***All Saints Church by Mike Fenton***

This is without question one of the most important and historically significant buildings in West Bromwich, its name originally believed to have been St. Clements, an unusual and somewhat uncommon dedication, a reminder of this being St. Clements Lane which is to be found at the rear of the current hospital and site of the first functioning workhouse in the town. Although positioned away from the epicentre and hub of the town’s daily social and business exertions, ‘*Old Church’* as it is affectionately known was for many centuries fundamentally important in the cohesion and progression of the town’s future prospects. Although the present church is unquestionably ancient in origin, it is very probable that a much older structure of Saxon heritage once laid claim to the site. It is possible therefore that some sort of religious worship has been performed here for well over 1,000 years.

In encountering the Norman period we can be more assured of the facts. During the 1872 restoration of the church, remains from the Norman era came to light; these consisted of a shaft and two capitals generally thought to be the remnants of a belfry window from the Norman tower. These were later to be preserved as part of the north wall of the present belfry. The date proposed for the construction of the church from this time is between 1080-1090; this however must be regarded as something of conjecture. The 14th century saw a post-Norman reconstruction, giving way to a less austere atmosphere and a more decorative and welcoming style with more light facilitated by larger windows. The Gothic period saw a marked increase in the population of West Bromwich and in response the church witnessed further enlargements, so much so that it can comfortably be assumed that this current structure was more substantial than any of its predecessors. Certain aspects of the Gothic period are still with us, for example the lower parts of the tower comprising the arch and window date from the Middle Ages, these having being encased in more modern stone in 1872.

The 16th and 17th centuries were more concerned with additions than any substantial reconstruction. In 1573, Walter Stanley, Lord of the Manor of West Bromwich, is believed to have been responsible for building a chapel at the East End of the north aisle; this chapel was demolished in 1786. In 1619 the Whorwood Chapel was established in memory of Sir William Whorwood of Sandwell Hall. The 18th century saw neglect and decay. In 1783 it was recorded that it was ‘much dilapidated and in want of repair’. With fund raising underway the repairs to All Saints began in earnest in 1786, virtually all traces of its Gothic past demolished, the exception being the lower tower and the Whorwood Chapel. My fourth, albeit distant cousin, the local historian ***Frederick William Hackwood*** remarked that this single event in the church’s history constituted, ‘the greatest act of vandalism to which any church has ever been subjected ‘.

By 1854 a small sanctuary was built onto the East End, containing the High Altar and illuminated by an ornate Venetian window. About this time the Whorwood Chapel, having been used as a family pew by the Earls of Dartmouth, became a vestry. In 1862 a previously installed and grand pulpit was deemed too large and removed, replaced by a more suitably sized structure. The church we view today originates from the major alterations undertaken in 1872; plans however for a major refurbishment had been in mind for some years before, the Reverends Spry and ***Willett*** being the principal instigators for such change. In 1870, the vicar had complained vociferously, saying ‘The rain pours in at the roof, the walls are mouldy and stained, the windows let in draughts on all sides, the floor is so damp that it is almost dangerous to kneel, the belfry is unsafe, the bells useless for ringing, the whole building is . . . damp, inconvenient, uncomfortable, dirty and slovenly’.

After much wrangling and disagreement about which designs to adopt, 1871 saw the tender of Mr. Burkitt of Wolverhampton to rebuild the church for £6,300, being accepted. The last full day of worship in the old church was Sunday, 25th June 1871 and in April of the following year a memorial stone was laid on the site of the High Altar by the High Sheriff of Staffordshire. Building work continued with gusto and the new church was opened with great ceremony on 29 October 1872. The following year Mr. Willett was thanked ‘officially’ for successfully completing the restoration, everyone agreeing that ‘in place of one dilapidated and inconvenient church . . . there is now a church of great beauty’. That beauty remains today and I trust for millennia to come.