who built the vault beneath the Assheton chapel and endowed the annual sermon on the resurrection which is preached every year on a Sunday in January to commemorate his death in January, 1680.

In the nave hangs a heavy, single tier, chandelier of baroque shape. It was presented in 1851.

The north side of the chancel originally belonged to the Starkie family of Twiston. Above the fine oak panelling at this point is the organ. It is some 200 years old, rebuilt in 1909 and presented by Sir Ralph Assheton.

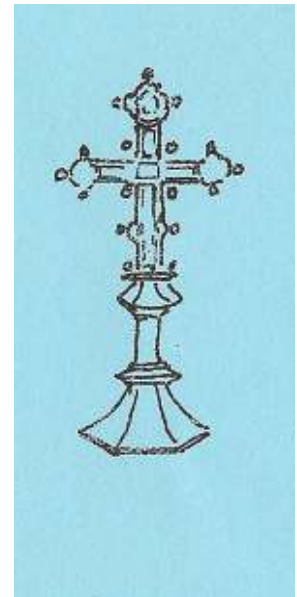
The east window is of five lights and was given by Ralph and Richard Assheton in 1869. It carries an inscription which testifies to the fact that these two brothers designed the window, burnt the glass and constructed it with their own hands. It focuses attention on Jesus, with the manger (birth) scene aptly set in the centre of the cross (death). Notice the emblems of the four evangelists who wrote of His life: the man (Matthew), the lion (Mark), the ox (Luke), and the eagle (John). The panel at the foot of the cross shows Abraham offering his son Isaac for a sacrifice (James 2.21) and Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3.14), representing sacrifice and salvation.

The oak altar was made by Thompson of Kilburn, (the mouse man), and presented in 1974 by the late Agnes Evelyn Johnson, a missionary.

The brass cross was given by Lady Assheton when the church was last rebuilt. The wooden cross was made by Frederick, 6th Lord Hotham for his wife for their wedding day. He was grandfather of the present Lord Clitheroe.

The brass candlesticks were given in 1974 by Miss Barton, once head teacher of the village school and a churchwarden for many years. The brass is kept elsewhere when not in use.

No longer kept in church, but brought out for special occasions and festivals are the very beautiful chalice (1614), Flagon (1680) and two patens. Apparently these replaced two chalices, a cross of latten (a mixed yellow metal, like brass) taken away together with some vestments by the commissioners of Edward VI. The communion plate in regular use is plain and modern.



The processional cross was given in, 1974 by Mary Seed. The large free-standing wooden candlestick the gift of Mr. & Mrs McFall in 1974 in memory of their son Matthew.

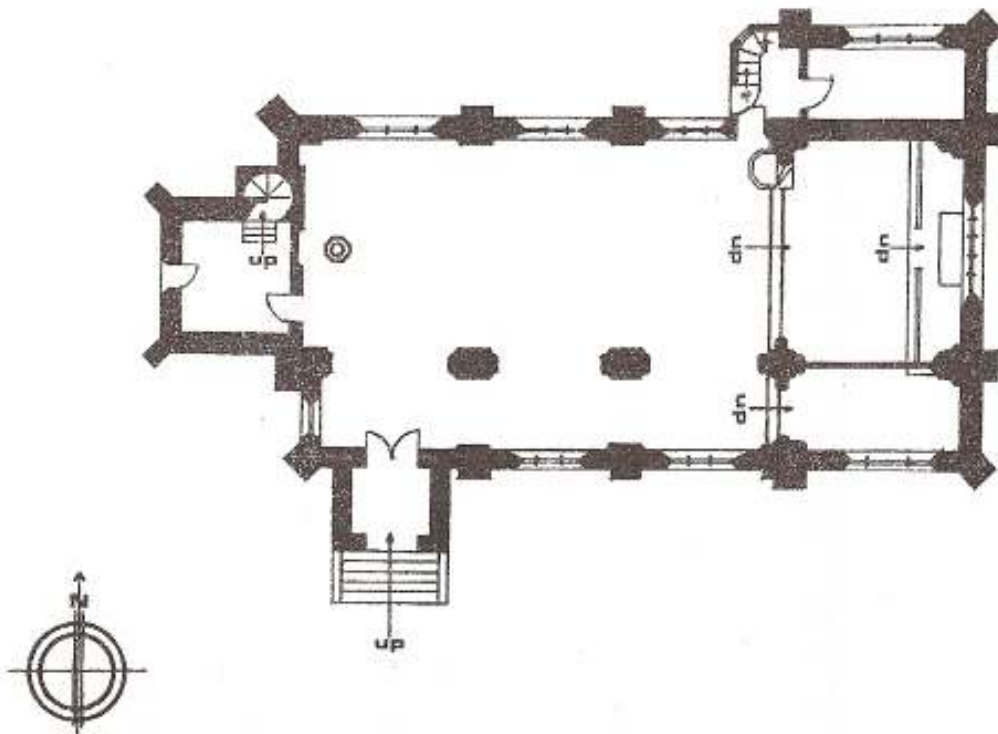
Underneath the Assheton chapel in the south-east corner of the church is the vault of the Assheton family and on the walls various monuments to members of the family. The oldest monument is that commemorating Lady Dorothy who died in 1635, and the most recent, by David Kindersley, in memory of Ralph Assheton, the first Baron Clitheroe who died in 1984 and of his wife Sylvia who died in 1991. Perhaps the most noteworthy, however, is that by Westmacott in memory of Frances Annabella Assheton (1835) fine horizontally oval relief with seated female figure. The lettering on all the monuments is a tribute to the skill of generations of craftsmen.

A tile commemorating the golden jubilee of the Diocese of Blackburn in 1976 is affixed to the south wall near the main doors. Many of the kneelers were made by Parishioners, at this time to mark the same event.

Not on view are the church registers. Those containing details of baptisms and burials begin in 1635, though there is a gap in the burial records between

1766 and 1770. The register of marriages begins in 1655. These were transcribed by Dr. W.B. Price and published by the Lancashire Parish Register Society in 1979. There are a few registers for earlier years copied from the Bishop's registers and now in the County Record Office. Some registers from earlier years have not been traced.

As you leave Church you are met with the awesome sight of Pendle Hill and, before it, one of the last unspoilt pastoral village scenes, You may agree with the late Queen Mary who visited in 1938 and who regarded it as the most beautiful view from any church porch in the land.



Plan of present building

Illustrations by Michael McFall (1999)
Calculation of present day value of the 1296 mark from *How Much is that Worth?* By Lionel Mumby,
The British Assn for Local History.