

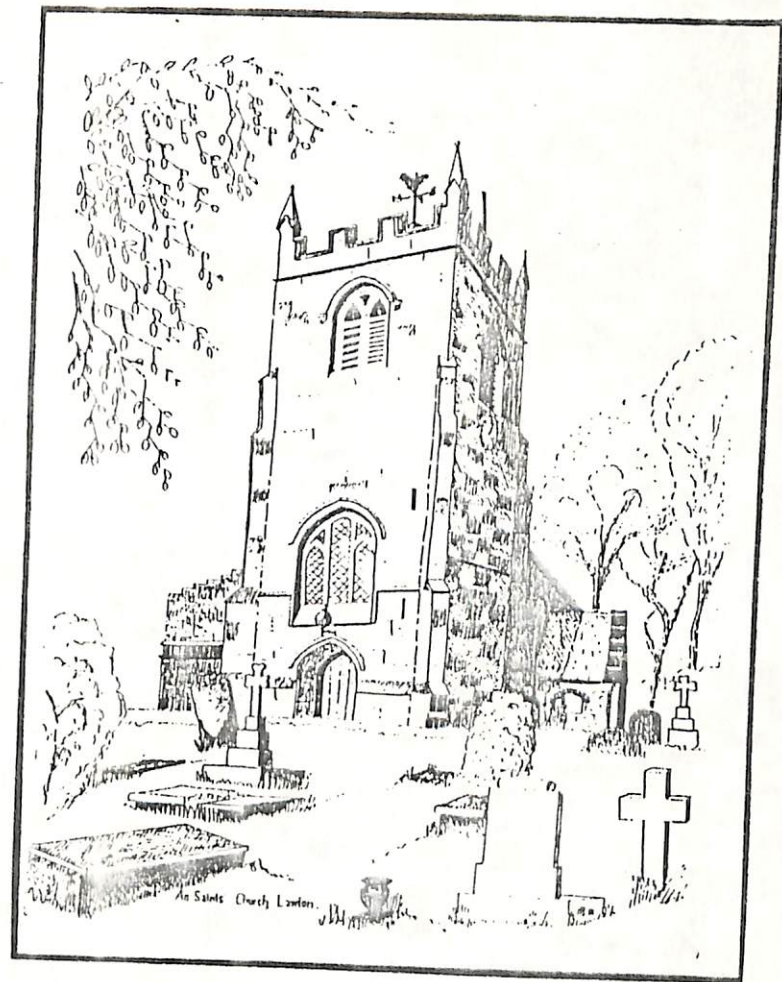
A HISTORY
OF
ALL SAINTS', CHURCH LAWTON

By
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(Rector)

PENTECOST 1988

Price

Cheshire, England



PRAISE THE LORD OUR GOD,
AND
WORSHIP AT HIS SACRED HILL.
THE LORD OUR GOD IS HOLY.

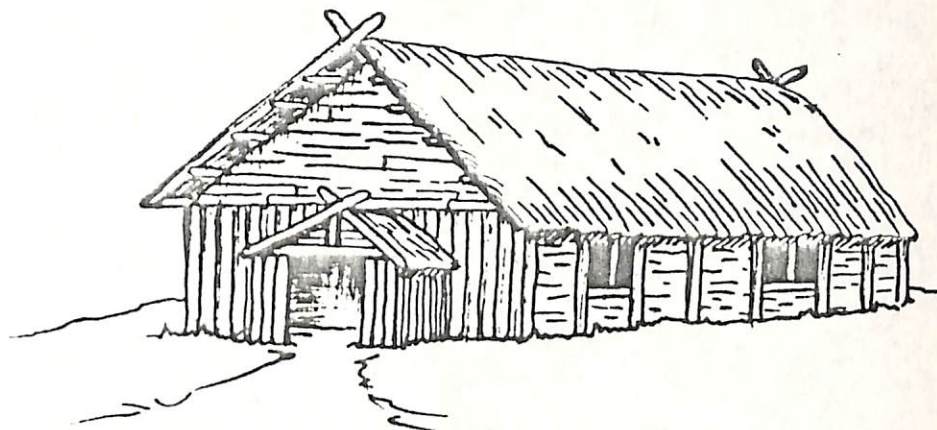
(PSALM 99:9)

A HISTORY OF ALL SAINTS', CHURCH LAWTON

The name Lawton itself is an indication of the parish's ancient origin. The word has a Saxon meaning, namely 'Farm by a mound', and it is assumed that the mound is the hillock upon which the present parish church stands, but whether or not the mound was a barrow (an archaeological burial tumulus) is not known. A dig on the field, some three-quarters of a mile away, between Crewe-road and Knutsford-road has in recent years unearthed 'urns' of a pre-historic period.

Lawton is however first identified for historical purposes in the eighth century because of an association with St. Werburgh. This devout lady was a daughter of the Saxon King Walpurgus (or Wulfhere) whose saintly life led her to be reputed as a royal abbess of several religious houses. On her death in Lincolnshire about the year 700 her body was taken to Chester to avoid the marauding Danes and it is believed that the cortage rested overnight on the site of Lawton church. The first monastery in Chester was founded in her name and to her memory and later became successively the Abbey and the Cathedral church of Chester.

William the Conqueror's Domesday Survey refers to the area as 'Lautune' and that it belonged to Hugo de Mara, who was one of the king's fellow Normans. The whole of the County of Cheshire had been given over to the king's brother-in-law Hugh Lupus (Hugh the Wolf), a character notorious for his riotous living who, on his deathbed, vowed to establish a church at Lawton "if the Lord would only spare him".



11th. Century



12th Century - 1550

This is a version of how the first church came to be built. The church lands were passed over to the Abbot of St. Werburgh's at Chester, a place of worship was erected and the Abbot appointed one Edward as the first Rector of Lawton in the year 1180. The architectural remain of this earliest church is the Norman Arch doorway over the South door.

Between 1180 and the fifteenth century the village of Lawton was in two halves, one half being the church lands, or the 'Glebe', on which is now built the Lawton Gate estate, and the remainder which was owned by the Squire of Lawton. The legend of the Lawton family dates back to around the year 1200 when King John was separated from his companions while hunting in the area. The story is that his horse reared and threw him when it was confronted by a great wolf, whereupon a nearby keeper came to the rescue and killed the wolf. The man gave his name as Keeper Adam de Lauton and, for saving his life, the King granted him all the land he could walk over in a week, taking the bleeding wolf as his starting point, "Moreover, the head of the wolf shall be thy crest", the King told him, "Thy deed will go down in history".

The Lawton family can thus trace their family-tree to the time of this exploit and their family crest is to be found several times in and around the present church. The Lawton Coat of Arms, which is linked with the Davenport family, consists of the three crosses of calvary and the Tudor Rose underneath a wolf licking its left shoulder - and the motto 'Spes Infracta' (Hope

Unbroken).

The church building itself undoubtedly underwent a number of changes over its eight centuries and may well have been a black and white type with a thatched roof but there are only artists' impressions of how it may have looked. There is mention in the Churchwardens' accounts of 1691 and 1707 of the purchase of '15 bags of moss for ye church roof' which suggests that the building was of wattle and daub. During improvement work which was carried out in 1873-74 the discovery was made of six Thirteenth Century Tiles which have been preserved in a carved frame at the back of the church made from an oak tree grown on the Lawton Estate, and which was donated to the church in 1971 by the former Lawton Hall School.

The Reformation which started during the reign of King Henry VIII included the dissolution of the monasteries and the disposal of their properties. It was at this time that the then Squire, William Lawton, acquired the Manor and the patronage of the Church from the Crown for the purchase price of £232: 14s: 2d. (c.1542).

It was during this part of the sixteenth century that the church at Lawton experienced other changes both in its outward appearance and within its walls. From 1530 to 1559 the Rector was one John Byber during whose ministry the effects of the English Reformation came to the parish. In 1538 the first Bible in the English language was placed in every parish church, and in 1549 the Latin Mass was replaced by the first

English Prayer Book, to be followed three years later by a more reforming book. By 1554 however the Roman Mass was restored under Queen Mary and continued until the Accession of Elizabeth in 1558. Rector Byber lived through all these changes and it was also during his incumbency, in 1536, that the Parish Registers were started and which still exist today in their original Latin language.

John Byber has left the parish a permanent memorial of his life and times as he was the one who was responsible for the building of the Church Tower, and his mortal remains are interred at the foot of the belfry stairway in a recessed altar tomb which bears his initials and a sculptured chalice and breviary, signs of his priesthood. The south facing outside wall of the tower also has "J B" carved between a chalice. The west facing wall of the tower also has the remains of carving, the type of which were despoiled by Puritan enthusiasts.

It appears that the Lawton family were Royalist sympathisers at the time of the Civil War, a period when the County of Cheshire was bitterly divided with the King's standard being raised at Chester while the town of Nantwich was a Parliamentary stronghold. In about the year 1656, during the Commonwealth rule, Charles II was concealed for a time at Lawton Hall and stood as a Sponsor at the baptism of one of the Squire's children (probable John Lawton on 7th May 1656). As a baptismal gift to the child the royal godparent gave a drinking cup, saying he "had naught else to offer". It is interesting to note that during the

period of the Puritan Commonwealth the sacrament of Baptism was supposed to be forbidden by Parliament.

Tragedy struck the church on a Sunday in early June 1652 when the area suffered a terrible thunderstorm. An entry in the church register reads, "A great black cloud poured down hail over an area of 60 miles by 2 miles. It killed small animals by hundreds and beat down men and horses". This occurred at the time of a church service just as Rector Ralph Sillito was commencing his sermon based on the text Philippians 3.8. There must have been a full congregation as people were standing in the belfry. It is reported that there was a terrifying clap of thunder, a blinding flash which caused some to fall to the floor, a dog yelped and a boy cried out for his brother. Surprisingly the service continued before it was realised that eleven men who had been in the Bell-house had been killed by lightning. A great throng attended the service when the victims were buried in the churchyard.

In those days the inhabitants of Lawton were mainly employed in agricultural pursuits and there is also mention of some salt mining at one time in the parish. The woodlands which then covered this part of South Cheshire contributed to charcoal making and this also encouraged the opening of an Iron-making furnace. A John Turner of Stafford obtained a 21-year lease in the year 1658 for the conversion of a corn-mill into a furnace - this must have been a substantial enterprise as he invested £3000 in the making of the Furnace and Forge. Subsequent records show that the Iron-making



1550 - 1798



1803 -

business was later leased to the Foley family who were great Iron-masters in the seventeenth century. During the period 1696 to 1704 the annual output of pig-iron rose from 700 tons to 900 tons, and up to 30 men would have been employed in the heyday of this former Lawton industry.

The next development which had a great effect upon Lawton was the construction of the Trent and Mersey Canal which was completed in 1777. This was one of the many such engineered by the famous James Brindley and this 93-mile waterway formed part of the busy network of horse-drawn water transport. The feature of the length through Church Lawton is the number of locks known as the Red Bull Flight and the Lawton Flight. The church registers provide evidence of the many who were employed as Overseers, Lock-keepers and Boatmen, and the carrying of coal, salt and materials used in the nearby Pottery industry kept the canal very busy until the coming of the steam-railway. Now after years of being virtually un-used the canal is again busy as a popular section on the waterways holiday route.

The church registers from this time on show that many Lawton men were employed as colliers in the many coal-mines in the area, and at one time there was a coal-pit at the Red Bull end of the parish.

The south face of the church tower contains an ancient clock whose original mechanism dates back to the seventeenth century and the churchwardens' old accounts contain a reference to the purchase of "oyle for ye clock" in 1691.

Lawton church is justly proud of its peal of eight bells which are still in full use. Five were installed in 1713, having been cast by R.D.Saunders of Bromsgrove, and are inscribed with the names of their respective donors, namely, 'the ironmasters of Lawton Furnace', 'William Lawton Esq.', 'Thomas Rowly and James Beech, churchwardens' and 'John Lawton Esq, Patron.Charles Shaw, Rector'. The present peal was completed in 1901 by which time three further bells made by Taylor's of Loughborough had been added. These bear the names of, 'A.Rigby of The Grove', 'the parishioners and friends of Church Lawton' and was known as the 'Queen Victoria Memorial Bell' erected during the 52-year long incumbency of Rector Samuel Nunn (1864 to 1916).

In the year 1798 the Nave of the church was destroyed by fire, although the Tower survived. The opportunity was then taken to re-build a more substantial building and this was done by the use of stone from Smallwood, bricks from Burslem and timber from Liverpool Docks. The total cost of restoration came to about £800 which was finally paid off by 1813.

A more ambitious extension scheme was considered in 1873 which would have involved expenditure of up to £3000 but this was not proceeded with. However, a number of improvements were carried out in that year. The former box-pews were replaced by the present pews (the older type can still be seen in the gallery). Also at this time the present two-manual Organ was installed, being a gift from the wife of the then Squire. Prior to that time the gallery (added in

1717) accomodated an 'Orchestra' to accompany the singing; from 1807 there had been a Bass-Viol, a Clarinet, a Bass-Fiddle, a Violin and a Violin-Cello. In those days repairs to instruments, renewal of strings and 'fiddle-sticks' were a cost that had to be met from the Churchwardens' funds.

The church has retained its close link with the Lawton family who still hold the patronage to the living. The present Lawton Hall which was the Lawton family home up to the early part of the present century dates from the eighteenth century having replaced a former hall. It is believed that an underground passage exists between the Hall and the church.

On a visit to the church there are a number of other interesting things to look for.

The Royal Coat of Arms which hangs from the gallery is dated 1802 and has therefore been in the church since the reconstruction which was completed in that year. The Arms are those of King George III and contain a rare feature, in the centre can be seen the Arms of Hanover which was included in the British Coat of Arms between the years 1801 and 1816. On the north and south walls are six fine examples of Hatchments of the Lawton family which were placed in the church during the nineteenth century and on the occassion of the death of a male member of the family.

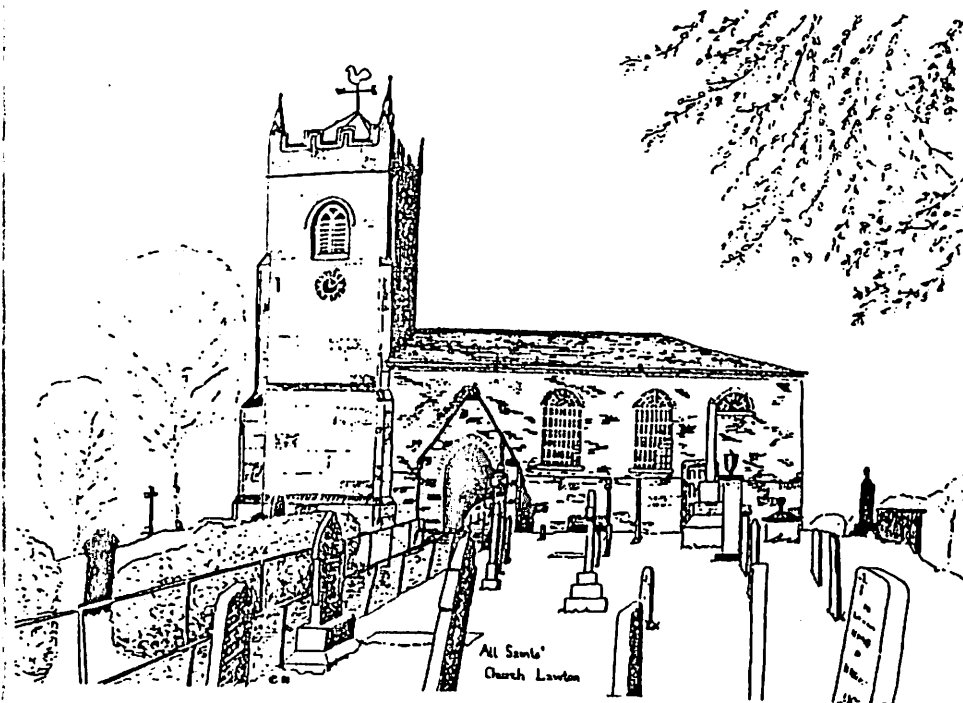
The Adam and Eve Alms Dish, which is still

in use, has had a spectacular history and is one of the very few of such dishes that remain in existence. It was stolen in 1817 by thieves who thought it was made of gold, but upon discovering that it was of brass they flung it in to the nearby canal. There it lay for 80 years before it was retrieved when the canal was dredged and having been restored it still shows marks of its time in the waters.

An advertisement was published in the Staffordshire Advertiser of 15th June 1816 in which Samuel Pointon and John Hall, churchwardens of Church Lawton offered a reward of ten guineas (no mean sum for those days) for information concerning a thief who had recently broken into the church through a bricked-up doorway and stolen a Flagon, a Communion Cup and a Salver (all of silver). These, unlike the Adam and Eve Alms Dish, were never recovered but they were replaced by Mr. William Lawton with a fine Wine Flagon, two Chalices and a Communion Paten, dated 1817, which are still among the church's treasures.

The pews on either side of the altar both used to have their own private doorways, the one on the pulpit side being the Lawton family pew and the one on the south side was for the use of the Rector's family.

The Altar Table appears to have been the work of a local joiner made up of a mixture of wood, and of more artistic skill are a pair of seventeenth century Yorkshire type chairs. One of these was found in scattered pieces some years ago but was restored in 1983.



A brass memorial tablet over the Rector's stall and to the memory of William P.V. Nunn who died in 1873 contains the symbols of the four gospel writers, namely a human form for Matthew, a lion for Mark, an Ox for Luke and an eagle for John (see Ezekiel 1:10). Another memorial to I Cartwright of Lee Hall and dated 1718 has the sign of the skull and crossbones which at that time was not an uncommon embellishment on memorials.

There is an interesting Benefactions Board dated 1801 which was rescued from decay during the early 1980's and it records a number of very interesting endowments and gifts to the church from 1667 onwards. These include the weekly supply of thirteen penny loaves to the dozen to the poor of the parish each Sunday, and also that the interest from a bequest of £12 to be paid annually to the Rector on condition that he preached an Anniversary sermon and taught three of the poorest children until they could read the Bible through.

The Bellingers' Tower as well as having some memorials to past ringers also houses three boards on which are written the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. These were introduced into churches at the time of the Reformation and would have originally been in the Nave of the church for all to see and learn. This room also has a reminder of the days when bellringers were sustained by a regular supply of ale. There is a fine jug which was presented to Church Lawton ringers by the ringers of Christ Church, Tunstall in 1883, together with five individually numbered drinking mugs.

The church also has a mid-eighteenth century stone Font which is now unfortunately in two parts awaiting proper restoration; for a number of years after it came out of liturgical use it had served as a bird-bath in the Rectory garden.

The extensive churchyard has been a burial ground for hundreds of years and continues in use at the present time. In former years people were buried in unmarked graves and it was not until about the year 1700 that memorial stones were introduced and the very first were nothing more than markers simply bearing initials and year of death. Large flat stones became popular in the eighteenth century and the churchyard contains some interesting examples with informative details of the deceased. The 1800's brought more elaborate memorials into fashion and there is also one which is made of cast-iron. A wander round the older part of the churchyard gives an insight into the lives and occupations of the past inhabitants of Church Lawton.

The church is dedicated in the name of 'All Saints' and now ministers to a population of more than three thousand parishioners, being part of the Deanery of Congleton and within the Diocese of Chester. A pleasing feature of the building is the amount of natural light provided by the attractive clear windows. The small Chancel and Sanctuary area are combined and although lacking in space the church is ideal for intimate and congenial worship and the services which are provided are an assortment

of both traditional and modern forms of liturgy and music as means of fulfilling the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Bibliography includes :

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- 'History of County Palatine and City of Chester', by G.Omerod (1882 Helsby edition)
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