

THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, DALE ABBEY.
A Study in post-Reformation Furnishing.

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THE present church of All Saints at Dale Abbey has a history as varied as that of any ecclesiastical building in this county. It is probable that it stands on the site of an oratory attached to the pre-Norman hermitage founded in Depedale.¹ Between 1149 and 1157 the site was granted to the Augustinian canons of Calke, who founded there the Priory of Depedale, with a small body of Augustinian canons regular, consisting of a prior and five canons. They built or rebuilt a church on this site; the lower parts of the walls of the present nave and chancel, and possibly also the north door, are remnants of their work. With interruptions, they tenanted it till 1197, when William fitz Ralph of Stanley Park gave the estate of Stanley to the Praemonstratensian order, and by arrangement with his nephew and tenant at Ockbrook, William de Grendon, founded an abbey in Depedale, on condition that a chantry was established there to provide a daily mass for the soul of William de Grendon. There were nine canons, with William de Senteny as first abbot, and they came from the oldest Praemonstratensian house in England, Newhouse Abbey in Lincolnshire. They settled here probably about 1198, and the title of the church, as we see from its ancient seal, was "Ecclesia Sanctæ Mariæ de Parco Stanlei". On the respond-like projection on the south-west corner of the chancel is the fragment, much worn, of a Norman string-course, probably an impost formerly sustaining an arch. This, and the south wall of the chancel of which it is part, were originally members of the 1150 fabric. At the end of the same century, probably just after 1197,

¹ Rev. C. Kerry, *The Hermitage of Depedale*, in *The Reliquary*, Vol. XXI.

when the church became Praemonstratensian, the south aisle was added, bringing the ground plan of the church to its present form.

This fabric stood more or less unchanged for two centuries, but the 15th century saw a great transformation. The walls were lowered, the windows being in some cases decapitated (as can be seen clearly in the windows of the south aisle) and the second storey was superimposed. The windows on the south side of the nave aisle, and that on the south of the chancel, were not reshaped, but a low arch was introduced over the east window, to fit under the new lowered gable, which process can be clearly seen by following the lines of the engaged shaft on each of its jambs, now without capital, and carried part way through the arch above. Mr. Kerry dates all this work about 1480. The purpose seems to have been to turn the old hermitage into an infirmary and infirmary chapel for the abbey, which had now been built to the north of the ancient site. There was a door at the end of the south aisle, now blocked up, opening into the ground floor of the infirmary building; the new gallery, set on a north-south axis, transverse to the existing chapel, likewise communicated with the upper floor of the infirmary, giving the patients opportunity to hear mass said in the chapel below, and possibly also to watch the Elevation. On the walls there remain traces of painting, also of this period: the best preserved example is the Visitation on the north wall, restored by Professor E. W. Tristram in 1931.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, the abbey itself fell into dilapidation, and many of its stones and fittings were taken away, and used in other churches and for other purposes.² The infirmary chapel was retained for use as a parochial church, and has so continued down to the present day, so that its history from pre-Norman days is continuous. It has not changed in form architecturally since the work of 1480; but in 1634, the date of the pulpit, or at some time very near that, the church was re-furnished in something like its present form. The arrangements are of very great interest, as they are

² See H. M. Colvin, *The Dissolution of Dale Abbey*, in *D.A.J.*, 1943.

unique, even among 17th and 18th-century churches planned in a similar way, as for instance, Foremark. Dale is the only church in England where the reading pew and pulpit and clerk's pew are all behind the altar, and still in regular use.

The ordinary modern arrangement of a chancel, with the altar at the east end, the quire-stalls along each side, and the clergy stalls at the west end of the quire, though now almost universal, is quite modern, being only about a hundred years old, and results from parish churches imitating cathedral music and cathedral quires. Dale represents an arrangement which was very common two hundred years ago, and the arrangement of the services corresponds with that of the furniture. There is no quire, but the singing is done by the congregation.

Dale is one of the best surviving examples of an auditory church, which is designed to bring the officiant as close to the congregation as possible, so that the worship is the corporate act of the whole body, as the Prayer Book intends it to be, and not something performed by the clergy or quire, or by a monastic body, which has no congregation to cater for.³ By placing the reading-pew behind the altar, and facing the congregation, it is ensured that every word of the service shall be audible to everybody in the church. In many churches of this period, the altar was left in the chancel at the east end; the nave was used for Morning and Evening Prayer, and the chancel separately for the Communion. Dale Abbey is too small for this scheme to be adopted: indeed the church is only about 25 feet long, so that placing the reading pew under the east window, and behind the altar, did not remove it far from the people, especially as the pews flank the altar itself, and one of them adjoins the reading-pew and pulpit.

But the Dale arrangement gave its designers the opportunity of putting the altar still nearer to the people. The altar is a 17th-century table, which in the 18th century was boxed in on the top, and on all sides, thus

³ See G. W. O. Addleshaw and F. Etchells, *The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship*. I am greatly indebted to this work and to personal conversation on the site with Canon Addleshaw for much information on the subject.



Dale Abbey Church—interior.

Photo by C. E. Brown.

making a cupboard. On the west side, that is the front, a door was inserted, and inside shelves were fitted for the storage of altar plate and linen, bread and wine, and other requirements. This, or some other arrangement, was a necessity in the days before vestries, and there is still no vestry at Dale, but the officiant robes in the Clerk's house next door. In earlier centuries he would have robed at the altar itself. But the cupboard-altar is not a 17th or 18th century innovation: it is a survival of mediæval practice. The doors were often at the short end of the altar, not on the long side, as at Dale. In the cathedral church of Saragossa are altars with painted fronts, opening like cupboard doors, and these were used for similar purposes of storage. In 1435 a merchant of York left to Saint Mary's Hungate (now destroyed) money to found a chantry there, and the cloths and missals were to be kept in an *armariolum* under the altar itself. These cupboards were forbidden in the Roman Church by various provincial synods after the Council of Trent, but a good number has survived in Germany, and they evidently continued to be used in the Church of England. Some altars had drawers instead of cupboards. The altar at Dale has no communion rails, and the modern use of administering the communion to communicants kneeling right up against the altar, the celebrant standing at the side, is very inconvenient. Presumably, however, in the 17th century the communicants received the sacrament in their pews, which was the custom at Christ Church, Oxford, right down to the end of last century, and is still the custom at the Latin Communion each term in the University of Oxford.

The pews in the nave are very good examples of the two types of pew in common use in our churches before the Victorian age. Those in the nave are what are called open seats, and possibly date from the 17th century. Archbishop Laud was very anxious that all pews should face the altar, and be low enough for people to see it; the pews in the nave of Dale west of the screen are of this type. The straight backs and narrow seats make them very uncomfortable, and they must have been worse in the days when sermons were much longer than is now

usual. In the south aisle and by the altar are square pews, with seats on all four sides, so that some worshippers have their backs to the officiant. These pews have high sides: they would have ample cushions and hassocks to satisfy the sybaritic tastes of the 18th century, and doors to keep off the draughts in an unheated church. For this reason also they are much higher than modern pews.

The font, which is the ancient font of the abbey, recovered from Stanton Hall, whither it had been taken for use as a flower-vase on the lawn, was restored to the church in 1884, and placed in the position doubtless occupied by its predecessor, at the east end of the south aisle. This is a typical position of the 17th century, designed so that the congregation could see the font, and take part in the baptism service without turning round. This was part of the same policy which inspired all the other arrangements in this church, the policy of an auditory church, here so perfectly exemplified. It was a policy of edification, bringing the liturgy to the people, so that they could hear with ease, and see every action of the service. But on the other hand anyone who has officiated frequently at Dale Abbey can see that it effectively destroys all sense of mystery in worship, which is encouraged by a large church of many parts, not visible all at once, and that it produces an atmosphere more congenial to family prayers than to public worship.