

ECCLES PARISH CHURCH

St Mary the Virgin



Statement of Significance

March 2025

ECCLES PARISH CHURCH St Mary the Virgin



The name Eccles suggests that the town was established around the site of a religious community - the church here once ministered to a vast parish of eighty square miles. The present building is a reflection of local and national history. Every century, from the twelfth to the twenty-first, has contributed to the structure and furnishings which we see today.

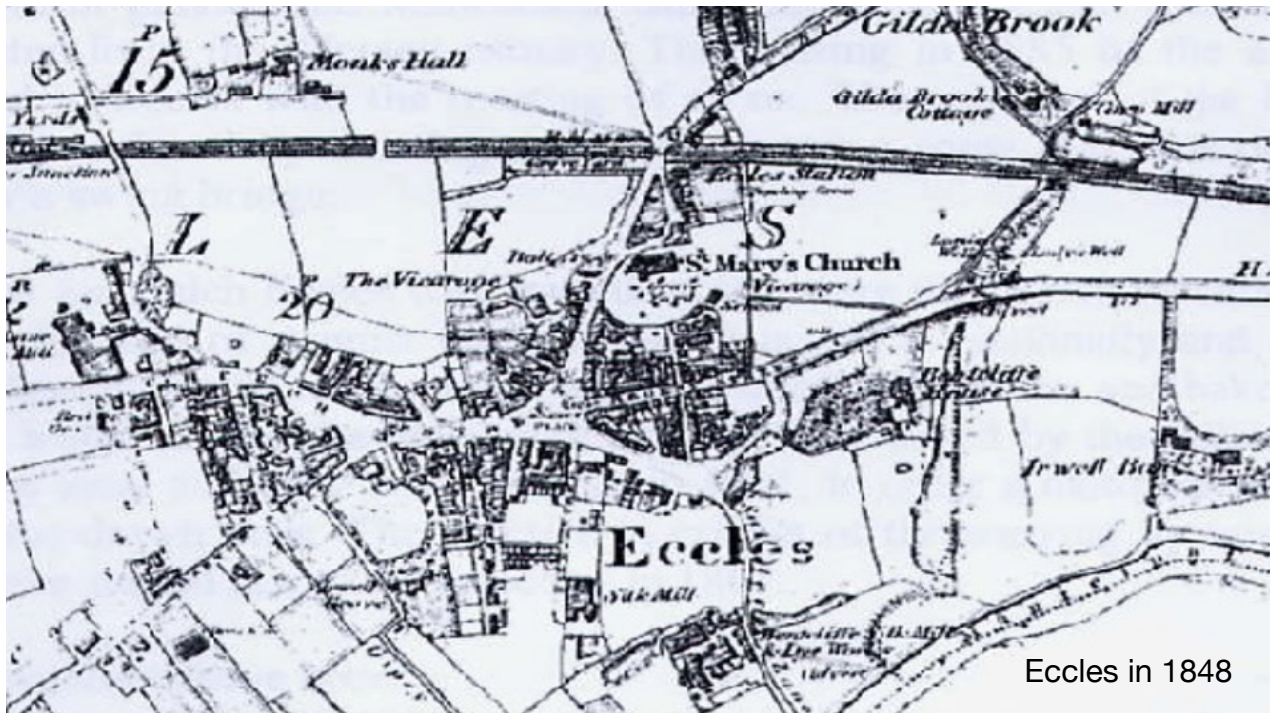
The tower inner wall reveals the outline of an earlier, smaller, building. Three chantry chapels and the niches in the nave columns, robbed of their statues, are witness to religious changes. The carved ceiling of the nave with its Yorkist roses is a reminder of the turmoil of the fifteenth century and the influence of the Booths of Barton who supported the church throughout three centuries.

The Mayo window is a memorial to a Salford man making a new life in America in the nineteenth century. The many records throughout the church of the achievements of previous vicars, local philanthropists, land owners and industrialists, provide evidence of the extensive impact they and Eccles Parish Church have had both locally and nationally.

In contrast, the deliberately unrestored East window, shattered in the Manchester Christmas blitz of 1940 reflects the perils of war. The memorial in the churchyard to Alan Henning, who fell at the hands of Islamic State militants in 2014, reminds us of the continuing struggles of humanity.

Introduction

The town of Eccles, with a population 40 000, lies 4 miles to the west of Manchester city centre. The church, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, dates back to the twelfth century. Whilst there is no trace of a pre Norman church, fragments of an Anglo Saxon cross found during excavations for the Manchester Ship Canal in 1889 and the originally circular boundary of the churchyard suggest the existence of an older building on the site.



Over time the building has been enlarged to accommodate both a rising population and changing religious orthodoxy. Fixtures and fittings throughout the church attest to its importance to the local community for over 800 years. Until the sixteenth century the parish extended over 80 square miles and the church, being the oldest religious foundation in the area, was the natural home for a wealthy land owning community. The beginnings of the industrial revolution in nearby Worsley saw a massive increase in population and the church attracted interest from senior clerics, landed gentry and industrial tycoons. John Gilbert (the agent of the 3rd Duke of Bridgewater, who built the world's first canal in 1761) is buried here and it was the vicar of Eccles who gave the last rights to William Huskisson, President of the Board of Trade, as he lay dying in his rectory after being struck by Rocket, along the line at Parkside, on the opening day of the Liverpool to Manchester railway in 1830.

Declining church congregations of the twentieth century have been mirrored by the declining numbers of people visiting small town shopping centres and Eccles is no exception.

Pevsner describes “a little group of civic buildings, pubs and shops, with the church on a slight eminence to the north, having some sense of coherence marred by a depressing and now partially abandoned 1960s shopping centre”.¹

It is therefore reassuring that Salford City Council has recently bought the shopping centre and has plans to reimagine its purpose. Selective demolition will allow the creation of more open spaces, a lower density of shops and the provision of affordable housing and public meeting venues. The intention is to create an environment which will encourage community cohesion. Bringing the Parish Church back into the centre of life in Eccles is part of that ambition.

The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin now looks forward to a bright future, summarising its aims as:

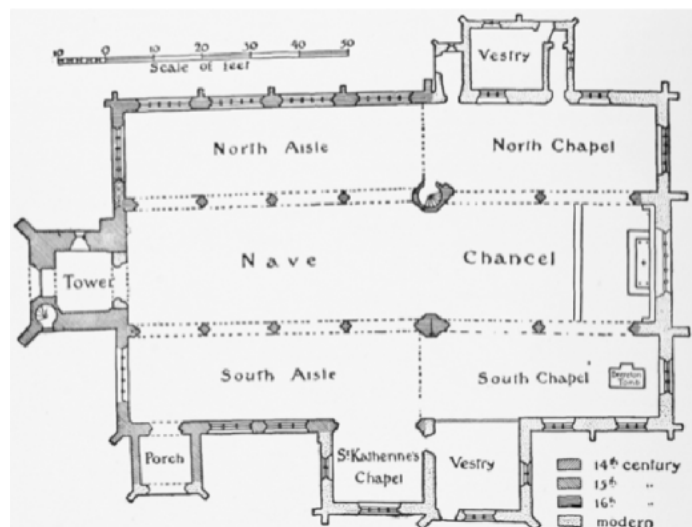
Further developing as a worshipping, growing, and transforming Christian presence at the heart of our community and offering a place of sanctuary and quiet reflection to everyone of any faith or none.

Fully engaging with the City Council in order to ensure that the church is seen as an important part of the town centre's development - not only as its oldest and most noteworthy building but also as a functioning part of the community.

Ensuring that our building is safe and sound.

History

This is the oldest building in the city of Salford. The original twelfth century church was small and of simple design and quickly became inadequate for an increasing population. In the fourteenth century North and South aisles were added. The St Catherine's Chapel was built in 1368 and a new south door created. A century later the Nave was widened - northwards - and the roof raised to include a clerestory. These changes resulted in the tower, rebuilt at the same time to accommodate bells, no longer being aligned with the central aisle.²



The Chancel's low pitched roof was now quite out of proportion to the Nave and ambitious plans to enlarge it were developed in the sixteenth century. They were never realised, possibly because of the turbulence associated with the Reformation. but more probably because the reduction in the size of the parish at this time would have had a significant impact on sources of revenue.³

It seems as though the Chancel was almost forgotten and it was not until the early nineteenth century and the Gothic Revival that there was a move to completely rebuild this part of the church. ⁴

Rev William Marsden, appointed in 1837, replaced the box pews with the oak ones which are still in use today. Canon Pitcairn became vicar in 1861 and was responsible for the rebuilding of the Chancel, replacing its old pitched roof with a higher structure to match the Nave and upgrading the adjacent chapels thus creating the building which we see today.⁵



The twelfth century tower was rebuilt 200 years later to house four large bells and a small sanctus bell. These were increased to six in 1709 and two trebles were added and the tenor recast in 1825.

When St John's Deansgate, Manchester closed in 1929 their bells and Peal Boards were brought to Eccles. They replaced the Eccles bells but were recast by John Taylor of Loughborough to create the current ring of eight bells.

A clock was installed in 1721, repaired in 1848 and replaced in 1930 by William Potts of Leeds. An automatic winding system was installed in 2007.



The Present Church

The church is Grade 1 listed (Historic England List Number 1067498). ⁶

Sitting comfortably in a prominent and elevated position, the church's West door faces the wide traffic free Church Street - once the main road to Liverpool. It is adjacent to the shopping centre and surrounded by public houses, cafes and high rise flats. There is step free access to all three entrances to the church. The large graveyard to the South and East provides a tranquil space in this densely populated area. With the majority of the gravestones removed, the lawns, seating and lighting are maintained by Salford City Council. The railway station is 200m up Church Street, the bus and tram interchange 200m down Church Street, with the Post Office, Town Hall, library and sports centre a little further along. The church is at the very centre of the town.

The tower is accessed by a spiral staircase on its South side. The eight bells are rung regularly. The turret clock drives three dials. The west door is the main entrance to the church; a door on the south side allows access to the Bridgewater Room.

The ashlar red sandstone is an attractive feature, clearly showing the many phases of development of the building. The nave roof is lead, accessed by a spiral staircase within the church. The lead was replaced in 1994 after a theft.

Services are held every Thursday and Sunday. Whilst our aim is to keep the church open longer and hold more events for the local community, the restrictions imposed by the Chancel floor collapse (qv) have made this challenging. However, the Bridgewater Room, which can be isolated from the main body of the church, and has its own catering and toilet facilities, is popular with art groups, local societies and organisations linked to Salford's Council for Voluntary Services.

Chancel Collapse

A gradual sinking of the Eastern part of the Chancel floor became apparent a few years ago. Initial investigations suggested that this was caused by partial collapse of extensive burial chambers, known to contain over 30 coffins, which had been recorded but not investigated during a 1861 restoration project. Whilst there has been no further noticeable change over the past two years, it is clear that more detailed investigation is urgently required. Discussions are currently being held with architects and archeologists.



Historic England Buildings at Risk Register:

The church appears to be suffering from a localised sub floor collapse of a burial chamber in front of the communion rail and altar and this is allowing the floor to deflect. Priority A - Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed ⁷

Recent Local Developments

The underused and rather sad shopping centre is now being demolished by Salford City Council. Their objective is to recreate the commercial, recreational and residential facilities which had grown up over the centuries around the Parish Church. The Council recently opened negotiations with the church and we are now discussing how we can help provide more facilities and opportunities for the local community.

Separately, many groups around the town, including the church, have come together to explore how to integrate their often disparate activities through the use of social media and the establishment of a community hub to advertise events and facilities. We expect to



be able to publicise our work here and increase the knowledge of our presence and work in the town.

Finally, there has been renewed interest from a wider demographic in the potential offered by the strategic position of our town - with its excellent transport links and proximity to the city centre. Property developers have nearly completed one high-rise block with 250 flats; another has planning

permission. Both are within a short distance of the church. Our congregation currently is of modest size. It is stable and slowly growing but we are hopeful that these initiatives will lead to further growth.

Significance

Eccles Parish Church features as the start of a pilgrimage to Manchester Cathedral
 “....from the fragments of a medieval cross in Eccles to the delicate beauty of Manchester's very own Saxon angel”
 Britain's Pilgrim Places ⁸

The many fixtures and fittings within the building attest to its importance to generations of the local families, many of whom rose to national and international importance.

Descendants of the gifted Booth family, who acquired the nearby Manor of Barton on Irwell in the thirteenth century, built the St Catherine chapel in the fourteenth century and the nave roof in the fifteenth. William and Laurence Booth both became Archbishops of York.

Another local family, the Dauntsey's, lived in nearby Agecroft Hall for over 400 years; many of their descendants are buried in the church. The Hall was relocated to Richmond, Virginia, in 1926 and is now a thriving museum which retains a link with Eccles.

Sir Geoffrey de Massey of Worsley founded the Trinity Chantry in 1453 and so began a long association of the family with the church through the Breretons, the Egertons and the Dukes of Bridgewater, linking it to the building of the world's first canal and the industrial revolution.

The Pitcairn Chapel

Originally named the Jesus Chapel and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, this Chantry Chapel, on the north-side of the Chancel, was founded in 1460 by the Booth's of Barton.



The Booth family had acquired the Manor of Barton on Irwell in 1292. They produced a number of prominent churchmen including:

William Booth, Archbishop of York 1452 - 1464
John Bothe, Bishop of Exeter 1465 - 1478
Laurence Booth, Archbishop of York 1476 - 1480
Charles Booth, Bishop of Hereford 1516 - 1535

After the Reformation, the chapel continued to be used by local Catholic families - who are thought to have had their own private entrance through what is now the vestry.

Following a bequest by the daughter of Canon Pitcairn (vicar 1861 - 1892) in 1943, the Jesus chapel, with its south facing pews and neglected east end, was refurbished and dedicated to Canon Pitcairn. The Chapel is now used for midweek services.

The Bridgewater Room

The Trinity Chapel on the south-side of the Chancel was even more neglected, containing a few old pews and the Brereton Monument. In 1996 the area was cleared to create a community space complete with kitchen and toilet. As the Brereton Monument was being moved to its present position in the St Catherine's Chapel a vault was discovered below the Chapel floor and found to contain the coffins of John Egerton (d 1700), John Gilbert (d 1795) and Gilbert's wife, Lydia (d 1797).⁹ Gilbert was agent to the Third Duke of Bridgewater, responsible for building the Bridgewater Canal. The decorated coffin plates from John and Lydia's coffins are displayed on the south wall of St Catherine's Chapel.¹⁰

St Catherine's Chapel

A Chantry Chapel was built on the south side of the church in 1368 by Thomas Booth of Barton. The original arch remains but the chapel was rebuilt 1863. Significant movement of the floor was addressed in 1971 by underpinning.



“On this site the ancient chapel dedicated to
St Katherine,
 Virgin and Martyr,
 formally stood here,
Thomas del Bothe
 of Barton upon Irwell in this Parish
 deceased to be buried
A.D.1368.

Destroyed by age and neglect
 It was rebuilt by subscription
 together with the eastern part of this church
A.D.1863

The subscribers to the rebuilding
 Of this Chantry are the following four persons:
 John Dugdale, Irwell Bank
 Charles Hilton, Spring Bank
 John Wilson, Park Field
 Thomas Henry Underwood, Hawthorn Hill

JP Pitcairn M A Vicar
 William Chorley, James Bennett
 James Renshaw, William Bradburn”



The Brereton tomb, moved here in 1996 from the Bridgewater Room, was built in 1600 to the memory of Sir Richard Brereton, (d 1598) his wife Dorothy (d 1639) and their stillborn son Richard (d 1575).⁸

The Nave



The nave roof and clerestory were built in 1470. The magnificent carved bosses include the “Sun in Splendour”, the badge of the Yorkist Edward IVth. It’s inclusion in a Lancastrian church at the time of the Wars of the Roses can perhaps be explained by the influence (and benefaction) of a local man, William Booth of Barton, Archbishop of York from 1452 to 1464.

South porch and door

This was the original entrance to the church. The door, with its great strap hinges, was built in the fifteenth century and refurbished in 1790. The original porch was completely rebuilt in 1923 as a memorial to those killed in the Great War.



Fixtures and fittings

Pulpit



There is some uncertainty about the history of the pulpit.

It was moved into the nave after the Reformation to become a focus for the now plain and austere building. Changing priorities, in the mid nineteenth century, reversed this move. A report from 1856 suggests that a new pulpit was ordered to replace the old one "*in its plain deal case*". The story goes that when the casing was stripped away a fine fifteenth century structure was revealed; the order for the new pulpit was cancelled.

The precise age of the present pulpit is not clear. However, the detailed carvings of small mammals around its base suggest that it predates the 1863 restoration.

Palm Sunday Window



The glass was probably made in Flanders in the early sixteenth century for a parish church or for Rouen cathedral. There is a tradition that the window came from a convent in Rouen and had been given to the first Rector of St John's Church, Deansgate, Manchester by a grateful priest, thankful for sanctuary at St John's during the French Revolution. A more likely explanation is that it was in a batch of French stained glass brought to this country for sale at the end of the eighteenth century.

Note the length of the donkey - an embarrassing consequence of our wide mullions.

Mayo Window



William Worrell Mayo was baptised in Eccles in 1819. He studied science in Manchester under John Dalton and emigrated to the United States in 1846.

Initially working as a pharmacist, he set up a medical practice in Rochester in 1863.

His two sons qualified in medicine in 1883 and 1884 and, in 1889, the three doctors established what was to become the Mayo Clinic. William Worrell died in 1911; this window was installed by his sons, William James and Charles Horace in 1929.



Air Training Corps Window

Fourteen members of the 292 (Eccles) squadron and the 1099 (Walkden) squadron of the Air Training Corps were killed during the Second World War whilst serving in the Fleet Air Arm or RAF. This is one of the first windows to be dedicated to members of the RAF.



East Window

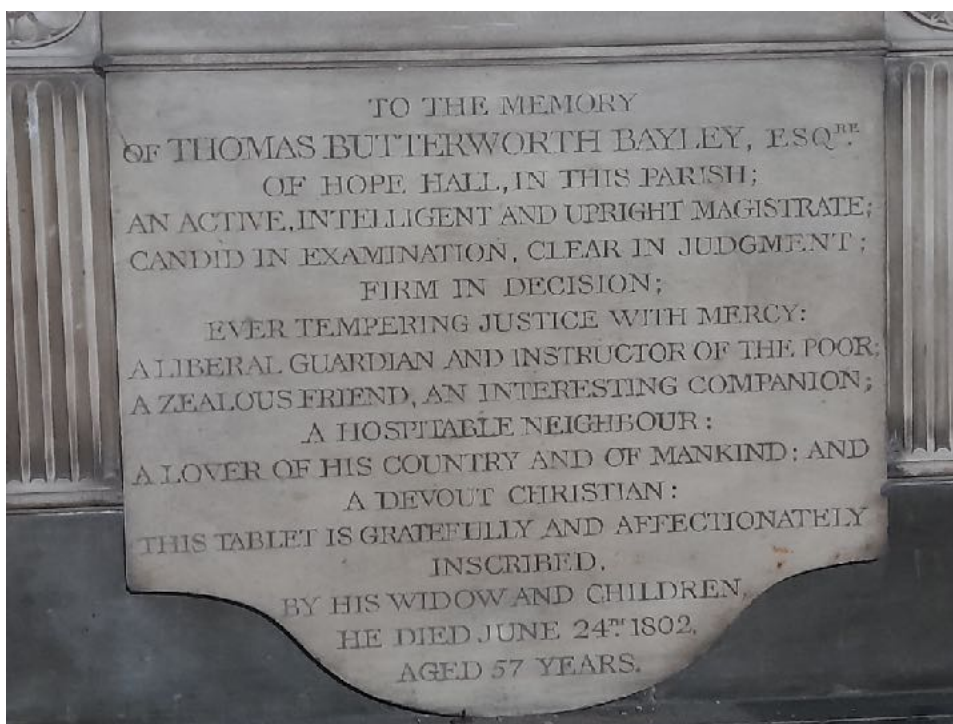


The East window was installed as part of the Pitcairn renewal of 1862. It was extensively damaged in the Manchester Christmas blitz of 1940. Those areas of stained glass which were lost or shattered were deliberately replaced with clear panels as a reminder of the perils of war and to be a memorial to those who were killed.

Memorials¹¹

Butterworth Bayley (Marble, West Porch)

A memorial to the magistrate, philanthropist and reformer who lived at nearby Hope Hall (d 1802). He was associated with the New Bayley prison, and a founder member of the Manchester Board of Health and the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.



Agecroft Hall and The Dautesey's (Brass, behind pulpit)



This records several generations of the Dautesey family who are buried beneath the Chancel. The first internment was of William Dantesie Esq in 1639, the last of Rev John Dautesey MA of Agecroft Hall in 1813. Agecroft Hall was the Dautesey's family home for 400 years.

Initially in a rural setting, the building saw many renovations but by the 1920's it had become derelict. Sold to an American businessman in 1926, Agecroft Hall was transported to Richmond, Virginia. First rebuilt as a family home, it is now a thriving museum.

William Dautesey (West wall near Font)

Died 16th March 1648 aged 28
NON EST MORTALE QVOD
OPTO (I seek not what is mortal)



John Greaves
(Marble, West Porch)



John Greaves of Highfield, Pendleton was a banker and philanthropist. He died on 10th December 1815, aged 61. His wife, Mary died 11th December 1823, aged 69.

A son, also John Greaves, was a JP and Deputy Lieutenant of Lancashire. He died 8th July 1849

George Legh of Barton
(Wood, North wall nave)

Here lyeth y body of George Legh of Barton in y^e country palatine of Lancaster esq, son and heire of George Legh of Barton esq by Frances his wife and daugh^r to Tho: Brook of Norton esq; yonger sone of George Legh of High Legh in y^e couty palatine of Chester esq & son and heire to his mother Anne daughter and coheir to John Booth of Barton esq. the said George married Hanna daughter & coheire to Thom: Whitby of y^e city of Chester esq & relict of Edw: Morgill of Moston gentleman but died without issue y^e .. day of December: A^o 1674



Arthur Temple Lyttelton D.D.
(Brass, North of pulpit)

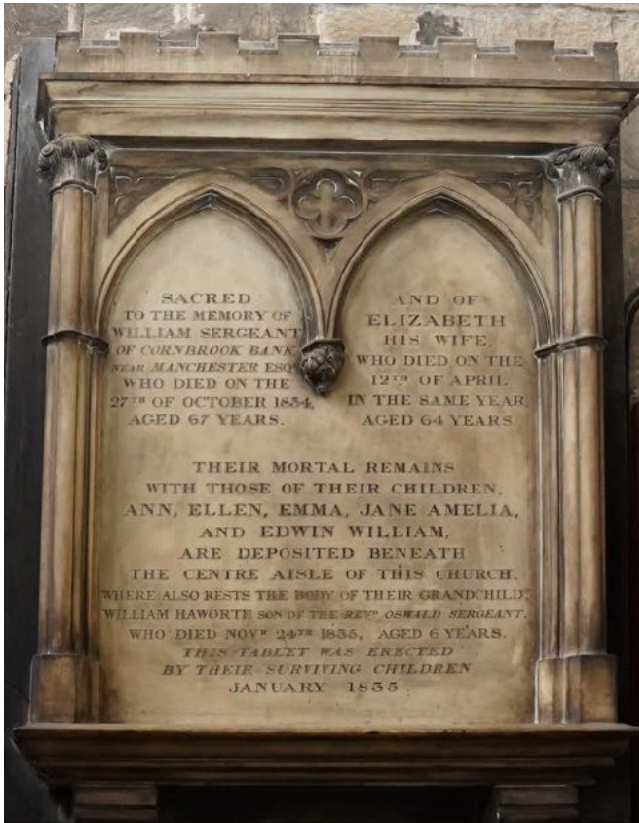
First master of Selwyn College, Cambridge
1882 – 1893

Vicar of Eccles
1893 - 1898

Bishop of Southampton
1898 - 1903

The Sergeant family

(Marble, West wall near font)



Memorial to William and Elizabeth Sergeant
Cornbrook Bank, Manchester

Both died in 1854 aged 67 and 64
respectively

"Their mortal remains with those of their children, Ann, Ellen, Emma, Jane Amelia and Edwin William are deposited beneath the centre aisle of this church where also rests the body of their grandchild William Haworth, son of the Rev Oswald Sergeant who died November 24th 1855 aged 6 years This tablet was erected by their surviving children January 1856"

(South wall of nave near south door)



Harriet Sergeant,
daughter of
William & Elizabeth
Sergeant
died 19th January
1848
aged 30 years

Memorial to W and JG Whitaker

(Marble, West wall, behind Verger's pew)

WILLIAM WHITAKER
OF HIGHER BENTCLIFFE
Died 23rd March 1843, age 67

*"HE LIVED RESPECTED,
HE DIED REGRETTE"*

and

JOHN GIBSON WHITAKER
OF HIGHER BENTCLIFFE,
8th Hussars

Died 27th January 1859, age 87



Churchyard

The churchyard extends over three acres (12 000 sq m). The original boundary was circular, suggesting it is far older than the church itself.

An eighteenth century bulbous sundial near the South Porch is Grade 2 listed. The bronze dial is broken.¹²

In the nineteen fifties a decision was made to convert the graveyard into a community garden.



Some gravestones were transferred to the East wall, to represent the designs and styles of each century. The names on all those with readable inscriptions - there were over ten thousand - were recorded. The vaults and graves were then filled in and the headstones lowered, to be covered with top soil. The site was then grassed over and, in the presence of the Bishop of Manchester on 21st May 1961, handed over to the Borough of Eccles. Salford City Council continues to care for the churchyard.

A memorial to local taxi driver Alan Henning was recently installed against the south wall of the church. Alan was taking relief supplies to people in Syria when he was murdered by militants.

References

1. Pevsner N (2002) The Buildings of South Lancashire. p 107. Yale University Press
2. Hampson CD (1948) A Short History of Eccles Parish Church. Local pamphlet
3. Harland, J. (1864) The Ancient Parish Church of Eccles: Its Antiquity, Alterations and Improvements. Eccles; A. Shuttleworth, pp.81. BBR942.72E9 Manchester Archives
4. Taylor T W (1956) Know Your Ancient Parish Church Part 2 p9 . Parish Archives
5. Parkinson GS (1977 / 79) Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives. Miscellaneous records relating to St Mary's, including Visitation Returns (1846) and Architects Report (1849) GB127.L49
6. Historic England: St Mary the Virgin, Eccles
Grade 1 1067498.
First listed 24th Feb 1964
7. Historic England Heritage at Risk Register 2024
Condition: Poor. Priority: A
"Immediate risk of further rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed"
8. Mayhew - Smith & Hayward (2021) Britain's Pilgrim Places p394
Eccles to Manchester; British Pilgrimage Trust
9. Greater Manchester Archaeological Contracts (1995), University of Manchester. The South Chancel Vault , Eccles Parish Church, Salford
10. Jones N (1998) Following in the Footsteps of Time. Local pamphlet
11. Vigeon E (2011) The Monumental, Memorial and Other Inscriptions within the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin Eccles. Eccles Parish Church. Croftprint Ltd Horwich. Manchester Public Library
12. Historic England: Sundial in churchyard
Grade 2 1162811
First listed 16th July 1987