

= St Mary 's Church , Astbury =

St Mary 's Church is an Anglican parish church in the village of Newbold Astbury , Cheshire , England . It is recorded in the National Heritage List for England as a designated Grade I listed building , and its architecture has been praised by a number of writers .

It is possible that a church was present on the site in the Saxon era , although the earliest fabric in the church is Norman . The present ground plan was established in the 13th and 14th centuries , from which time the church 's external appearance dates , apart from a major rebuilding in the later part of the 15th century , when the range of high windows or clerestory was added . All styles of English Gothic architecture , are represented in the church : Early English , Decorated , and Perpendicular . During the civil war , a group of Roundheads stabled their horses in the church . In the 19th century the interior of the church was restored by George Gilbert Scott ; some wall paintings were revealed , and stained glass was added .

The church has a number of special features . These include its exceptionally wide nave for a village church , and its trapezoidal shape . The tower is separate from the body of the church , joined to it by a passage with a porch . There are two other porches : the three @-@ storey west porch and the two @-@ storey south porch . Inside the church are medieval fittings and furniture and many memorials . The churchyard contains numerous gravestones from the 17th century and five listed structures , including a canopied tomb . St Mary 's continues to be an active church in the centre of its village . It provides the usual services of an Anglican church and runs a number of organisations catering for children and adults .

= = History = =

The origins of the church are unclear . The Domesday survey of 1086 records the presence of a priest at Astbury , but not a church . The discovery nearby of fragments of stone with apparent Saxon decoration , coffin lids , and the lower stages of a cross ? all of which might date from before the Norman conquest ? suggest that an earlier church may have been on the site . The earliest fabric in the present church is a round @-@ arched doorway . Architectural historian Andor Gomme dates this from about the middle of the 12th century and states that at that time the church would have been a simple rectangular building , and mainly timber @-@ framed . Gomme suggests further that in the middle of the 13th century the east end of the church would have been rebuilt in stone , with a chancel and sanctuary . Subsequently the rest of the body of the church was built , consisting of the nave and north and south aisles ; the work was completed in the 14th century . The tower was built towards the end of the 13th century , not in the usual position at the west end of the church but to the north of the west bay of the north aisle , separated from it by a distance of 6 feet (1 @. @ 8 m) . During the 14th century the south porch , with its priest 's room or treasury in the top storey , was added . It is not known whether the tower 's spire was built in the 14th or the 15th century .

Major rebuilding work took place in the later part of the 15th century . It is thought that it began with the south arcade , followed by the north arcade and the addition of a clerestory . The rebuilding was probably complete by about 1525 , although the north aisle may not have been completely re @-@ roofed until the early 17th century . The west porch was probably started in the 14th century , and the upper two storeys added in the following century . The nave roof was repaired in 1615 . During the civil war , while nearby Biddulph Hall was under siege , Sir William Brereton 's Roundheads stabled their horses in the church . They damaged the medieval glass windows and removed some of the church furniture , including the organ . There have been few significant changes since that time . The church was restored during the 19th century by Anthony Salvin , and later , in about 1857 , by George Gilbert Scott , who removed plaster from the walls and built a small gallery . During the Victorian era , the reredos and most of the stained glass were added .

= = Architecture = =

== Exterior ==

The body of the church is constructed in yellow sandstone ashlar , and the tower in millstone grit , an unusual material for churches in Cheshire . The architectural historian Alec Clifton Taylor draws attention to the crispness of the details of the stonework in the tower 500 years after it was carved , compared to the sandstone , which is prone to weathering . The roof is metal . The church incorporates elements of Norman , Early English , Decorated , and Perpendicular architecture . The overall plan is that of a trapezium ; the west end is 8 feet (2 @ 4 m) wider than the east . The body of the church consists of a seven bay nave and chancel with no structural division , and north and south aisles . The aisles are rectangular , thus the narrowing takes place entirely within the nave and chancel . The west end of the nave , between the piers (columns) of the arcades , is 40 feet (12 @ 2 m) wide . This is exceptionally wide for a parish church , and slightly wider than the nave of Chester Cathedral . The aisles extend along the sides of the chancel , forming north and south chapels . The tower stands to the north of the west bay of the body of the church , and is joined to it by a short passage with a porch on its east side . There are also porches on the west and south sides of the church .

The tower is in three stages and is supported by buttresses . In the lowest stage , on the west side , is a doorway in Romanesque style , on the north side is an ogee headed lancet window . On the left of the east side is a Perpendicular style porch . The middle stage has a two light window on the west side , above which is a circular clock face , and on the north and east sides are lancet windows . The top stage contains a two light louvred bell opening on each side . The parapet is plain , and projecting from it on the west side is a gargoyle . The spire is octagonal , with two tiers of lucarnes (dormer windows) . The north side of the church is divided by buttresses into four bays . The second bay from the east contains a priest 's door , above which is a lancet window . To the right of the door is a small trefoil headed window . The other bays contain two light windows with Early English tracery . Battlemented parapets run around the walls of the aisle walls and the clerestory . The clerestory has seven bays on either side , each containing a four light Perpendicular window . At the east end are three windows . The central window , at the end of the chancel , is Perpendicular with seven lights . This is flanked by two aisle windows with plate tracery , the one to the right having four lights , and that to the left five lights .

The southern side of the church has nine bays , again divided by buttresses . In the third bay from the west is a porch . The other bays each contain a two light window with trefoil heads . The porch is in two storeys , with angle buttresses and a battlemented parapet with gargoyles . The lower storey contains a doorway with a pointed arch , and the upper storey has a two light window . The doorway and window are set slightly to the west of the centre , as the east wall contains a stairway . Inside the porch are stone seats and the remains of two stoups (holy water fonts) . The staircase leading to the upper storey is composed of old gravestones . On the outer wall of the upper storey is a sundial . The west end of the church is in Perpendicular style , and has five bays . At its centre is another porch , this one with three storeys . At the west front are diagonal buttresses , and in the bottom storey is a double doorway , over which is a canopied niche containing the weathered image of a saint . In the middle storey is a three light window , in the top storey a two light window , and at the summit is a battlemented parapet . There are windows in the north and south faces of the top stage , and on the north side is an octagonal stair turret . Inside the porch are four corbels (supporting brackets) carved with musicians . On each side of the porch is a four light window . At the west end of the north aisle is a four light window , and a five light window is at the end of the south aisle .

== Interior ==

The nave and chancel are divided from the aisles by seven bay arcades , the piers being without capitals . At the top of each pier , facing the nave , is a carved human face . The roofs are divided into panels and contain much carving , including bosses (protrusions) , shields , inscriptions and three pendants . The chapel at the west end of the south aisle is known as the Lady Chapel ,

and that on the north side is dedicated to Saint Mary . The church contains more medieval fittings and furniture than any other Cheshire church . Between the nave and the chancel is a screen , and there are parclose screens between the aisles and the chapels . The chancel screen , dated 1500 , is elaborately carved with representations of birds , roses , vines and foliage . It has ten bays with lierne vaulting . The chancel stalls and the carved wooden eagle lectern date from around the same period . The lectern is one of the oldest eagle lecterns in the United Kingdom . The stalls have hinged seats , and formerly had misericords (shelves to support a standing person) . Much of the furniture dates from the 17th century and is in Jacobean style . This includes the altar rails , the octagonal pulpit , the box pews , the reredos (screen behind the altar) in the Lady Chapel , and the font cover . The font itself is Perpendicular . The reredos in the chancel of 1866 was designed by the Manchester architect J. S. Crowther .

The royal arms of Charles II are in the north aisle . During the 1852 restoration whitewash was removed from the walls , revealing the royal arms of Henry VII , and paintings which include one of The Blessed Virgin knighting St George . Stained glass in the west windows of both aisles dates from around 1500 . Other glass comes from the Victorian era . This includes the east window from about 1858 , and the window at the east end of the north aisle from about 1861 , both by William Warrington , and the east window in the south aisle from about 1872 by Ward and Hughes . The two westernmost windows in the south aisle are by O 'Connor and dated 1871 . There are later windows from 1920 in the south wall of the Lady Chapel . In the north aisle is a small part of an Anglo -Saxon circular cross -shaft carved with interlace decoration dating from the late 10th or the 11th century .

There are 76 memorials in the church . These include the 14th -century tomb of Ralph Davenport with the recumbent figure of a knight wearing plate armour with a gorget (collar) of mail (armour consisting of linked metal rings) and a conical helmet , a tomb chest of 1654 , and a recumbent effigy (statue) of Lady Egerton , who died in 1599 . The church also contains two sanctuary chairs and six old chests , one of which is iron -bound and dates from the 13th century . There is a ring of eight bells , six of which were recast in 1925 by Taylors of Loughborough from the metal of the previous four 17th -century bells . The other two bells were added in 1998 and were also supplied by Taylors . The organ was made by J. J. Binns for King 's Hall , Stoke -on-Trent in 1912 . It was presented to the church by Stoke City Council in 1962 and was rebuilt and installed by Reeves and Merner . The parish registers begin in 1572 and the churchwardens ' accounts in 1711 , but the latter are incomplete .

= = External features = =

The churchyard contains 51 gravestones dating from the 17th century . The most important monument is the canopied tomb of a member of the Venables family , which dates from the late 13th century ; crocketed pinnacles on the canopy date from the 17th century . Formerly inside the church , the tomb contains two figures , male and female , with their hands clasped in prayer . The only one of its kind in Cheshire , it is listed Grade II * , and is a scheduled monument . There are two further notable memorials in the churchyard , one to the north and the other to the south of the Venables tomb . Both are in yellow sandstone , date from the medieval period , and include weathered recumbent effigies . The one to the north possibly depicts a cleric with his hands in prayer , and the one to the south is a knight in armour with a missing leg . The churchyard also contains a sundial , consisting of two octagonal steps that were originally the base of a 16th -century cross supporting an 18th -century octagonal pillar . In addition to being listed , it is also a scheduled monument . The gateway to the churchyard dates from the 17th century , and consists of a yellow sandstone arch with crocketed pinnacles and a battlemented parapet . All of these structures are listed as Grade II . The churchyard contains the war graves of 16 British servicemen , 15 of World War I , and one of World War II . A yew tree in the churchyard is believed to be over 1,000 years old .

= = Assessment = =

The church was designated on 14 February 1967 by English Heritage as a Grade I listed building . Grade I listing means that the building is acknowledged to be " of exceptional interest , sometimes considered to be internationally important " . The architectural historian Raymond Richards , writing in 1947 , considered it to be one of the most beautiful churches in the county . The authors of the Buildings of England series call it " one of the most exciting Cheshire churches " . Clifton @-@ Taylor includes it in his list of " outstanding " English parish churches .

= = Present day = =

St Mary 's Church stands in an elevated position overlooking the village green on the south side of the village . It is an active Anglican parish church in the diocese of Chester , the archdeaconry of Macclesfield and the deanery of Congleton . The church holds traditional Anglican services and activities for younger people on Sundays . It runs a Prayer Group , a Toddler Group , and groups for other ages of children . The church publishes a monthly parish magazine .