

Talke's Churches- St. Martins

Until we have an archaeological dig at Talke Church, we can never be sure when the first church was built, particularly as early churches were made of wood that would have rotted away. Although St. Martins was a popular name in the 5th Century, it is unlikely to be this old as Mercia, the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of the Midlands, was fiercely pagan under ferocious kings like Penda, who slaughtered the Northumbrian Christians. If Talke Church had been built at the very end of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th century, it probably would not have survived long.

It wasn't until Penda's son Peada was converted to Christianity in 657 AD by four Roman missionary priests and through his marriage into the Christian Northumbrian royal family that Mercia became Christian. In this time the outward form of religion was more a matter of a public procedure than private conviction, and the populations of whole kingdoms changed religion with their rulers. It wasn't until 669 that Lichfield Cathedral was built as the focus of Mercian Christianity, shortly followed by some monasteries.



*Stained glass showing St.
Martin of Tours*

The only church found in Staffordshire that predates Lichfield is at Eccelshaw. This was established by the Celtic or Irish rather than the Roman church and may even have a tradition stretching back to a Christian group left over from the Romans. In fact, one of the reasons that St. Augustine and his missionaries came to Britain was to stop it being Christianised by the Irish. This was a second Roman conquest but this time of the soul.

Therefore, St. Martins was very unlikely to have been built before the 7th Century. A Christian community could have existed here before this but a building was unlikely to withstand the wrath of pagan kings. Evidence for churches built in the 7th century is 'scant,' so we should probably look for St. Martins' origins much later.

Even if the church had been built in the 7th Century it would probably have had a short life, as the Danes invaded Mercia (one of England's seven kingdoms) in 874, destroying the abbey at Repton and later the abbey at Burton. The Danes are different from the Vikings. They came from Denmark, not Norway, arrived much later and came to conquer land rather than steal booty.



However, after many battles, Alfred the Great, the king of the southernmost kingdom Wessex, triumphed and forced the Danish Kings to split England in two along Watling-Street, which roughly follows the modern A5 and dissects Staffordshire. The south-west side belonging to Alfred and his Wessex kings while the other north-east side and most of Staffordshire being under Danish control in the Danelaw. Talke was just on Alfred's side of the line, and Alfred probably didn't need to drive the Danes out as they had little control over Staffordshire, unlike areas in Derbyshire. Most of

Staffordshire's settlements remained Anglo-Saxon, so perhaps an early church could have survived and been controlled by kings based in Devon and Cornwall.

Alfred and his children then split England into new administrative units called Shire's. Our shire was given a new capital, Stafford, and Tamworth, the old Mercian capital, was cut in two by a county boundary to ensure it could no longer challenge the power of the Wessex king's.

Danish rule did not last long. The Warrior-princess Aethelflead, the lady of the Mercians and daughter of Alfred the Great (who I am convinced had at least some part in inspiring the Lord of the Ring's Eowyn), re-conquered the Staffordshire area for Wessex and made it again a safe place for Christians to worship. Later Danish invasions under the famous king Cnut were not a threat to churches as Cnut let the English people keep their traditional religion and customs.

A 9th Century preaching cross has been found in Red Street. This may have been consecrated so that a travelling priest could say mass at important festivals- perhaps early Christians in Talke travelled here. One theory even suggests that there was once a church in Red Street and when it was moved this sacred cross marked the alter spot.

This era of calm continued under Edward the Confessor, but few Anglo-Saxon churches built during this period of relative calm survive, particularly as many were re-built in the grander Norman style to symbolise William the Conqueror's control.

Our first mention of Talke is in the 11th century in the Domesday Book, but this listed only land and property, and does not mention any churches. Talke had only four villeins or families at this time and the land-owner, Lord Gamel, owned many small villages including Audley, so there may not have been much demand for an Anglo-Saxon or a later Norman church here. Furthermore, parishes were not common before the year 1000. People's religious needs were met by large Minsters, usually attached to an abbey or monastery, and looking after huge areas independently of the local Cathedral and diocese. Although the parish system seems normal now, it has only been so for the last 1000 years.

By the 1200s Talke must have grown immensely from its four families, as records show that it now not only has its own church and was even on its way to

winning a market charter in 1253. The earliest records of St. Martin's church date from the 12th century or 1100s. This makes sense as this century saw a 'comprehensive programme of church building' with 108 new churches being built in Staffordshire alone, and with one chronicler, Rudolphus Glaber, seeing the whole world being re-covered with the white mantle of newly-constructed churches.

Any pre-existing Anglo-Saxon church would probably have been built in wattle and daub, whereas the Normans liked to build their churches in stone (although some churches had begun to be built of stone after 950.) This Norman-style church would probably have had semi-circular arches and geometric designs like St. Chad's in Stafford or St. Mary's at Tutbury.

Churches were often built by local lords and considered their property, for example it was they and not the church that collected the tithe. Talke Church could have been built by the successors of the Saxon Thegn Gamel, but his heirs would have controlled it even had it been built and paid for by the villagers.



This is a tapestry of Henry VIII in the care of Newcastle Borough Museum and Art Gallery

The current building was built in 1552 as 'a chapel of ease,' a small church built for a local community if the central parish church was too small or too far away. The main parish church was Audley. These were years of conflict between Henry VIII's Tudor England and the Catholic Church supported by his daughter, Queen Mary. St. Martin's church was only rebuilt in the last year of the protestant Edward VI's reign, a year before the Catholic Mary came to the throne, and it would be interesting to wonder if this structure, had to be altered in some way to please the Catholics that were swept back into power.

The church was 'attacked' by Cromwell's commissioners in the 1650s in their attempt to remove crypto-Catholicism or Arminianism from the Church of England- a traditional Catholic-style of worship brought in by Charles I and his Archbishop Laud. This could have involved vestments and altar rails, the symbols of this new formal and elaborate Christianity, being removed quietly during the night or being smashed up by Cromwell's men or a public riot. The only information we have is that the vestments from St Martins church were in fact burned.



Oliver Cromwell

During the 'interregnum,' the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell, Talke's minister was Thomas Poole.

He was removed when Charles II returned in the restoration in 1660. He was one of many clergy who were 'ejected' as he refused to renounce his oath made to Cromwell's Godly Commonwealth, as regardless of their views on Cromwell, any oath made before God was binding. Further acts of Charles II punished these men, they were ejected the day before the tithes were due and were banned from teaching to try to deprive them of income and make them recant their oaths. However Thomas Poole did rather well, he found coal on his land and became a wealthy coal-master.

St. Martins was re-built in 1749 on land bought with £200 of Queen Anne's bounty, a fund set up for the 'maintenance of poor clergy,' many of whom earned less than bricklayers and had to take other jobs to buy their food, and also by a 1741 article of agreement in which £7 per annum was to be paid to the 'curate of the chapelry of Talke on Hill' by the vicar of Audley and his successors, who were still responsible for the church. However, this was not enough and £90 was taken from the poor fund, to be paid back in a rent charge of £3.18sh. Perhaps one reason for the repairs was a story of lightning striking the church tower in 1652, killing 11 men and boys and one dog. However, some books say that this is St. Martins Church, others that this is Audley. Perhaps you know?

It was then further enlarged in 1794 and 1832, adding a gallery and a new vestry (plans and pictures are available at Staffs record office), but this mostly because extensive repairs needed to be carried out, and the clock tower had to be rebuilt.

The Communion cup was donated by John Bourne in 1728 of Harecastle farm, and a plate was later donated by the family of Linley Wood, the local manor. It got its first organ in 1851 from Mr. G A Moore who also built the parsonage. The seven windows represent Talke's mining tradition and pit disasters in addition to traditional religious images.

St. Martins became its own parish in 1852, caring for Talke and Butt Lane, but it had begun to take its own records of baptisms in 1830. These records were previously held at Audley. 1830 was also the year that it had its own graveyard consecrated- it is strange to think that once villagers could not be buried at Talke. A record of all the

graveyard inscriptions is held at Talke Library and is great for tracing family history. In 1884 a letter was sent to Talke concerning the burial of Roman Catholics in the churchyard, showing that the shadows of the civil war lingered longer in religion than anywhere else.

The vicar of this time was a reverend McHutchin, who has left many letters to the Staffordshire record office, with two referring to the difficulties of building a church. Perhaps he was sharing the wisdom gained in rebuilding St. Martins, or perhaps St. Martins itself was undergoing some further renovation. However, life was not all plain sailing. In 1875, along with the Rev Paul, he took 'Bidder and Elliot,' perhaps a mining company or an individual, to court, accusing them of mining coal on church lands, coal which belonged to the vicar. However the coal did not stay there for long, as in 1890 the church reached an agreement with Talk o'th'hill' colliery for 'Bulhurst coal workings' under the parsonage.

Many of the items in St. Martins church exist as a memorial to someone who loved the church. In 1906 a peal of 5 tubular bells was added as a memorial to the Rev Wilks, an oak panel was added as a memorial to the war dead in 1921, and in 1949 a new white baptismal font and stained glass window was put in memory of Rev John Henry Wilwall Edwards, who had been rector for 30 years. However, the most substantial change was when a new oak altar, rails, choir stalls and reading desk were added in memory of JP Albert Mayor Henshow.

An unsafe cottage in St. Martins' grounds was demolished in 1967, which made room for a church hall, built in 1971. At one point it also had its own school, called the National School, which has now become a private nursery.





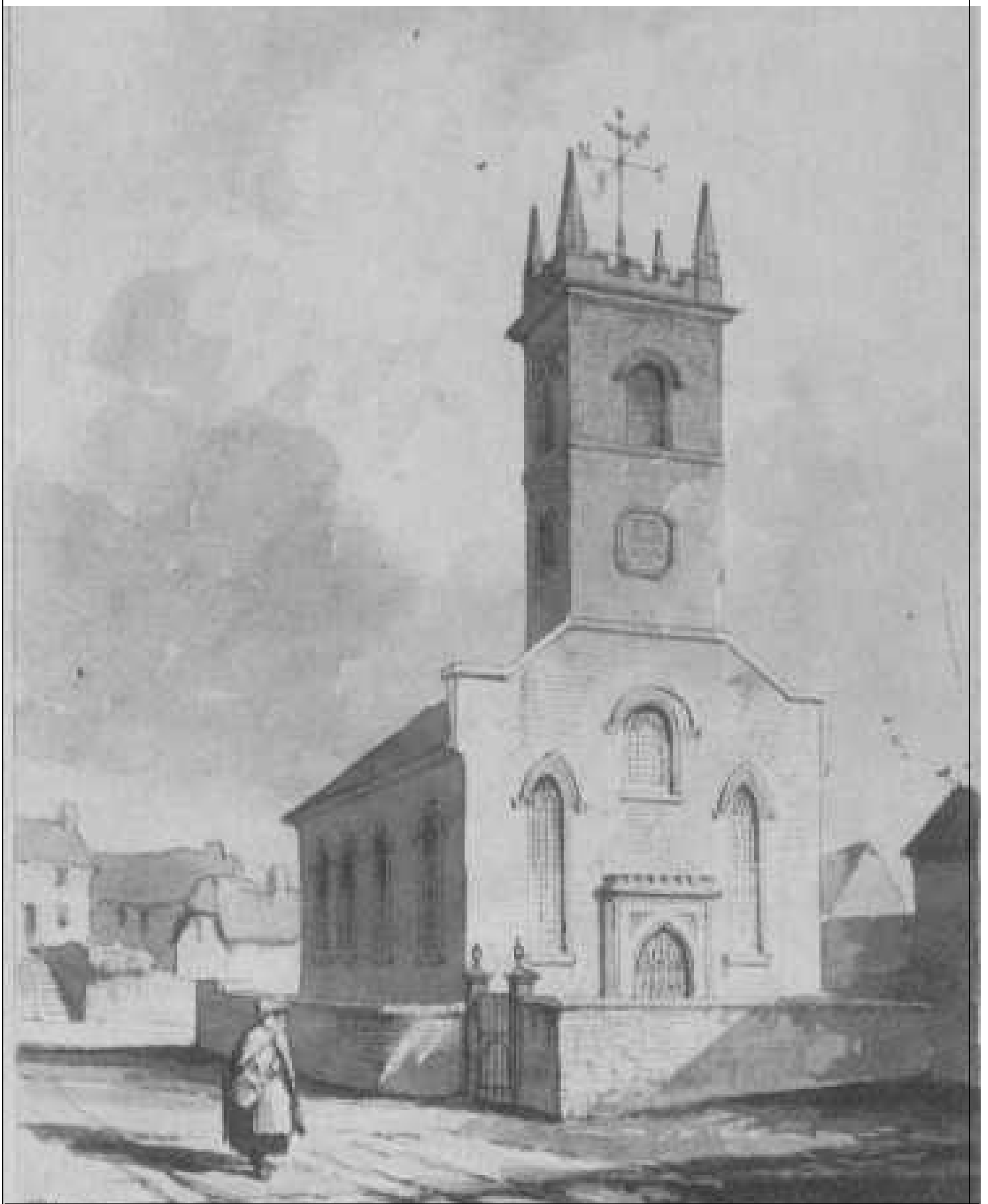
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Despite redecoration and repairs in 1984/5 and 1987, where the organ was also repositioned, surprisingly little has changed inside over more recent years (modern photograph above)



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TALKE CHURCH



How St. Martins looked in 1841, before its rebuilding which removed the clock tower