

The Church of St Mary-le-Ghyll: A Short History



Early History

In 1066, Norman armies under William the Conqueror crossed the Channel and conquered Anglo-Saxon England. At that time, Barnoldswick was a tiny village known as Bernulfeswic [Bernulf's town]. Its episcopal see was founded and administered by Benedictine monks, like most of the North of England at that time, and it had only an ancient wooden church.

In the long aftermath of the Norman Conquest, Benedictine influence in France and England was frequently challenged by a new, stricter order, the Cistercians. In 1147, twelve Cistercian monks and ten lay brothers from Fountains Abbey in Ripon travelled to Barnoldswick on the orders of the Norman baron of Clitheroe. They attempted to found a monastery called St. Mary's Mount, where Monks Road in Barnoldswick is today. The Anglo-Saxon villagers were not happy that these Cistercians were using their old church; they were even less happy when the Pope gave permission for the monks to tear the church down; they were probably furious when the monks, who had discovered that Lancashire is 'full of rains and vapours', changed their mind and decided to move thirty miles east and found Kirkstall Abbey instead. In 1152, Barnoldswick was left without any public church, since St. Michael's Church in Bracewell, built around 1100, was originally a private chapel of the Tempest family.

It was only eight years later, in 1160, that the Cistercian monks returned to build St. Mary-le-Ghyll church. The name 'Ghyll' comes from the Old English for 'valley', referring to its isolated location. For the next seven hundred years, St Mary's served as the only public church in Barnoldswick.



Not much remains of the original structure: the few Norman elements still visible include the old font, the stone coffin by the porch, and possibly one of the windows on the North side.

There is a faint etching of three daggers on an inside wall, representing the heraldic arms of Kirkstall, where the Cistercians who abandoned Barnoldswick founded their abbey.



The early 14th century (from around 1290 until the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348) saw significant expansion and embellishment on many churches across England. At this time, the south aisle was added to Ghyll Church, as was the lancet window, and the church's original thatched roof was replaced with slates.

Religious Change

At the beginning of the 16th century, Christianity in Europe was undergoing a series of enormous shifts. The beginning of these changes is usually attributed to a German Augustinian friar named Martin Luther, whose 1517 public condemnation of many Catholic practices and beliefs inspired the movement known as the 'Reformation', the beginning of Protestantism. Reforms within this movement include the

preaching of the Bible in languages other than Latin, more of a focus on the text of the Gospel, a reduction in the authority of priests, and generally a more austere, plain church aesthetic, as imagery and ornamentation in church were considered idolatrous.

Although similar movements had existed in Britain for a long time, the Reformation really came to England when, in 1527, King Henry VIII decided he needed an annulment of his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. This started a series of events that led to the establishment of the Anglican Church. Henry suppressed and destroyed traditionally Catholic institutions, including in 1535 accusing monks and nuns of 'unthrifty, carnal, and abominable living', and ordering them to disband. These divisions and changes continued throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, eventually forming the Anglican church we know today.

This was a very important era in the history of St. Mary-le-Ghyll. The church's tower was built during the reign of Henry VIII and is dated 1524 in Roman numerals, although the M for thousand has been omitted, probably intentionally.



During the Reformation the church's interior walls were plastered and painted white to cover any traces of decoration.

The 17th-century oak box pews in the centre of the church face the tall, three-storey pulpit, rather than the altar table (which dates from the same era), so that congregants focused more on the Bible being preached than on what was perceived as the more 'Catholic' (and therefore dubious) rituals performed at the altar.

At this time, services were held only every other Sunday, and Holy Communion only four times a year.



The Bells

Three of the church's six bells date from 1723, when the pulpit was also redecorated. These original bells were cast and hung by Abraham Rudhall II. of Gloucester. In 1880, T. Mallaby and Sons, bellhangers of Masham, removed the bells for refurbishment. They were reinstalled in a new wooden frame and fittings in May, 1881. The original bells now form the 2nd, 3rd and 4th of the ring.

A further three bells were added, after a significant fundraising effort, in the early 2000s. In November 2009 the ring of six bells was installed in a cast iron frame. On 30 January 2010, the bells were dedicated by the Rt. Revd. David James, Bishop of Bradford, in the presence of the Mayor and Mayoress of Pendle.



- The 1st bell, the treble, originally cast by John Taylor of Loughborough, was acquired from among the redundant bells from St. George's Church, Kendal in Cumbria.
- The 2nd bell is inscribed, "A.R. 1723. Peace and Good Neighbourhood".
- The 3rd is inscribed, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's. A.R. 1723"
- The 4th is inscribed, "Wm. Drake Esq. Church Warden. A.R. 1723".
- The 5th bell, known as the Ringers' Bell, was cast on 3rd May 2007 to celebrate the church's 850th anniversary, by Taylor, Eayre and Smith of Loughborough.
- The 6th bell, the tenor, was cast in 2009 by Taylor, Eayre and Smith and is dedicated to each of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Associations of Change Ringers.



The Nineteenth Century



Many of the church's interior decorations now date from the 19th century, when the industrial revolution and the building of the Leeds-Liverpool canal expanded Barnoldswick significantly. These include painted boards with the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments (shown left).

Some of the pews, including the churchwardens' pew, were installed in 1836.



There is a plaque to Enos Nuttall, the first Archbishop of the West Indies (1842-1916), who grew up in Barnoldswick, at the east end of the church.

The building in the churchyard, probably originally a bier house, but now known as the Coach House, was built in 1824.

The Churchyard

The churchyard's oldest tomb dates from 1609, although burials have taken place here since the 12th century and still continue today. Eleven graves are dedicated WWI or WWII servicemen.

Today

The church of St Mary-le-Ghyll continues to have services on most Sundays (except the first Sunday of the month) at 11.30 am. It is a popular venue for weddings and Christenings. The Coach House is open, serving hot drinks and cakes at weekends from Easter to September.

For more information, or to book a wedding or Christening, contact the vicar, the Rev'd Sheena McMain on sheena.mcmain@leeds.anglican.org or see our website (www.barlickbracewellparishes.org.uk) or Facebook page (@BarlickBracewellParishes).