

Exploring St. Peter's Church, Upper Gornal



The church sign and front doors; and the front elevation of St. Peter's, Upper Gornal

Several years ago I attended Wednesday Morning Communion at St. Peter's, Upper Gornal, touring the church afterwards. My guide was David Moss, one of St. Peter's churchwardens, whose family has long been associated with the Parish.

On that morning, the beautiful Lady Chapel was used for Communion and it was there that I began my tour of this early Victorian church, that celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1994. On entering the chapel, the eye is drawn to a colourful frieze behind the altar which was donated to the church in memory of Barbara Armstrong, a young woman who died in a tragic accident in her early 20s.



A view of the Lady Chapel; the frieze in memory of Barbara Armstrong lies behind the Lady Chapel altar.

The aumbry door bears a striking, brightly coloured relief depicting the Lamb of God and the Seven Seals, as described in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 5.



The aumbry door in the Lady Chapel bearing the 'Lamb and Seven Seals'.



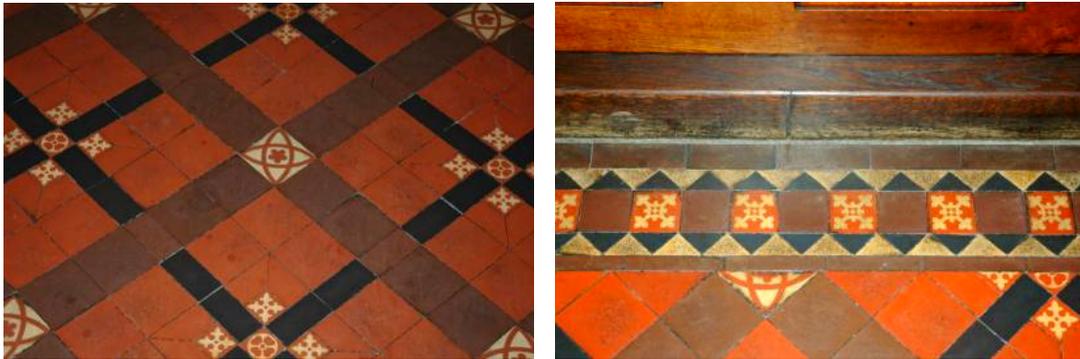
Presidential Chair and First World War memorial in the Lady Chapel.

In a corner of the chapel there is a very imposing Presidential Chair, no longer in use, bearing the inscription 'Praise Ye The Lord' and on the chapel wall a memorial carries the names those from the parish who fell in the First World War.



A Presidential Chair in the chancel in memory of George Yates, a pre-WWII churchwarden

Moving to the chancel I found two more presidential chairs on each side of the choir stalls, one of which is dedicated to George Yates, a churchwarden in the 1930s and 40s.



Minton floor tiling in the chancel

The chancel floor is especially richly patterned and solidly built using red, brown, blue and white coloured made by Stoke-on-Trent ceramics manufacturers **Thomas Minton and Sons**.

Standing proud, attached to a choir stall, is a ceremonial processional cross of unusually ornate design, depicting Christ on the cross, which is used every week for services.



A processional cross, kept by the choir stalls and used every week



Reredos and plaque in memory of Revd W.A.H. Lewis, B.A.

Behind the altar is a fine oakwood reredos: the panelling to the side bears a plaque indicating that it was erected in memory of a long-serving vicar whose tenure spanned the Victorian and Edwardian eras, Revd W.A.H. Lewis, B.A.



Sections of the three stained glass windows behind the altar

The central stained glass window bears both the emblem of St. Peter and his image carrying the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven; in the left window there is an image of a winged man, traditionally associated with St. Matthew; and in the right window a winged bull, denoting St. Luke.



From the lectern looking westwards; wooden roof vaulting.

Looking down from the lectern across the rows of wooden pews the scale of the building becomes apparent: it was originally built to seat 900 persons - scarcely imaginable today even with the balconies that were removed in 1876, reducing the capacity to 390. In more recent times the removal of pews to accommodate the font further reduced capacity to 260.

Looking upwards to the roof, you begin to realise why the church was described in early documents (somewhat snobbishly) as having 'the aspect of the most barn-like structure which perhaps ever passed for a parochial Church'. The wooden vaulting does in some respects resemble that of a giant barn - but is no less elegant for it.

The large windows around the side walls of the church each have decorative wooden friezes beneath them, all bearing different patterning. They were donated by the families in the 1950s (in fact David Moss's family bought one of them). The last window on

the left looking towards the rear of the church is another fine example of stained glass work, depicting St. Peter receiving the Keys of Heaven.



Stained glass depicting St. Peter receiving the Keys of Heaven from Jesus; decorative wooden carved friezes lie beneath each large window around the church.



Sunday School and Mothers' Union banners hang from the side walls.

Among the many items adorning the walls are two colourful embroidered processional banners, one made in 1946 for St. Peter's Sunday School, and a Mothers' Union banner of unknown date.



Sculpture of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus.

Looking towards the altar, set into a wood-panelled niche on the wall near the Lady Chapel, is an imposing alabaster sculpture of the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus.



The west end: the church organ in the gallery space; and the War Memorial screen commemorating the fallen of World War II.

At the back of the church, in the rear gallery space is the church organ which was introduced in 1976, replacing the original organ brought to the church in 1891. Beneath the organ is a War Memorial screen that commemorates those of the parish who lost their lives in the Second World War.



The stone pulpit and Lady Chapel oak screen behind, part of the 1920s renovations.

In the early 1920s the church interior underwent considerable renovations including the erection of the reredos, the stone pulpit, the chancel screen and the oak screen forming the Lady Chapel.



The font.

The ornate marble and stone baptismal font at the rear of the church bears various Christian symbols including fish and IHS, which looks rather like a dollar sign but is in fact the first three letters of the word 'Jesus' in the Greek alphabet. The font was donated by the Gibbons family. This may be the 'James Lloyd Gibbons' who bought Ellowes Hall in Lower Gornal in 1891/92. He was County Councillor for North Bilston in the same year as he took up residence at Ellowes. He was well-respected in his capacity as County Magistrate in the Sedgley Petty Sessions Division, and was described as being a kind, generous and most charitable man. He died on 25th April, 1919 and was buried at All Saints Church, Sedgley.

I concluded my tour of the church, aware that I had only scratched the surface of all the symbolism and family history contained within its walls. I merely glanced at the churchyard to the rear which undoubtedly contains further rich resources for researchers of local history.



The Parish Hall, exterior and interior views

However I had not quite finished my visit because I was invited by David and Andy to join the congregation for tea and biscuits in the Parish Hall. The hall site itself has a rich history, having been the location of the Upper Gornal National School. These schools were founded by the Anglican Church in the 1830s to provide education to the poor and performed this duty until the Forster Education Act of 1870 ushered in universal state elementary education and a spate of municipal school building.



These tablets mark the site of the Upper Gornal National School and the building of the hall: its foundation stone was laid by William E. Gibbons in 1935.

I checked the time, glancing up at the imposing church clock, installed in 1982 by public subscription in memory of Mary and Richard Ball: my visit was an intriguing glimpse into the history of the church and village.



The church clock.

Martin Jones

Original article February 2011; updated December 2015.