

**NOTES ON THE
PARISH CHURCHES
OF WIRRAL**

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Notes on the Parish Churches of Wirral by Wm. Ferguson Irvine

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NOTES ON THE PARISH CHURCHES OF WIRRAL.

ONE often hears the question asked, "When was such-and-such a church built?" and one always feels tempted to reply, "It was not built, it grew." The questioner evidently expects to hear a clear and succinct account, how some Lady Bountiful of a bye-gone age supplied the funds for the building of the particular church, much as we see it now, and at the same time presented it with lands sufficient to maintain a priest. Among the ten thousand old parish churches of England there are a few of which such a plain and definite history can be given, but in by far the greater majority of cases, the story of the foundation is lost in the blue distance of the ages.

If we wish to think of the beginning of one of our parish churches, we must at once put from our minds any picture resembling what we constantly see to-day, a church rising in a few months, complete in all its parts, nave, chancel, transepts, even to clerestory and tower. In its place we must conjure up a vision of a little wattle and daub structure, standing in its croft beside the

village, hardly so large as and possibly not unlike one of the smallest thatched cottages of our countryside, in which, perhaps, not ten men could kneel, but large enough to cover the altar and to shield the sacred elements from rain and storm. This is the tiny germ, and as the village grows and prospers, the villagers add a loftier and better building at the western end, and the little thatched hut becomes a chancel and the new part the nave. But still all is wood, wattle, daub, and thatch; years, it may be centuries, pass, until from over the seas comes some travelled son of the hamlet, who in Normandy has seen men rear houses of stone, as his fathers had done of wood; and he and his fellows go up to the hill, and there with their wood-cutting axes, hew the rough sandstone into a semblance of square blocks. And if you look at some of the earliest masonry in our churches, you will still see the broad wound made by the axe, before our English forefathers learnt the use of the chisel. Thus the building becomes more permanent, rough but sound and good. And as year by year England is drawn more and more into contact with the larger world across the sea, the skill and knowledge of the men who work in stone becomes more widespread, and the buildings more elaborate in detail, until, in Eadward's time, the Norman masons travel in bands up and down the land, rearing structures some of which we have with us to-day.

Then the Conquest. And the new lords, with some of their new-found riches, build grand piles, like St. John's in Chester, and many another massive monument. And the grandsons are not content simply to follow in the footprints of their fathers, but develop the details, and the work becomes more ornate; and one day a builder sees the beauty of the pointed arch, and others follow, and breaking

away from the methods of the continental masons, they stamp their individuality on a style which has since been called by our national name, Early English. But still the process of elaboration goes on, the size of the window increases, and men see the exquisite tracery of the decorated work spread like the veins in a leaf across the blank space of light. And as the wealth of the country grows, and men begin to lavish it in every way they can on their church, they soon seize the chance of further beauty offered by the broadening light, and the windows begin to glow and sparkle with that marvellous jewel-like glass which is the wonder and despair of modern church-builders. And as the taste for this grows, there comes the desire for yet broader spaces, until the spreading arch of the fourteenth and fifteenth century window requires the straight support of the slender mullion, and the characteristic feature of Perpendicular is attained. The tendency goes on increasing, until in some of the churches built in the early sixteenth century the walls are nothing but one blaze of light.

Then fell the fierce storms of the sixteenth century, when practically all building ceased, and the only trace of it is to be found in such repairs as were necessary to keep the churches sound. The seventeenth century came and went, leaving but few structures to mark its degraded style, and ushered in the eighteenth, which has left, alas, too many. And how shall I speak of this century? The century of restorations we might call it, but of that we shall speak later.

And thus we have to-day not the creation of a single mind and the effort of a year, but the accretion of a millennium and the countless efforts of thirty generations; so that one feels there is truth in saying, "That church was not built, "it grew."

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There can be little doubt that all our fifteen old parish churches of Wirral, with the possible exception of Eastham, were standing at the time of the Norman Conquest; of course not as we see them now, but churches were standing then where we see them stand to-day. Little is now left of the actual structures of this period, but with these we shall deal later. How much earlier than the Conquest the various churches date it is impossible to say, but we may, I think, lay claim to a very high antiquity for some of them; and in order that we may have a clearer idea of the founding and early history of our parish churches in Wirral, you will forgive me if I sketch very rapidly the early story of this neighbourhood.

It is a matter of history that Christianity was established in Britain some time before the withdrawal of the Romans from our island, but the evidence seems to point to the fact that it was almost entirely confined to the ruling race, and that the native British were not affected by it to any great extent. We have a parallel in the India of to-day, or perhaps I should say of one hundred years ago, where, before missionary societies started their work, Christianity found its sole adherents among the English rulers, while the natives followed Bhudda or Mahomet.

In 410 the Romans retired from Britain, and from that date for almost exactly two hundred years (that is, until the Battle of Chester, in 613) our district may be described as British pure and simple. It was during this period that Christianity was first planted in Wirral, and it is probable that to the earlier of the two centuries we can assign the founding of some of our parish churches. We know that between the years 440 and 450 St. Germanus was evangelising North Wales, and Denbigh in particular, and it is not unlikely that

Wirral may have come in for a share in his ministrations; and it is within the bounds of possibility that he founded the parish church of Wallasey, and dedicated it to the great saint in whose footsteps he strove to follow, St. Hilary. But of this presently.

Certainly in the following century the surrounding neighbourhood was thoroughly Christianised, and it is hardly conceivable that there could exist within fifteen miles of Wirral the great monastery of Bangor Iscoed, with its two thousand monks, not to mention churches and monasteries in Chester itself, without some effort having been made to win over Wirral to the faith. And we have, I think, definite proof in our midst in the place-name Landican. Surely the first syllable of this name can be none other than the Celtic *Llan*, meaning a church; a word with which we are all so familiar in Welsh place-names.

Then the dedication of Wallasey Church to St. Hilary, of which I spoke a moment ago, is most significant. The dedication is a rare one,¹ and only occurs, so far as I can find, in eight other cases in Great Britain, six of which are in Wales, one in Cornwall, and one in Lincoln; all, except the last, in places where the Celtic element is supreme; and in the Lincolnshire case there is a neighbouring church dedicated to St. Germanus, a suggestive fact. St. Hilary, it will be remembered, was the great opponent of the Pelagian Heresy, which agitated the Church during the latter half of the fourth century. Britain was supposed to be infected somewhat, and it was

¹ The following is a list of the ancient parish churches in England and Wales dedicated to St. Hilary. In England—St. Hilary in Cornwall, Spridlington in Lincoln, and Wallasey in Cheshire; in Wales—Llanilar and Trefilan in Cardiganshire, Eglwys Rhos in Carnarvonshire, the Castle chapel in Denbigh town, Erbistock in Denbighshire, and St. Hilary in Glamorganshire.

partly to exterminate it that the Gallic Church sent over St. Germanus. He preached in Denbigh and Anglesey we know, and it is far from unlikely that he founded the churches in Denbighshire which are dedicated to St. Hilary, in spite of the usage of the British Church, which only permitted dedication to St. Mary, St. Michael, or the founder; and I submit it as possible that he or one of his disciples founded Wallasey, and perpetuated once more the name of the then popular Saint.

But the British rule was shortly to come to an end. For a century and a half the English invaders had been encroaching gradually on the territory of the Britons, and if you will look at Mr. Green's map of Britain in 580, in his *Making of England*, you will see that, roughly speaking, England was divided from north to south by a line drawn from Berwick to the Isle of Wight, to the east of which lay the English, and to the west the still-unconquered Britons. This line represents the natural barrier of hills that runs through England like a backbone, and that had long held the English at bay; and it was not until 613 that Æthelfrith, the Northumbrian king, anticipating by nearly 500 years the famous march of the Norman William, broke through the boundary and pushed over the bleak moors of Ribbleshead, to sweep down on what we now call Southern Lancashire. His object was to break in two the long unwieldy British confederacy that stretched north and south along our western coast, and he chose as striking point Chester, the capital of Gwynedd, a district which then embraced the greater part of the present North Wales. At the news of the danger of Chester, Brocmail, the Prince of Powys, marched from Shrewsbury to its rescue. Two thousand monks from the huge monastery of Bangor Iscoed, after a three days' fast, made their