THE CHURCH AT THE FORD

A History of St. James Church, Altham

“The hidden jewel in the crown of the Blackburn Diocese”

No church wears the insignia of a noble past more modestly than St James, Altham. Each year hundreds of travellers come to Whalley from all over England, and it also features on the itinery of numerous foreign tourists. It is one of the “musts” of East Lancashire and so it should be, for the abbey ruins and the church are of outstanding merit and importance. What none of its visitors suspects however is the existence, a mere four miles away, of St James, with a past equally as impressive and interesting.

Set at the end of a long graveyard, well back from the main Blackburn to Burnley road, this church is so well hidden by the summer trees that even the observant passer-by sees only the summit of its tower, and most people would miss it altogether but for the lych gate on the road side. In winter it becomes a little more obvious, but those who notice it rarely turn aside to seek a closer acquaintance, and very few of the inhabitants of the nearby towns guess what a neglected jewel is in their midst.

The present building has rather fewer historic features and treasures than has St Mary’s, Whalley, but those who worship in it know that they have the privilege of continuing a tradition which goes back for almost 900 years.
An Ancient Hermitage
No-one knows exactly when the first church was built, but there was already some sort of Christian presence on the site when a deed ascribed to Henry de Lacy was drawn up in the reign of Stephen (1135 - 1154).

William the Conqueror had parcelled England out among invading barons who had helped him to acquire it. They were responsible for keeping order and for supplying men to fight for him. The system continued long after William’s death, but there was often a great deal of unrest – so much, by the time of Stephen, that it amounted to a state of civil war. The Saxons’ cause may have been dead, but they certainly hadn’t lain down, and their strength in north-east Lancashire is shown by the fact that at this period - almost a century after the Conqueror’s invasion the ownership of Altham by the old nobility still continued, and the mighty de Lacy, finding it no easy task to retain control of lands extending from the Ribble to the Mersey, was glad to purchase the support of Hugh, son of Leofwine the Saxon, by confirming him in his position of authority. By the terms of the deed already referred to, he was assigned “all the rights of the Manor of Elvetham (Altham), Clayton, Akerington and parts of Byllington and Huncoat, including the monastery of Elvetham”.

Now there is nothing at all at Altham, or in the records of the place, to suggest that it was ever the site of a monastery, but no document as important as Hugh’s Charter would be likely to contain a mistake. The probable explanation is that what was meant in the deed by the word ‘Monastery’ was not a great complex like that of Whalley, but something more in the nature of a hermitage. We tend to have an unfortunate impression of hermits as rather useless people who shut themselves up with their holiness and left the world to get on with its troubles. Such an idea, however, is very far from the truth. They lived apart admittedly, but usually where they could render some sort of service. Bridges were few and far between, so they frequently established themselves at fords where rivers could be crossed, such hazardous places being the special charge of the church in early times. They provided food and shelter for travellers (and probably dried their clothes!) and the wayfarers would ask a blessing on their journey and offer thanksgiving for a safe return.

Even in pre-Roman times an important road passed through Altham, coming out of Rossendale via Haslingden, Hameldon Moor and Huncoat, crossing the Calder near the site of the present church, and going through Simonstone and Sabden to Clitheroe - a natural strong point whose castle, in Norman times, was the administrative centre of north-east Lancashire. The manor house of Altham stood on high ground above the Calder crossing, in a position strategically vital to the defence of the de Lacy territory, but the ford was extremely difficult to negotiate in bad weather. Accordingly it seems feasible that a monastic cell was founded so that assistance could be given to travellers, and also to serve as a place of worship when circumstances prevented the local people from reaching their parish church (St Mary’s, Whalley) on the opposite side of the river.
A New Beginning
It was quite usual for landowners to provide places of worship on their estates and to give endowments to pay for a priest. Hugh the Saxon built his church at the ford, either enlarging and adapting the original hermitage or erecting a new shrine on an adjacent site. It was dedicated to St James, possibly because local men, on their way home through Spain from the Second Crusade, may have worshipped at the tomb of that saint in the Cathedral of Santiago. Hugh gave sixty acres of land as an endowment and, as no dependent chapel in the parish of Whalley had more than thirty eight acres, he must have felt quite justified in claiming for it all the rights of a parish church - which did not please the mother foundation of Whalley, and led to years of argument.

During the reign of Richard 1 (1189-1199) the then Lord of the Manor of Altham won over Geoffrey, Dean of Whalley, by appointing Geoffrey’s brother Robert to the living. Later, when Robert was made Rector of Rochdale, he granted Altham to his nephew Henry. Robert’s deed, drawn up for the purpose, was witnessed by so many clerics from the surrounding districts as to prove the standing of Altham as an independent church. Thus it was a serious blow when, in 1249 Peter de Castria, Rector of Whalley, succeeded in his claim that St James’ had been wrongly alienated from his parish, and it was judged a dependent chapelry.

Status Causes Problems
Peter was a strong-minded gentleman who had made himself a force to be reckoned with in many spheres. The monks of Stanlaw in Cheshire, who had been given land at Whalley for a new abbey, had to wait for him to die before they could take up their inheritance but, along with their other privileges, they then assumed the right to appoint incumbents of Altham. The lords of the manor did not acquiesce in this without a struggle, continuing to persist in the claim that theirs was an independent parish and that they had the right to appoint its priest. In 1295, when the incumbent Henry de Clayton died, William de Altham was so determined to have a man of his choice appointed next that he undertook the difficult and dangerous to journey to London to uphold his rights in person, the plea being heard at the King’s Court of Westminster before Judge John of Metinham. An enterprising fellow - but alas for his efforts William lost the case and was incensed when the Abbot of Stanlaw, in order to assert his authority, sent Richard de Richard and Henry de Bolton to Altham to serve as incumbents in the name of himself and his monastery.

William therefore appealed to the Archdeacon of Chester, whilst the Abbot appealed to Canterbury and Rome. The Archdeacon of Chester, Robert de Raddeswell, and Robert, the Bishop of Lichfield took William’s part and sequestered the fees and revenues of Altham Church from the incumbents nominated by the Abbot of Stanlaw, but the Archbishop of Canterbury sent an injunction prohibiting them from attempting anything to prejudice the Abbot and monastery until an appeal had been heard in the Ecclesiastical Court of Canterbury. The exact term of this court’s decision have unfortunately not been traced, but the Bishop and Archdeacon accepted its ruling and withdrew their support from William de Altham - who nevertheless persisted in his claim for as long as he lived.

His son Simon, who succeeded him, took the same stand until 1301, when he agreed to settle the dispute on receipt of £20, plus 300 shillings to cover the expenses of the suits. The
relevant entry in the Abbey’s accounts states “Paid to Simon de Altham for the resignation of his rights, if he had any, in the Chapel of Altham, £30.” The scribe was careful not to admit that there had been any rights, but the size of the money payment, and the fact that expenses were added, suggest that the family had had just grounds for persisting in their claim. St James’ being finally declared a chapelry, the curates were presented to the living by Whalley Abbey up to the time of its dissolution in 1537.

The Coming of the Banastres

Simon was succeeded by his son John, who held the manor till 1371, and was the last of his line to do so. He did not, however, occupy it, letting it instead to the de Eaves family. When he died, his widow Mergery married John Banestre of Walton-le-Dale, and the couple claimed a third of the Altham property from John de Eaves and his wife Joan, as part of Mergery’s dowry. A few years later Joan was carried off by a certain William Talbot who with the help of his heavy fisted friends, also robbed her husband of many of his goods. About the same time a group of the Abbot of Whalley’s men, none too sober, probably, and on the rampage, did serious damage to the unfortunate man’s crops. It was against this troubled background that John de Eaves terminated his lease. Presumably he had had enough!

In 1386 John de Altham’s daughter and heiress Johanna married Richard, son of John Banastre, and thus brought the manor into the Banastre family, which played a notable part in its history for the next three hundred years.

The Church Rebuilt

Some time during the fourteenth century the small dark narrow Norman church was reconstructed, or perhaps even completely rebuilt, to satisfy the demand for a more graceful and elegant Gothic style. The elaborate stone tracery of the window at the eastern end of the north aisle still remains from this period - convincing proof that the original building was enlarged by the addition of aisles, and that there was an intermediate structure between the original church and the present one.

Dating from the same period (and now built into the interior north wall of the chancel) is the piscina, originally used for the washing of sacred vessels by the priest. It is the only remaining link with the Lady Chapel which was situated at the eastern end of the south aisle in the mediaeval church. The earliest mention of this chapel is in the will of Henry Rishton, dated 17th September 1427, in which he asked that candles be placed before the statue of St Mary in Altham Church. The Lady Chapel was also known as the Altham Chapel, being no doubt founded by some
member of the Altham family. It was small, and separated from the nave and the rest of the aisle by carved open screens. The dissolution of the monasteries was followed by the suppression of such chapels, and the statue and Chapel or Chantry of Our Lady of Altham ceased to exist.

The present church was built in the Perpendicular style in 1512, with nave, north and south aisles, clerestory, chancel and south porch and, on each side of the nave, three arcades of pointed arches, with a similar arch at the entrance to the chancel. The floor was the bare earth, tramped down hard, and strewn with rushes which were renewed every year, drying out delightfully with the scent of sweet fresh hay. There were a few black oak pews but the majority of the seats were open benches, and a single bell hung in the bellcote over the west end of the nave.

In the baptistry at the west end of the south aisle stood the font, still in use today, which, according to tradition, was the gift of Abbot Paslew, the patron of the church. The outside of the font is octagonal, with carvings on the instruments of the crucifixion on four of the panels. On one are the letters ‘IHS’, on another the letter ‘M’, on the seventh the letter ‘T’ and on the remaining one the initials ‘MB.’, which it is thought stand for Margaret Banestre, wife of Nicholas Banastre, the lord of the manor. She was a daughter of Sir John Townley, and the initials suggest that it was she who actually provided the font, but made the gift over to the Abbot who presented and dedicated it. Its date could not have been later than 1537 when Abbot Paslew’s tragic death by hanging brought his close association with Altham Church to an end and it was most likely some years earlier, while the new church was actually in reconstruction, for the old Norman font, then made redundant, was built into the right hand corner of the porch, in the angle where it adjoins the main building. The whole of its front was chiselled away, so that anyone wishing to rest at that end of the porch seat would
actually sit in the bottom of the bowl in which the early lords of Altham were baptised! In 2011 it was re-sited to the large pew at the east end of the south aisle where it is proudly displayed. To possess even three-quarters of an eleventh or twelfth century font is something to rejoice about, especially as it is the oldest in north-east Lancashire, the one at Whalley dating from the fifteenth century and none of those belonging to the other ancient churches going back beyond the sixteenth.

Put to equally good use in the new building were three stone coffin lids, one in the wall on the south side of the nave beneath a window near the porch. It bears an incised carving of a long straight cross-hilted sword. The left side of the stone is defaced but has suggestions of a cross. The second coffin lid forms the lintel of the doorway in the porch, and shows a similar sword with a dagger alongside. The third one forms the lintel over the window at the eastern end of the north aisle, and also bears a sword.

The semi-circular tympanum with star diaper design - the headstone of the original doorway (and one of only three surviving in the whole country) - was built into the south chancel wall, while various smaller stones, with the sort of zig-zag carving commonly found decorating Norman arches, were incorporated into the porch and south aisle.

Perhaps the most fascinating of the ancient stones in Altham, however, are two thirteenth century grave markers, now preserved in the chancel but really belonging to the churchyard. Diminutive as elfin tombstones they are both circular, and one still has the narrower rectangular base which fixed it to the earth. They bear no names and it is possible that they were intended merely to help relatives remember exactly where their loved ones rested. The old name of “Witch Stones” does nevertheless suggest that they may have been erected to keep the occupants of the graves safe from evil spirits. Their shape lends weight to this idea for the circle, an ancient symbol of life, was supposed to give magical immunity against witchcraft. The back of the smaller stone is plain, while the front bears a cross designed like a four-leaved clover. The larger stone is carved with a Maltese-style cross on one side, and a many-petalled flower enclosed in a circle on the reverse - perhaps a simple
promise of new life, but possibly an additional insurance, for one cannot be too careful when it comes to witches!

All told, there is a greater range and variety of Norman work at Altham than at any other church in Lancashire.

A Child Bride and Bridegroom
During the sixteenth century formal marriage contracts between young children were quite commonly made by parents anxious to form alliances that would consolidate or improve their standing. Sometimes there was even an actual wedding, one such ceremony being performed in Altham church in 1526, when nine-year-old Ralph Rishton, eldest son of Ralph Rishton of Church Kirk Chapelry, married Helen Townley, aged ten, the daughter of Richard Townley of Royle, near Burnley. Sir John Townley of Townley Hall, head of the family, was present, along with all the fashionable people of the surrounding districts, and Abbot Paslew also attended and attested the ceremony. How the child couple must have enjoyed the fine clothes and the excitement. One hopes that friendship blossomed as they grew up, and that the machinations of their elders did not condemn them to a lifetime of incompatibility. At least they were no worse off than the many girls of more suitable age who, at that unliberated period were beaten and starved into subjection by parents whose choice of husband for them did not please!

A Priceless Treasure!
One of the lesser troubles of the Reformation was that churches had their silver taken from them. A great deal was melted down, but some found its way into private hands and survived. This was the case with Altham’s Tudor Chalice of beaten silver in the form of an elongated cup with pedestal and base. It has an antique pattern encircling the top and its hallmark denotes its age and provenance. Only seven other pre-Reformation chalices can be traced in England, which makes this unique piece a special treasure. It was eventually returned to the church and is a priceless part of its plate which, in addition, comprises two pewter pattens, a pewter flagon inscribed ‘Altham Chancel 1746’, one silver flagon, two silver chalices, two silver pattens and a silver wafer box.

A Man of Character
When Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1649 the rigours of Puritanism were felt by everyone, but even beheading the opposition did not produce a state of perfect harmony for the victors. One of St James’ most memorable priests, the Revd. Thomas Jollie, came to the parish that year at the age of twenty-one, straight from Trinity College, Cambridge, to find a deep division between the Presbyterians and the independents (or congregationalists). With a breadth of vision, surprising in one so young, he urged
compromise, and drew up twelve resolutions, quaintly called “Swaddling Bands” (presumably because they were designed to protect this new version of the faith in its infancy and give it a chance to grow strong). He must have been persuasive as well as sincere, for his guidelines were happily accepted and he became one of the leading Puritan divines in the north of England. He believed absolutely in the power of prayer and in the protection and guidance of God, attributing his escapes from his enemies to the direct intervention heaven, and every calamity that befell those who hated him to divine retribution.

His tolerance in the matter of the “Swaddling Bands” was not continued in his dealings with his flock, his stern convictions demanding a strict discipline contrary to the inclinations of ordinary mortals. As long as the Commonwealth lasted he was able to rule as he pleased, handing out wholesale excommunication for unseemly behaviour such as lying, self-conceit, swearing, an in one case, even for ‘carrying burdens on the Lord’s Day. In 1655 a girl named Jennet Cunliffe was ‘cast out of the church’ for promising to marry a Roman Catholic and insisting on it after admonitions! The following year someone suffered temporary exclusion for not keeping his children in order, and someone else for using un-Christian language to his mother-in-law!

After the Reformation in 1660, however, Jollie’s authority was soon challenged. There were so many complaints against him that he was arrested and imprisoned and on his release in 1661 Nicholas Banastre locked him out of his church. With the help of his followers he broke down the door, had a new lock and key fitted and continued to preach Puritanism.

In 1662 the Act of Uniformity was passed, ordaining that any clergyman refusing to consent to everything in the Book of Common Prayer should be ineligible to hold a benefice. Jollie was ejected from his parish and became leader of the local nonconformists, holding meetings in the homes of his followers until he moved to Wymondhouses, near Pendleton. Until 1689, when the Toleration Act was passed, he was imprisoned many times; among other things for preaching at Altham in 1674 (which contravened the Five Mile Act of 1665). The Toleration Act brought relief for Jollie and his friends and he was able to spend the remainder of his life in quiet useful work. He died in 1702 and was buried at Altham, in accordance with his wish to be laid to rest in the first and last place of his public ministry, among the remains of his relatives who lived and died in the Lord. Though no memorial was erected to him, his bones may well lie beneath the flat stone which is inscribed ‘John Jollie, June 27th 1725’, this John being his nephew.

Although he must have been an uncomfortable man to come up against, one cannot but admire his single-minded energy, his loyalty to conscience and the great courage he showed in the face of persecution and in the sorrows of his private life, for, in the space of five years, he married and lost three wives, and his fourth partner died in 1675, leaving him a widower for twenty-seven years.
Farewell to the Lords of the Manor

In 1692 Mary, the last of the Banastre family, married Ambrose Walton of Marsden Hall, and Altham Hall ceased to be the home of the manorial lords. Ambrose and Mary had three sons and six daughters, the eldest son, Henry, succeeding to the estates at the age of twelve, when his father died suddenly in 1710. Mary died in 1718 and Henry later quartered the arms of her family, the Banstres, with those of the Waltons. Henry’s son, Banastre, inherited the estates in 1754 but, as he and his wife Jane Toulson had no children, the Marsden and Altham estates passed to his cousin, the Revd. Richard Wroe, who adopted Wroe-Walton as his surname, and resigned his incumbency of Radcliffe in order to manage the properties.

He married Elizabeth Topham and they had a son and two daughters. The son was Richard Thomas Wroe-Walton, who held the estates of Altham and Marsden Hall for forty four years and died a bachelor in 1845. He liked his surname to be spelled ‘Roe-Walton’ and it appears in that form on the memorial tablet his sisters erected at St James’ If he was half as godly and virtuous as it says, he must have done pretty well! Certainly he was remembered in the locality as a kind and charitable man who did a lot for the underprivileged and the old coaching inn which is the Church’s nearest neighbour had its age-old name of the Black Bull changed to the Walton Arms in his honour. It was his custom to sit at his door on Sunday afternoons with a purse full of small coins which he dispensed to the poor people who collected there to take advantage of his generosity.

In 1820 he purchased the patronage of Altham Church from Lord Howe whose family had acquired it from the Vicar of Whalley in 1772. Those were days of conscientious - one might almost say obligatory - churchgoing, when the Wardens still checked the Walton Arms during service time to make sure that only bona fide travellers were present, and no thirsty locals had slipped in!

Richard Thomas was succeeded in possession of the estates by his two sisters, Miss Maria Anne Wroe-Walton, and Miss Jane Wroe-Walton who later married Frederick Maw but died childless. They were the last descendants of Leofwine the Saxon to hold the Manor of Altham, and were great benefactresses of the church and village, providing, among other things, for the building of the school and the master’s house. After the death of Miss Maria Anne Wroe-Walton, who survived her sister by two years, the estates passed to Mrs Hallam and Mrs Fawcett, descendants of the sister of Ambrose Walton whom Mary Banastre had married. Mrs Fawcett died in 1851 but Mrs Hallams defendants remained in possession of the Altham Estate until 1941.
Of the four hatchments between the clerestory windows one is for Richard Thomas Roe-Walton and three for the Fort family of Read Hall. The Roe-Walton hatchment is particularly interesting as it quarters the arms of the Banastre, Walton and Roe families as follows:

the first per fess shows a lion passant guardant and in the base paly of six ermine (Walton), the second argent a cross potonce sable (Banastre), the third argent a chevron gules between three hawks’ heads erased proper (Walton) and the fourth gules quatrefoil (Roe). The crest comprises a ducal coronet a demi-lion holding a rudder azure and there is a slight mantling argent. The motto *Virtuti Honores Soli* translates “Honours to Virtue Alone”.

The second for the Forts show the family shield bearing a castle argent and a bee volant between two mallets proper on a field of azure and gules, the crest being a lion sejant gules semy of crescents and collared holding a cross crosslet flitchy without mantling or motto and the other with mantling gules and argent bearing the motto *Resurgam* which translates “I shall rise again” and a winged skull. These are thought to be for Richard Fort who married Anne Bulcock and died in 1829 and John Fort who married Mary Kay and died in 1842.

The third Fort hatchment is for Richard Fort DL, JP who married Margaret Ellen, the daughter of Major-General John Smith; the Smith family arms, azure two bars wavy ermine on a chief, a demi-lion rampant issuant sable being impaled with the arms of the Fort family The motto *Fortis et Audax* translates “Brave and Bold”.

Some Questionable ‘Improvements’

In 1812 a vestry was built onto the church, and an iron chest for housing the plate and registers set into the wall, together with an old rectangular sculptured stone bearing the letter ‘M’ and the date 1512 or 1513. The chancel needed attention but did not receive any and by 1819 it was in such a poor state that it was partitioned off from the nave and not used.

Hardly surprisingly such a state of affairs did not please the Revd. W Wood, appointed curate later that year, but though he set to work with enthusiasm he does not seem to have been a man of much taste. The old chancel was demolished and a new one built: the roof of the nave was underdrawn with a flat ceiling and a gallery added at the west end. The floor was flagged and pews substituted for the open benches while the pulpit was moved and alterations made to the choir pew. At that time there was no organ and the singing was led by a violin, a cello and a flute.

Perhaps the parish was exhausted by all this activity, for the refurbished building which resulted was certainly not well looked after, and when the Revd. William Sharp arrived in 1848 he described it as “little better than a barn” and had various uncomplimentary things to say about the previous “improvements”. He thought the new parts to be “unseemly”, badly constructed and out of harmony with the rest of the building. The upper portion of the small belfry with its one bell which could be reached only by means of a ladder, had fallen away; the chancel had not been buttressed and had a lower-pitched roof than the nave, and the front of the old porch was unsafe. The church was cold, damp and smelling of death, for many of the graves beneath the nave had not been effectively sealed. The windows would not open; the walls, arches and pillars were covered with flaking whitewash; the roof timbers of the side aisles were coated with soot from the oil lamps, and the chancel ceiling was black. In the nave stood the ugly three-decker pulpit; the pews were of varying size and design, some of old blackened oak, some of painted and grained oak in a light shade and others of deal painted and grained.

A Clean Sweep

Mr Sharp decided that a complete restoration was necessary and had the gallery and the flat ceiling removed. The chancel was completely rebuilt to match the nave and everything was thoroughly scraped and cleaned. The pulpit was replaced by a simpler more tasteful one and the old harlequin assortment of pews
gave way to matching ones with wooden floors and doors, their ends decorated with poppy heads of cast iron.

The musical accompaniment having shrunk to a single bass fiddle, it was replaced temporarily by a small organ behind the pulpit, but when the tower was erected to replace the small belfry its interior was used to house a more elaborate instrument with twenty-five stops. Built by John Laycock of West Closes near Crosshills, it was for many years serviced by Laycock and Bannister of Crosshills.

A painted window, given by members of the Manchester Royal Exchange as a memorial to John Hacking, inventor of the carding engine was placed at the east end of the chancel. Carding, which was the process of persuading all the fibres in a mass of raw wool or cotton to run in the same direction, had always been done by hand - by drawing two pieces of wood set with forests of short wires, across each other with the material between them. John Hacking was the first person to produce a simple machine to do the job. It still had to be turned by hand, but was vastly easier and quicker than the old method, and soon his ‘engines’ were in great demand. His sons also built small mills where they could be housed. This set them off on an impressive career as builders, their achievements including St Mary’s Roman Catholic Church at Clayton-le-Moors (now demolished), Read Hall (erected in 1825) and rebuilding at Dunkenhalgh, where Leonard Hacking was employed for many years at wood carving and similar highly skilled jobs.

The family made a good deal of money and later on the Royal Exchange’s window was removed and replaced by the present one at their expense. It is an exquisite piece of craftsmanship, with
elaborate jewelled detail, the work of The Whitefriars Glass Studio of London (Powell and Sons of London) and bearing their logo - a very small white friar. It was unveiled by Mr Thomas Hacking and dedicated by the Venerable Archdeacon Hacking of Newark, Nottinghamshire the ceremony being attended by seven Sons of the late Mr and Mrs Joshua Hacking and their families, descendants of the inventor. John Hacking's grave is on the right of the church path roughly in line with the chancel.

The restoration of the church cost approximately £1,600, towards which the patrons gave £45, in addition to land for the extension of the churchyard The Clegg family gave £48, Mr Richard Fort £45, Mr John Taylor of Moreton Hall £30, Mr Le G N Starkie of Huntroyde £25, Altham Colliery Co £25, the Duke of Buccleugh £20 and Mr James Dugdale £20, the rest coming in response to Mr Sharp's appeal for aid from families who had ties with, and memories of, the church.

Altham became a parish its own right in 1867 by an Order of Council and the Revd. William Sharp became vicar in his twentieth year of service.

Mr Sharp was held in high esteem, not only for his pastoral work but for the efforts he made in the community as a whole. The rougher element was probably not so pleased, for he had much to do with the appointment of a parish policeman, and strongly objected to the ‘disgraceful scenes’ on Saturday afternoons, when gambling, wrestling, clog and cock fighting and pigeon flying were indulged in, and there were races where men ran naked. (After the way people had worked all week, one wonders where they got the energy for such goings-on!)

The two stained glass windows in the south wall were given by parishioners and friends in memory of Mr Sharp in appreciation of his long faithful service to them and the church.
More Interesting Memorials

At the eastern end of the south aisle is another window honouring a priest - the redoubtable Rev. John Adamson, famous for the way in which his incumbency of St Leonard’s Padiham improved the unenviable reputation of that town! He was also, at one time, in charge of St James’.

The baptistry windowsill bears a brass tablet presented by Hyndburn Borough Council in memory of the victims of the Moorfield Colliery disaster of 1883. Fifteen of them were boys of what is now school age, the two youngest being only ten years old. These last would work only half a day at the pit but, sadly, it was the wrong half.

On the wall nearby is a charming memorial board to Elizabeth Cowper (nee Lonsdale) ‘snatched away’ at the age of twenty-three after almost six years of ‘conjugal felicity’. A great deal of heartbreak must be hidden in those time-marked phrases, but the James Walmsley brass on one of the pillars is rather enigmatic. It records the fact that he awaits the Last Judgement and adds, ‘What sort of person he was, that day will discover’ (which hardly suggests that the writer of the epitaph would have cared to bet much on his chances of success!).

The graveyard has a great variety of stones and inscriptions. For centuries it was the only burial place in the area and people brought their dead from miles around. Beneath the east window and on the north side of the church are the memorials to the Banastre family simply inscribed with names or initials and dates. In complete contrast are the memorials of later years; some that have a quaint charm and some that arouse feelings of great sadness. One can almost feel the grief suffered by Thomas and Ellen Marshall whose gravestone records not only their demise, but also the deaths of their four children and the children of Thomas and Jane Marshall, three of whom died within two months of each other, aged five weeks, five years and four years, and were followed by another child aged fifteen months within a few years.
Wandering round the graveyard one also finds may examples of rhyming epitaphs. That of Nelly Lang of Church, who died young in 1794 reads:

“Death cut me off; alas full soon,
my morning sun went down at noon”

While that of Benjamin Riley, driver of a team of pack horses, reminds us of the days when body-snatching was rife, for it ends:

“This silent grave in which I now remain
at your peril open it not again”.

At that time an armed watchman had his hut in the churchyard to keep the ‘resurrection men’ at bay, and there is an old framed document, dated November 21st 1832, attached to one of the pillars inside the Church, which exonerates the sexton of the time, a man named James Calvert, from a charge of being in league with them, and taking advantage of his office to dig up bodies for their benefit. As the accusation was made by a fellow named Rushton, who had himself been only recently released from prison in Preston, it seems obvious that it was merely an attempt to blacken Calvert’s name.

An Outstanding Pastor
The Revd. H H Whittaker, who was vicar for thirty years, from 1909 to 1938, was responsible for several improvements. Between 1928 and 1931 a new pulpit and chancel furnishings in oak were installed.

However, the innovative urge was not allowed to get out of hand, and the altar, which beneath its cloth and frontal is a simple ancient table such as would not have seemed out of place in Thomas Jollie’s kitchen, was happily preserved, and still keeps company in the chancel with a Jacobean gate-legged table and two seventeenth century oak Yorkshire chairs.

The present oak screen, commemorating the work of Miss Sarah Hallam and her sister Clara, was fitted lightly in front of the pillars of the chancel arch, which shows signs of having supported a rood screen in the past. It bears two shields showing the family alliances from the de Altham family onwards.
Miss Hallam also gave the stained glass, made by Shrigley and Hunt of Lancaster, picturing St James and St John, now occupying the ancient window at the east end of the north aisle.

In 1930 the entrance to the churchyard was transformed, the stone posts with iron gates and lamp bracket overhead, some distance along the pathway were removed. The posts were preserved as seats on the wall along the path, for they were inscribed with the names of the incumbent and Churchwarden at the time of their erection, the Revd. W Wood and Thomas Hindle and the date 1821. They were replaced by the present beautiful lych-gate, part of the Pilkington bequest to Altham Church, which also included the chancel stalls and altar rails. The lintel beam on the outside of the gate records that it is in memory of Alice Ann Pilkington, and on the inside is the comforting inscription

“The Lord preserve thy going out and thy coming in”.

Visitations of workmen to modern buildings are usually just necessary inconveniences to be survived as painlessly as possible, but in and around an edifice as ancient as St James’ they are fraught with the possibility of bringing something interesting to light. About 1930, an interesting discovery was made beneath the chancel. This revealed the memorials of several local influential families, the Grimshaws, Shuttleworths and Lomaxes of Clayton Hall and the vault of the Whitaker family owners of Simonstone Hall from 1311 until the 1850’s. The memorials gave historical data, and details of the association which the deceased had had with the Church, but they were not in good condition.

One of particular interest is that of Ralph Shuttleworth, a Jacobite who took part in the 1715 rebellion and died in 1733. Their resting place was left undisturbed and the entrance sealed up.

In 1934 the Baptistry was restored by the Church Women’s Guild to mark the completion of twenty-five years of faithful service by the Revd. H H Whittaker, and in 1937 a chime of bells was installed to replace the single one. For safety reasons the bells are now played by a carillon in the west porch, the clappers being moved by steel wires attached to wooden handles, and many are the hymn tunes which greet today’s worshippers as they walk down the long path to the Church. England is so much the country of change-ringing that it needs only closed eyes for one to believe oneself across the Channel in Belgium.

**A New Lease of Life**

Unfortunately over the years the number of worshippers declined, so that, in 1950, when the Revd. B H Williams left the parish, it was decided that St James’ could no longer afford a vicar’s stipend nor the upkeep of the vicarage, and it became part of a joint benefice with All Saints, Clayton-le-Moors and St James’ Mission there. This arrangement worked well, with a small but solid core of faithful parishioners until 1973 by which time the church required much in the way of repairs and decorations and a proposal was made that it should be closed. However, at a public meeting, such support and encouragement was received, not
only from the villagers but from outside the boundaries of Altham, that those in favour of keeping the church open won the day.

Since then repairs, including the re-roofing of the north and south aisles and the underpinning of the tower, have been undertaken: the organ has been rebuilt and the church decorated; the hatchments have been cleaned and re-hung; new carpets have been laid, and over a hundred kneelers have been made by church members. In addition generous benefactors have donated new brass altar vases and furnishings and in 1984 the Britcliffe family gave a new brass cross and a pair of candlesticks in memory of members of the Britcliffe and Daniell families. In 2011 major re-ordering was undertaken when the pews below the gallery were removed and a toilet and kitchen were constructed. In addition the vestry was extended into the north west corner of the nave to provide a community meeting room and Sunday School. The cost of this re-ordering was provided by the generous gift of Mr Jack Broderick, a local historian and former church warden of the parish of St James, Altham.

The most encouraging happening, however, was the increase in the number of worshippers, amongst whom are several children who will, we pray, continue the tradition of Christian worship in this ancient shrine.

**Lovely and Beloved**

Despite now being face-to-face with an industrial estate, St James’ is still in essence a village church. The great length of the graveyard and the intervening trees mute the noise of the busy road outside. The large area where railings and side stones make regular mowing of the grass impossible is a riot of grass and wild flowers - one of those refuges for wildlife which make untamed churchyards so valuable these days. The ancient flag path, unvandalised by tarmac, approaches the porch across a lawn like green plush where the wind enlivens daffodils in the spring.

The shrine, which was so forlorn and dismal a hundred and sixty three years ago, is now cherished like the treasure it is. Everything polishable gleams with love and elbow grease: brightly painted heraldic devices keep the past alive in the present; the beautifully-worked hassocks in blue and gold complement the simple richness of the plain blue carpet; the geometric designs in azure and ruby glass stride clean and sparkling across the clear lattices of the north aisle, and are echoed amid the misty grey foliage of the chancel windows, above which, freshly gilded stars shine down from the ends of the roof beams upon the four kneeling angels.

All the carved faces at Altham Church look as if they were copied from life - from the motherly-looking lady in a
befolded head-rail to the find bearded gentleman with every hair of his well-curled moustache in place, on the north wall outside the chancel ..........

and it is easy to imagine that the model for the angels in the chancel was one or more of the sculptor’s children. The white paint assists in such a flight of the imagination (Surely they are saying bedtime prayers in their nightgowns? One would hardly be surprised if he had sneaked in a teddy bear ...).

If Hugh the Saxon still looks down sometimes from the flowery slopes of paradise it must please him to see that men and women yet remain who are determined to ensure that a living church continues to look forward into the future’ from beside the Calder ford. There are now so many bridges that the question of a shallow place along the river is no longer of any interest, but St James’, like all churches, watches over a more important ford - the fearsome Jordan crossing which loses its terrors only for those who approach it with God as their friend.

Names prominent in the history of Altham Church, but not elaborated in the text:-

Ellis Cunliffe  baptised at Altham, later to become chaplain to Charles II

John Cunliffe  one of the Cunliffes of Woodhead (Hollins) and one of the first feoffes, who purchased the college buildings and helped to found the Chetham Hospital or Blue Coat School for Boys.

Robert Cunliffe  one of the ruling elders of Altham Church in 1651. The first member of parliament for the district.

Major-General Worsley  member of the first parliament of Cromwell when Lord Protector of the Commonwealth and trusted friend and confidant of Cromwell, interred in Henry VII Chapel, Westminster Abbey. His son was baptised at Altham in 1653.

The Walmesleys  a numerous family in the district, from the branch at Dunkenhallgh to that at Rough Hey, Oswaldtwistle. Altham registers record baptisms and burials of 55 members of the family. The Walmesleys of Rough Hey were descended from a brother of Judge Walmesley of Dunkenhallgh and James of Rough Hey and his wife Ann and son George are all buried at Altham.

The Lonsdales & Aspinalls  John Lonsdale of High Riley, Accrington was the father of James who married Elizabeth Walton. His son Richard married Elizabeth Rishton of Lower Antley Hall, Accrington and his daughter Elizabeth (memorial board in Baptistry) married D. William Cowper of Hough Green near Chester, to whom various hymns are attributed including “God moves in a mysterious way”, “Jesus where’re Thyb
people meet”, “O for a closer walk with God”, and “Hark my soul it is the Lord”. Their great grandson, born in 1767 became the first Lord Delawarr. John Lonsdale’s nephew Henry, who inherited High Riley, married Ann Nutter of Burnley and their five children were all baptised at Altham. When Henry died his widow married James Aspinall of Standen Hall, Clitheroe, the brother of her daughter Mary’s husband. Memorials in Altham Church give two generations of the Aspinall family.

The Haworths this family’s old home was Laneside farm and Mr Thomas Haworth was overseer for Altham Church for many years. He married Mary Jackson of Hard farm and they had fourteen children. The Haworth family memorials are at the south east end of the church.

Miss Lydia Becker a pioneer of the Women’s Suffrage Movement lived with her family for a time in Altham when her father was a churchwarden.

The Metcalfs Mr John Metcalf founded the distillery known as the Moorfield Chemical Works in 1886. He built Martholme manor and he and his family were devoted worshippers at Altham church. His daughter, Annie Cecilia, a memorable figure, always dressed in Edwardian style, donated the chime of bells in memory of her parents and sister. She died on 16 November 1972, six days after her 100th birthday, and is buried in the imposing family vault outside the west door of the church.

The Laws T C Law, LRCS and LM Edin. A doctor in Padiham for 50 years from 1855 to 1905 was the father of Alice law who, after a distinguished scholastic career at Girton and London, lived in The Old Parsonage, an old Georgian house between Moorside and Sykeside, originally the home of the village clergyman (until the erection of a new vicarage nearer the church) from which issued her works known as “The Old Parsonage Press”. Miss Law is buried at Altham, alongside other members of her family.

The Forts Richard Fort went into partnership with the firm of Taylor and Bury at Oakenshaw Printworks. In 1782 they founded the Broad Oak Printworks, which had a far reaching effect on the industrial development of Accrington. His son, also Richard Fort (born 1770) encouraged by the work of the brilliant chemist, John Mercer, who invented mercerised cotton. Richard purchased the old Read hall in 1801 and had it rebuilt and, by accident or design, from the Fort family vault it is possible to see Read Hall.
CLERGY

Thomas de Altham, son if Hugh, founder of the church, grandson of Leofwine the Saxon.

1189 – 1199
Henry de Altham, brother of Thomas.

1199 – 1213
Robert, brother of Geoffrey, Dean of Whalley

1213 – 1295
Henry de Altham, son of Henry and nephew of Robert

1295
Richard de Ridyard and Henry de Bolton (presented to the living by the abbot of Whalley when Altham was designated a Chapelry of Whalley

No record of succeeding priests presented by Whalley until......

1526
John Radcliffe, last priest prior to the Dissolution of the monasteries.

1540 – 1544
Lawrence Haye

1608 – 1610
William Westbye

1610
Thomas Hamilton

1622
Postlethwaite

1634 – 1636
William Kippax

1636
Giles Clayton

1649 – 1662
Thomas Jollie

1662 – 1671
John Ormrod

1671
Elisha Clarkson

1705
John Taylor

1718
Nicholas Houghton

1730
John Anderton

1742
Ashton Worden

1760
Charles Pinder

1761
Richard Longford

1804 – 1823
John Adamson (also William Wood, appointed Curate of Altham 1819)

1848 – 1891
William Sharp
1891 – 1896  Henry Haworth MA
1896 – 1904  W H Green BA LLb
1904 – 1909  James Robinson MA
1909 – 1938  H H Whittaker MA
1938 - 1950  B H Williams
1952 – 1967  Kenneth Hoghton MA
1976 - 1990  Edward Angus
1991 - 1997  Philip Dearden
1998 - 2003  Christopher Cousins
2004 -2014  John Tranter
2014 – 2015  Interregnum

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