

**YE OLDE WHITE CHAPPEL IN THE NORTH**  
**A Short History of Whitechapel Church**

It is generally recognised that the foundation date of Whitechapel is 1134, although very little is known about it except that it was built as a Chapel of Ease to the Parish Church of Birstall. The townships served by 'Ye Olde White Chappel in the North', as it came to be known were that of Cleckheaton, which included the hamlets of Scholes and Oakenshaw, and the township of Wyke. A feature of these chapels is that they possessed a font 'so that none might die unbaptised'. However the rights of marriage and burial were reserved to the mother church. The two townships embraced by the Chapelry were at this time under different Lords of the Manor and the Longvilliers, the Lords of Cleckheaton, did not live in the area and consequently the duty of providing for their tenants spiritual needs would be less on their mind. The erection of the building seems to have been dependent upon the joint action of the Rector and the inhabitants and it is possible that one Lord was persuaded to provide the land whilst the other would help the freeholders with the cost of building. There is no evidence that anyone but the Incumbent of Birstall was responsible for the Chapelry, which was served by one of his Chaplains.

It is probable that the church was rebuilt between 1300 and 1600 and the first suggestion for the formation of a separate parish was made by the Parliamentary Commissioners in 1650 but nothing came of it at the time. By the end of the seventeenth century the building had fallen into disrepair and rebuilding was started in 1706, at the instigation of Dr. Richard Richardson M.D. of North Bierley who was then Lord of Cleckheaton. This is recorded on the top lintel of the main door with the inscription, 'This ancient Place of God's worship was Rebuilt in the year of our Redemption 1706' followed by the names of the wardens. It was due to Dr. Richardson's efforts that Whitechapel became a parish in its own right in 1731 when the patronage was invested in him and his heirs.

In 1782 the structure was repaired and the walls and roof increased in height but by 1820 - 21 the church was once more said to be ruinous and was again rebuilt and enlarged. This too is recorded in a second inscription over the main door 'This place of God's worship called the Old Whitechapel was rebuilt Anno Dom 1821'. A three decker pulpit and high pews with doors were installed at this time together with an organ which was placed in the West Gallery. However on the 7th of January 1839, during a great storm, the Bell Turret fell through the roof and crashed into the organ. The single bell, which may have been of pre Reformation date and which had been recast and increased in weight in 1709 and again in 1766, was found on the floor of the Nave. This can now be seen lying below the pulpit. A peel of eight 'Harrington' tubular bells were procured in 1889 as a memorial to the Rev. Robert Fetzer Taylor who died in 1886.

The above mentioned pews, pulpit and North Gallery were removed in the late 1880's when the church underwent modification. The sounding board of that pulpit can now be found in the ceiling of the Warden's Vestry. In addition the organ was brought down from the West Gallery and fitted in the North East corner.

The church we see today is much as it was after the last extensive renovation carried out between 1932 and 1934 when a new raised roof was fitted and the organ again moved back to the Gallery but this time with a separate console on the North Side behind the Choir. In 1969 the Vicar's Vestry was built in the place previously occupied by the organ.

Evidence of the chapels antiquity is well illustrated by the Font which has been dated by experts as having been carved no later than 1120, in a very early Norman style. The decoration consists of geometrical patterns and the nude figures of a male and female, said by some to represent Adam and Eve and so refer to the Fall, the effects of which are done away with in Baptism. There is also a cover from a stone coffin, carved with a Maltese Cross and thought to be from that of a Knight Templar or Knight Hospitalar. This is now set into the wall of the Porch which was built in 1923 as a memorial to those members of the church who gave their lives in the First World War.

The Rev. Jonas Eastwood, Vicar from 1757 to 1772, is the person we have to thank for our earliest church registers for baptisms and burials which were begun by him in 1761. The earliest known gravestone is dated 1707. Marriages were not performed here until 1837.