

THE STONE ALTAR AT ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, DARTON



If only stones could speak, then the altar would have quite a story to tell from its inception and placement in church in the 11th century.

Darton and Kexborough both feature in the Domesday Book in 1086 and to all intents and purposes the altar would have been in place at that time, although the earliest written record of a church in Darton is in 1150.

During the Reformation, Henry VIII was more preoccupied with the dissolution of the monasteries, when the monks from Monk Bretton Priory (and builders of the present phase of the church) were deprived of their living and accommodation and evicted in 1537 – only 20 years after they completed the present building. Throughout the Reformation the church escaped the ravages of Thomas Cromwell, and physically it would have remained intact. It was during Edward VI's reign (1547 – 53) when parish churches were desecrated as the effects of extreme Protestantism began to bite. The Protestants were given full rein to destroy all paintings, frescoes, statues, rood screens, stained glass windows and altars in all the parish churches on the pretext that they were associated with superstition.

Our altar escaped damage but was removed and placed in the churchyard. It is not known whether it was buried for safe keeping or whether it merely became part of a footpath. A section of the surface is worn and may have been exposed, but some 370 years later the vicar (Rev. Harold F. Elgood) in 1924 decided to raise the stone to satisfy his curiosity. He was amazed to find that he had uncovered the original altar, displaced during the Reformation. The altar was identified by the five crosses which had been carefully sculptured into the surface, when it was consecrated in Norman times. (The five crosses represent the Five Wounds of Christ.)

The altar would have been a magnificent feature when it was first consecrated in the 11th century. It may also have had an inscription running along the front chamfered edge, but weathering has taken its toll over the centuries as it lay in the churchyard.

Thankfully it is now back in its original position in the chancel as a centre for worship and the focal point within the church.

Tony Warden