Reading Audley Church

Wendy Morgan

Those who worship in Audley parish church, or who merely glance up at it as they pass by, see a large Gothic building with tower, nave, chancel and aisles in red sandstone. However, its simple style and unified appearance hide the diversity of its construction: some parts of the building are less than 150 years old, but much of the fabric dates from the fourteenth century. A detailed look at the church will reveal the older work and then make it possible to see what its appearance might have been before its nineteenth-century restoration.

Looking at any parish church should not just be a matter of examining its masonry: much can be gained by combining this with information from historical documents, and by studying major church building works undertaken in the region, and even the wider country, at the same time. The church itself then becomes a document, illustrating the lives of those who paid for it to be built and those who designed it. Fortunately there are a number of written documents relating to the church in Audley which provide additional historical details and there were also a number of other churches in the region, including the cathedral at Lichfield, where building work was being carried out in the same period. However any study of this kind has always to be tempered by the fact that historical and architectural information often survives as a matter of accident and a picture which seems clear now may, in truth, only be seen " through a glass darkly"

The first known documentary reference to the church occurs in the foundation charter of Hulton Abbey, Staffs of 1223. No mention of a church in Audley is made in the earlier sources such as the Domesday Book and it is possible that, before the Conquest, an estate, Alditha's *leah*, was part of the minster parish of St. Bertoline at Barthomley. Audley may not have been a separate parish until the early twelfth century when its land was assigned to a rising Norman military family which took its name from the settlement and built a castle motte (still extant) at the north end of the site. Just to its south is the church from the revenues of which, in 1223, Henry Audley was able to grant an annual pension of ten marks (£6 13s 4d) to the new Cistercian Abbey at Hulton.

There is no fabric which can be dated with certainty to this early period but there is a stone coffin lid (now placed in an external tomb niche on the south side of the chancel) bearing traces of a cross motif of typical thirteenth century design. In addition, random uncoursed masonry can be seen on the north and south interior walls of the tower. Whilst there is no trace of this masonry externally, it may indicate the existence of an earlier tower of unknown height, but of similar internal dimensions to the present structure.

Links with the Audley family continued despite the removal of the *caput* of their honour to a new castle at Heighley, three miles to the south-west. The family flourished throughout the thirteenth century, maintaining its association with the Court. William Audley drowned fighting in Wales in 1282 when royal and noble involvement, in architectural as well as military matters, in the north-west was reaching its peak. Edward I's castles in north Wales and the Cistercian Abbey he founded in Cheshire at Vale Royal, as well as other projects by his courtiers such as the large new church of St. Mary in Nantwich, also in Cheshire, on land owned by the Chancellor, Bishop Robert Burnell, demonstrate the importance of architecture in the display of social status and its prominence in the north-west.

Nicholas, a contemporary of Edward II, was made first baron Audley in 1313 in the same year as his son and heir, James, was born. This combination of events was probably the incentive for the campaign of work at Audley church which resulted in the raising of the tower to its present height and the addition at the east end of a large chancel to serve as " an elegant mausoleum" for the Audley family. The architectural details of both the internal and upper external openings in the tower, together with the two north windows of the chancel and the external tomb niche below them appear to date from this period. Each has an arch of one or two continuous orders of broad, sunk- quadrant, or wave, mouldings of the type developed in the castles of north Wales in the 1280s by Edward I's Master Mason, Walter of Hereford, which became increasingly common in ecclesiastical architecture throughout the fourteenth century.

The masonry of the tower is a course, grey-red sandstone, having a singular rusticated appearance. At its base there is a tall plinth with a simple profile, interrupted by a flight of four steps rising to the west door immediately above which is a three-light window, both openings being remodelled in the nineteenth century. Close to the north-west angle there is, on both the west and north sides, a number of small rectangular openings which light the newel stair to the two upper chambers. These chambers are each lit by large arched windows on all but the east side, though the remains of an east window in the bell stage, now blocked by the nave roof, can still be seen. Each window with its continuously moulded jambs, is now much weathered, but has evidence of tracery of two-lights, with a cusped quatrefoil above. This design is confirmed by the surviving tracery in the lower, ringing-chamber window on the north face. The tower is topped by a deeply moulded parapet of fine ashlar masonry and, at each angle, and at the centre of each side, this incorporates a pinnacle with crockets and finials also typically associated with late medieval work.

Inside the tower, in its the north-west angle, is the original, shouldered opening to the stair turret. This was much reduced in height when a vaulted brick chamber was built in the base of the tower to accommodate the mid-nineteenth century heating system, and, as a consequence, the tower floor level was raised. The turret door has a simple quadrant moulding and two identical x- shaped marks on it record the work of an otherwise anonymous medieval mason. Its obscure position, beside the inner vestibule, probably protected it from the zealous attention of the nineteenth century restorers, and, unlike the rest of the interior of the building, its masonry still bears the dark patina of age.

Elsewhere in the tower interior, the masonry is somewhat obscured by plaster which is interrupted on both the north and south sides, just above head height, by a brick-filled rectangular hole (some timber fragments are visible on the north) probably indicating a former tower floor level. The present tower ceiling is now much higher and made of pew timbers, placed there in the mid-nineteenth century. The east wall has a tall, two-centred arch opening into the nave. It has no visible bases (no doubt obscured by the heating chamber) but two of the continuous wave mouldings are found on both its tower and nave faces.

The external tomb niche on the north wall of the chancel is beneath the west window. It has an arch with a single, continuous wave moulding set below a shallow gable. This is incorporated into the solid stone wall running down, from the sill of the window above, to springing of the tomb arch. The design, " like the *glacis* at the foot of a castle wall" is very similar to that of the three external tombs on the south side of the Lady Chapel of Lichfield cathedral being built by the Master Mason, William Franceys, for Bishop Walter Langton in the same period.

The two north windows above the niche have been identified as early fourteenth century by " the handling of the cusps and the total absence of ogee curves" in their tracery. A string course runs beneath the interior and exterior sills of these two windows, and at the same height, and for the same length, on the interior of the south wall of the chancel, which should, to this position be considered contemporary.

Work on the chancel may never have been completed as Nicholas Audley died in 1316. His son, James, was three years old when his father died and only ten on the death of his mother. He thus came early into the responsibilities of the Audley family and was married and attending Parliament from the early 1330s onward. When his own son, another Nicholas, was born also in the 1330s, he may have felt it necessary to continue his father's intention to build a suitable family mausoleum in the church and therefore arranged for the completion of the chancel.

The change in the chancel design occurs in the east and south windows and the mouldings take on a much more complex form. The inner jamb mouldings of the east window, and all three south windows, use the same "fleur-de-lys element" and this can also be seen in the arch of the other external tomb niche, below the east window on the south wall. This distinctive moulding points to the style of a Master Mason, known as the Stafford Master, who was working on several buildings in the Lichfield diocese in this period: the same moulding is found in the north transept of St Mary's church in Stafford, St Andrew's, Shifnal, Shropshire, and, in very large form, on the crossing piers of Chester Cathedral, formerly the Abbey of St Werbergh.

The tracery of the south windows has two lights, and above this there is a "distinctive quatrefoil" ogee, perhaps referring to earlier work on the crossing tower of Lichfield Cathedral which would have been very familiar to the Stafford Master as he probably carried on the work of building the Lady Chapel which, though incomplete when Bishop Langton died in 1321, was probably finished by 1336. Cathedral documents name this Master Mason as William of Eyeton.

The buttresses between the windows have a triangular plan in their upper sections which are paneled, and have attached pinnacles with crockets. Though the pinnacles themselves have all been replaced, their original finials are still visible under the chancel eaves and reveal that the external walls have not been raised. The same type of upper section appears to have been added to the two buttresses on the north wall, though those of the same design on the north-east, and south-east angles are nineteenth century.

The priest's door in the south wall is also heavily moulded. However, it was re-designed by George Gilbert Scott in the nineteenth century as was the tracery of the east window. A drawing by Buckler of 1840 (fig. 1) shows this to have been a seven light composition originally, with a net of cusped, reticulated vesicae above. Scott retained the seven lights but abandoned the repetitive tracery device in favour a more elaborate form which he had encountered in his restoration of the north transept at Stafford. He made correct connections between the mouldings of the windows of these two churches, but was probably unaware of the link the Stafford Master had with Shifnal church where tracery of the design originally used in the Audley east window still survives.

On the east section of the chancel's north external wall the remains of a single storey building can be seen and it is also visible in the drawing of 1840. The cusped piscina indicates that the building contained an altar and would have served as a vestry. Disturbed masonry shows its size and the outline of its blocked door but there is now no sign of this internally, though a drawing of the interior, also made in 1840, shows its original moulded form.

The interior of the chancel is also much enriched. On the north wall there is a third tomb niche, in the position usually reserved for the donor in the fourteenth century. It has a tall, wide arch whose cusps are inhabited by winged heads of angels and beasts. Above is a crocketed gable supported on either side by slender pinnacles. The back of the niche is decorated with ashlars of diaper-work in a hexagonal mesh containing alternating flowers and 'Kentish' blank tracery, which, though typically fourteenth century in design, is probably Victorian.

On the opposite wall is a correspondingly elaborate sedilia. Its three richly moulded, ogee-arched seat canopies, and attached piscina, supported by a green-man corbel, are all topped by crockets and finials. Short pinnacles rise between each seat and full pinnacles enclose the piscina and sedilia itself. The whole composition is united above by a large string course, and the mouldings used throughout again reflect those familiar to the Stafford Master from his work on Lichfield Cathedral.

By employing such a widely known and well-connected Master Mason, to complete and further elaborate the Audley chancel, James, Lord Audley, not only emphasised the status of the family in this world, but also, through the opulence of the gift, ensured their salvation in the next. It is perhaps ironic that when he died at the age of 73 in 1386, having witnessed a large part of a century of great political and economic upheaval, his attachment to this church had waned and he no longer wished to be buried in the church his family had built; it seems likely that none of the three tomb niches were ever used and the "elegant mausoleum" remained empty. He chose instead to be buried at Hulton Abbey as did his successors.

The mid-fourteenth century saw the rise, under the Audleys, of another gentry family, the Delves of Apedale. They were administrators serving Edward, the Black Prince, especially in the principality of Aquitaine. They also built locally, both on their land at Doddington in Cheshire where a crenellated tower survives from their late medieval hall house, and at Audley where Sir John Delves (d. 1369) bequeathed vestments and plate to an altar in the north aisle in his will. It is here that his effigy originally stood and for the next hundred years members of the Delves family were buried here too.

Whether or not he was responsible for the building of the north and south aisles at Audley it is impossible to say, however the design of the arcades supports this and their addition would be the next way in which a benefactor could enlarge the church. The piers of the nave arcades, leading into the aisles, are all octagonal, stand directly on plain square bases, and support plain chamfered arches of two orders; however there are subtle differences present in their design. The north-east respond and first pier of the north arcade have identically moulded capitals. The three lowest courses of the respond are set back on their west face, and the next course has a corresponding chamfer. This probably accommodated the tomb of Sir John Delves, which would not have affected the adjacent pier. The west side of the first north arcade pier is also altered: five courses were cut back and subsequently repaired with red sandstone masonry. There is no record of the position of any other Delves family monument but one may also have stood here. Conversely the alteration may have occurred during a later re-pewing and this view may be supported by the fact that this pier alone has a base as well as a plinth. The remainder of the nave piers have capitals with slightly more complex mouldings and may date from the latter half of the fourteenth century. So too may the font which is composed of mouldings similar to these and is also octagonal in shape.

An example of the family's support for the fabric is recorded in the will of 1420 of John Delves (d. 1429) where money was paid for the north aisle, then known as the Delves Aisle, to be re-roofed, and for monuments to be erected over the tombs (not extant) of his father John Delves (d.1394) and grand-father Henry Delves (d. 1396) though after 1429 the Delves family were buried at Wybunbury, Cheshire. On the north side of the short wall to which the east respond is attached, that is in the north aisle itself, there is a simple cusped piscina confirming that this area had an altar and was the Delves family chapel. The whole of the first bay of the north nave arcade and aisle are now enclosed by the church organ.

The grey-yellow sandstone of the north aisle wall abuts the red masonry of the chancel and is topped by a parapet. All the north aisle windows, except that in the west wall, have rectangular heads and two lights, though that in the east wall has three. The masonry of each window has been renewed, as the simplified tracery and patching around the jambs reveals, and each buttress has also been replaced. However, the fourth window from the east appears original, having hollow chamfered jambs, cusped ogee-headed tracery, with glazed but uncusped spandrels. Internally this window has a unique chamfered wooden lintel and it may be the remaining example of the restoration work of the 1420s. Some windows of a similar design are shown in the nave clerestory in the drawing of 1840. This part of the church was wholly rebuilt by Scott in the 1850s and no other indication of its original form remains, though it may have retained both fourteenth and fifteenth-century windows until then.

Although they used Audley Church as a family mausoleum, the Delves were never patrons. This right was appropriated, from the Lords Audley, by Hulton Abbey in 1349, though a subsequent dispute prevented the Abbot from exercising his patronage until 1385. It is interesting to note that at this moment the brass to Sir Thomas Audley (d. 1385) a younger brother of the family, was placed in its original position in the south aisle, referred to as the Lady Aisle in Delves' will of 1369. There is no trace of a piscina on the south side of this aisle to confirm this. However, as the most severe weathering occurs here and the aisle has been rebuilt several times since the middle ages the piscina may have disappeared. The statue niche incorporated by Scott into the external wall above his east window may be the only fragment of its original stonework, but even this is uncertain.

The abbot of Hulton retained the rectory and appointed vicars to Audley from 1369 until the dissolution, although from 1517 onwards the right was already in the hands of minor local families to whom it was leased. A number of names and events come to the fore during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. Richard Parker and Thomas Boughey of Aqualate Hall were involved in a dispute subsequent to the re-pewing of 1585, and in 1611 Edward Vernon, *divinarum librarum professoris*, vicar of Audley founded a free grammar school on adjacent land to the church in which his effigy now lies (on the chancel floor). In his will of 1628 William Abnett asked to be buried near his father in the chancel, but though his brass is extant, the location of both tombs is now unknown. The boundary of the church was affected in 1695 when " the stone wall about the church yard was built for which the mason was paid in part £13" and further payment was made in 1696.

The majority of the churchyard wall is now of Staffordshire blue brick. However, the sections of the west wall, by the main church gate, are in stone and may date from this period. The following year the bells were recast at Congleton with the addition of new metal.

In the first half of the eighteenth century several changes took place. In 1719 a wooden gallery was purchased from the parish church of St Giles, in nearby Newcastle-under-Lyme, by Richard Parrott, then churchwarden, and the following year the Bishop was petitioned for its erection (no doubt after the event) at the west end of the nave between the last two piers. Their capitals and the adjacent responds show signs of replacement on their nave faces, as do the spandrels immediately above the two piers, which occurred when the gallery was removed; its decorated front has since been incorporated into the sides of the pews next to the tower.

The prominent local family of Craddock placed the final large monument in the north aisle on the death of Sir John in 1721. The purbeck marble lid of the tomb chest bears his coat-of-arms encircled by four putti above an inscription in Latin. Further repairs to the church and its roof were undertaken between 1742 and 1746.

To this point, apart from the considerable building activity during the fourteenth century, the church seems to have existed in a reasonable condition in keeping with its rural status. However, the economic progress being made in the region, due to the growth of pottery manufacture, had a notable effect on the village. The ridge which separates the parish from the neighbouring pottery towns was rich in coal, of great value to the new industry. The land was bought by members of the Wedgwood family in 1752 and 1765 for a total of almost £7000. By 1800 several profitable pits had been established and the character of the community was changing. This may account for the fact that, in 1772, the vicar, James Oates, wrote " I do not reside at Audley, but at my perpetual curacy at Betley" there being " no family of note resident in the Parish" , though there were some four hundred houses in the village. The church does not seem to have to suffered however: the pews were renewed in 1792 in a manner considered " very handsome" by the Archdeacon of Stafford in his Visitation of 1830 and an undated plan, now in the possession of Mrs. Barbara Burgess, probably shows the arrangements for their use.

Amongst those named on it is John Wedgwood (d. 1839) who lived at nearby Bignall End Hall and owned the collieries in Audley. Although his memorial tablet hangs in the north aisle his will of 1837 specified his wish to be buried, not in the church, but on top of the coal-rich ridge overlooking the village, in a tomb marked by an enormous obelisk.

The Archdeacon's Visitation of 1830, and further inspections in 1837 and 1841 reveal much about the condition of the church at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The roofs of the main body of the building -" oak covered with slate and tile-the side aisles with lead" were " in good repair" , and the walls were " solid stone-upright", with " the South side altered 50 years ago" (1780). The chancel, however, gave cause for concern being " not in good state either inside or out" and orders were made for the roof to be mended, and the " mullions of windows (to be) repaired and parts blocked up restored" . The Buckler drawing of 1840 confirms this. The vestry was undergoing alteration in 1837, according to the Visitation notes, as a reference to the condition of the churchyard says there was no rubbish there " except from present building of Vestry etc" . This may explain the non-medieval form of its parapet shown by the drawing.

Social change may have caused Audley church to be neglected by the late eighteenth century but it brought restoration in the mid nineteenth. Non-Conformism had been very successful in the pottery towns and, by 1836, four Methodist chapels were established in the mining community of Audley and its surrounding area. The Church of England sought to draw the lower classes away from the dissenting sects and back to their parish churches by increasing the number of free seats available in them and the appointment of Charles Philip Wilbraham as vicar on 27 November 1844 was wholly in line with this policy. The scene was set for the subtle transformation of Audley church from an essentially Medieval building to a Victorian interpretation of one.

A detailed analysis of the documentary and architectural evidence of Audley church reveals a building of the fourteenth century whose subsequent history reflects both its rural position and the later development of industry around it.

The windows and masonry of the western end of the north chancel wall have been identified as belonging to the early fourteenth century and, by comparing the mouldings, we can assume that the tower was rebuilt at the same time. The remainder of the fabric of the chancel which escaped later restoration, has been identified as the work of the Stafford Master who was working in the north-west between 1327 and 1337, and employed here by the Lords Audley.

The use of the church by another well-connected family, the Delves, may have encouraged them to finance the rebuilding of the remaining fabric which have stood between the two parts of the new work, that is the nave and aisles. Their former appearance is unknown, but the late fourteenth century nave arcades, probably paid for by the Delves, are extant. Repairs carried out in the fifteenth century by members of the family can still be seen in the north aisle.

The church retained the form it had achieved by the end of the Middle Ages, with few further changes, except possibly in the south aisle, until the mid-nineteenth century when a major scheme of repair and reconstruction was carried out. Not only were new designs introduced by Scott, but plaster was removed from the internal walls leaving the original masonry exposed, and to this were added new ashlars of a much stronger red colour. The use of such stones has been perpetuated in the repairs of recent years and the church has a much redder face in the late-twentieth century than it did formerly. No doubt to the nineteenth-century father of architectural conservation, John Ruskin, this would be a betrayal of the trust in which the church is held. However, it must be remembered that Audley church is not just a work of art to be treasured. It is, as it has been always been, a building which serves its community: " All great buildings change if they are to remain alive: they live on only through the continued care of each succeeding generation" . It is to be hoped that a greater awareness of the building's past development will make succeeding generations more sensitive to appropriate change.