

An Abandoned Church at Formby

JENNIFER LEWIS

The present church of St Luke stands on a site slightly to the north of an area of land known as 'Old Burying Ground'. The modern church was built in 1855 and replaced an earlier building supposedly abandoned in the first half of the 18th century due to persistent inundation of the site by sand.

The six inch Ordnance Survey map of 1848 records 'site of church' which it depicts as a rectangular building standing in the centre of a square enclosure named 'Old Church Yard'. The modern (1974) Ordnance Survey 1:10 000 sheet, SD 20 NE, makes no such comment regarding an earlier church, though the 1:25 000 sheet marks 'site of church' at SD 28090668, a little to the south east of the modern edifice.

Anciently, Formby, with Ravenmeols and Ainsdale, formed a detached portion of the parish of Walton-on-the-Hill. No church is recorded in the locality in the Domesday Book, but it seems that a church must have been established shortly afterwards. Grants made to Cockersand Abbey in the late 12th century record the following information: 'Grant in frankalmoign from Henry son of Warin of Lancaster . . . of two "lands" in Ravenmeols, to wit, one between the churchyard and the highway at the western plot and the other on the north next the church ditch in length' (Chet Soc 1900, 565). A second grant from Henry de Lea to the canons of Cockersand refers to a messuage extending from the threshold of Hugh the pounour to the toft of Robert, son of the priest (Chet Soc 1900, 566).

Deeds of the 13th century appear to confirm the existence of the church. A grant of land in Formby was made by Hugh, son of Master Roger of Derby, to Robert, son of Richard de Formby, son of Albinus the priest (DDFo 13/3). In a document dated 1240/1247, Hugh Honimouth quitclaimed to Sir John de Lee, Knight, the lands which Robert the chaplain held of the grantee in Ravenmeols (Rec Soc 1936, no 743). The Victoria County History (3, 1907, 48, n3) suggests that 'The Priests' seems to have been a holding which gave a surname to the tenant; land in Riccunifeld was granted by Stephen dil Prestes de forneby to John le Norreys in the period 1280 to 1284 (Rec Soc 1939, 183, no 1007).

Will. de Adbaston was parochial chaplain of Ravenmeols in 1340 (Rec Soc 1913, 107, no 665). Gilbert Blevyn was chaplain in 1442 (DDFo 13/5) and in 1485 a grant of land in Formby was made to John Dey and Hugh Lathum, chaplains (DDFo 13/8-11). By 1516 Roger Dobbe was chaplain; a ditch in Formby, known as Dobb's Gutter, still exists and may have formed the boundary of land held by Roger or his family.

Although it seems apparent that a chapel had existed at Formby throughout the medieval period, it is strange that no mention is made of such a building in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of Henry VIII (Caley & Hunter, 1834, V 221). The Valor recorded Edward Molyneux as rector of Walton, and Thomas Norres as vicar, with a chantry priest at Walton chantry. However, the VCH lists the curates and vicars who supposedly served Formby chapel from 1558, though it seems possible that their ministry was not always on a regular basis.

Local tradition believes that the church was finally abandoned in 1739, but it seems likely that the church was already in some state of decay before that date, although the chapel wardens' accounts, which date from 1705, suggest that the church was kept in reasonably good repair (Appendix). The storms of autumn 1720, recorded in the diaries of Nicholas Blundell (Tyrer, 1972), caused havoc in the township of Little Crosby, and large tracts of land along the coast were destroyed by the action of sea or sand (Beck, 1953).

With regard to the actual church building again little is known. A plan of 1557/58 (PRO, MR2) shows the church in Formby to be of a size comparable with that of Halsall Church, and to have had a spire. In addition, it is recorded that there had been at least one bell in the early church. It bore the date 1661 and was transferred to the new church, dedicated to St Peter, on its consecration in 1747 (Barsley, 1955, 12). The earlier church was given a grant of money from Queen Anne's Bounty in 1710, but it seems possible that part of this was used to establish the registers for the chapel, which commenced in that year. A gap of nine years in the chapel wardens' accounts, 1734 to 1743, may well relate to the period when the church was finally abandoned.

Of the actual construction and plan of the church there is no evidence outside that of the chapel wardens' accounts. It has already been noted that the church had a steeple, and in 1711 2s 1d was spent on 'glasing the bellhouse window'. Other entries regarding pointing of the church, suggest that it was built of brick or stone, and it seems likely that 'slate from the Delfe for the Chapel' was used for flooring or roofing. Stone, with adhering mortar, and some blocks with signs of having been dressed, can still be seen in the churchyard to the south of the modern church. The most spectacular of these is known locally as the 'Godstone'. It consists of a broken building stone on one face of which is a deeply incised

cross, surmounted by a perfect circle. The cross stands on a base of three steps. Local tradition states that prior to interment the corpse was carried three times around the Godstone. The stone is not in its original position: that it appears to have been originally a building stone suggests it may have come from the early church building.

In addition to the church, it is believed that there was a skull house in the churchyard, but its exact position is not now known.

Little is known as to the precise location of the early church. A newspaper report of 8 September 1894, refers to the funeral of Mr Richard Formby, junior. It was stated that 'in digging the new grave the workmen came across a coffin of red sandstone at a distance of 7 feet from the surface, as well as a portion of the old church wall'. Mr Formby's grave is just inside the present church gate, on the south side of the path. In the 19th century a font was rescued from a ditch where it had been used by local farmers for sharpening their scythes. It is of sandstone and circular, with the exterior surface cut into twenty three facets, all of which are absolutely plain and bear no trace of decoration. The font now stands inside the modern church and bears a plaque which states that it came from the old church which stood a little to the south east of the present building.

It appears that during the period following abandonment of the church burials continued to take place in the old churchyard. For the last 12 months, members of the Merseyside Archaeological Society, in conjunction with the Formby Society, have been undertaking a survey of the memorials in the old burying ground. The work is still in progress and it is hoped that a full analysis of the results will soon be completed.

Appendix

Extracts from Chapel wardens' accounts for the church at Formby (dedication not known)

	£	s	d
1705 Pointing ye church		18	0
1705 Drawing ye commandments		16	0
1705 Turf for ye church use		4	8
1705 Straw when ye church was plaistered		1	0
1706 An hour-glass for ye pulpit		1	2
1706 Whitelimeing ye church	2	9	0
1708 Stone from ye delf		5	4
1711 Lime and hair for mortar and 18 days pointing the chapel	1	7	6
1711 Glasing ye bellhouse window		2	1
1711 Rails for the communion table	1	17	10
1712 A sounding board for ye chapel	3	3	3
1716 Spent for drink at hanging the bells		1	0
1716 Slate from the delfe for the chapel		13	4
1716 18 days tearing the gallery and chapel		18	0
1716 Whitewashing the chapel	2	6	0
1716 Joiners' work in the gallery	6	10	0
1719 A dyale plate for chapel yard*		10	6

The above extracts are taken from notes contributed by Mr William Marshallsay to the Centenary Brochure of the Parish Church of St Luke, Formby, 1955, 23.

* The sun-dial was removed to St Peter's Church, and stands on the west side of the porch.

Bibliography

Barsley, H, 1955

Beck, J, 1953

Caley, J & Hunter, Rev J,
(eds) 1834

Chet Soc 1900

Rec Soc 1913

Rec Soc 1936

Rec Soc 1939

Tyrer, F, 1972

VCH 1907

A History of the Formby Chapel and the Ancient Parish of Formby.

The Church Brief for the Inundation of the Lancashire Coast in 1720, *THSLC* 105, 91-105.

Valor Ecclesiasticus, temp Henrici VIII auctoritate regia institus, Vol V.

Chartulary of Cockersand Abbey, *Chetham Society*, 43.

Moore MSS, *RSLC*.

De Houghton Deeds, *RSLC*, 88.

Norris Deeds, *RSLC*, 93.

The Diaries of Nicholas Blundell, 1720-1728, Vol 3, RSLC.

Victoria History for the County of Lancashire, Vol 3.

Abbreviations

DDFo Formby family muniments deposited at the Lancashire Record Office, Preston

PRO Public Record Office, London

RSLC Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire

THSLC Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire.