A SHORT HISTORICAL & SPIRITUAL GUIDE

Welcome to Halifax Minster

This short guide has been designed to help you to experience the history and spiritual presence of this Minster Church.

If you have any questions, please ask someone at the information desk at the entrance to the Minster.

The numbers in the text refer to the numbers on the plan view of the Minster.

The sections in *italic* are specifically designed to enhance your spiritual experience of the building.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

The Minster

This church of St John the Baptist Halifax was given its Minster status by the Bishop of Wakefield in 2009 in recognition of its important role in the civic life of the town and borough.

Coincidentally, like the Minster at York, this modern Minster also has a monastic foundation. Cluniac monks built the original church in the 12th Century, but the present structure can be traced to 1438 - the north wall is thought to be from the earlier building and if you look carefully you may spot the zigzag designed chevron stones from the Norman period.

The 92 painted wooden panels in the Nave and Chancel ceilings represent the coats of arms of the first 30 vicars, local families and the twelve tribes of Israel.

Much of the interior was significantly altered by Gilbert Scott in the 1878 restoration, with the removal of galleries and plaster from the walls.

Today, Halifax Minster continues as a place of community worship and prayer, of civic engagement, culture and education.
1. Font Cover 15th century; originally brightly painted green, red and blue; hidden during the Civil War and commonwealth period (1653-1659) in a house owned by a church member.

2. Commonwealth Window The Minster’s Commonwealth windows were given by the widow of Nathaniel Waterhouse following the destruction of the medieval stained glass during the civil war. The largest window at the West End is a 19th century repair but others in the Wellington Chapel are original.

3. Box Pews Built between 1633 and 1636; originally higher and lowered 60cm by George Gilbert Scott in 1878.

4. Rokeby Chapel Built in memory of William Rokeby, Vicar 1502-1521, and Archbishop of Dublin - his heart is buried in a lead box in the church!

5. Organ Rebuilt by Harrison in 1928; contains pipe work from 1766 Snetzler Organ. L William Herschel was the first organist. He later became personal astronomer to king George III and discovered the planet Uranus.

6. East Window Provided through the efforts of industrialist Edward Akroyd in 1856 and designed by George Hedgeland; who submitted a prize-winning design at the Great Exhibition 1851.

7. Misericords These three misericords (‘mercy seat’ for monks to lean against in long services) were probably installed in the Minster when it was linked to Lewes Priory before the dissolution of the monasteries.


9. Holdsworth Chapel Built by Robert Holdsworth (Vicar 1525-56); he became involved in a local feud and was murdered in the vicarage. Also sited to the West end is the 18th Century Snetzler organ acquired in 2015.

10. Porch Medieval headstones featuring cross designs and clipping shears from the 12th century bear witness to both Christian burial practices and the historic importance of the wool trade. The remains of the stone memorial to Anne Lister of Shibden Hall may also be found in the porch.

11. Old Tristram Licensed beggar from late 17th century who operated within the precincts of Halifax Parish Church during the late seventeenth century, bearing a scroll with the legend: ‘Pray Remember the Poor’. Testimony to the economic hardship experienced by many during this period.

12. Bishop Ferrar Memorial Born in Halifax; Bishop of St. David’s under Henry VIII and then executed for his opposition to Mary I.
**Finding Yourself**

Seek to find yourself in the beauty and peace of the otherness in this place.

In this spiritual journey allow yourself time (at least two minutes) to experience each location, to sit, to ponder, and absorb the atmosphere before moving on.

Take your time and enjoy the place where you now find yourself: 'where prayer has been valid' for over 900 years. It’s all about your journey, not reaching any particular goal or destination.

Be gentle with yourself, then you can be gentle with others.

---

**The View from the West**

Sit beside Old Tristram (11). Consider his life and take in the view of the church.

What has life been for the people of Halifax?

Marvel at the overall vista of stone and light that will have changed little since then.

What can this place mean to you now?

---

**Prayer in the Choir**

Go through the screen and sit near the organ (5) in one of the clergy seats (known as stalls or misericords) facing the East window (6).

In misericords like these and those in the sanctuary (7), monks and priests in Monasteries and Minsters will have come into church seven times a day to sing prayers and psalms to plainsong chants.

Find yourself in ‘The timeless moment ... never and always’.

As you absorb the vigour of the colours of the great East Window and follow the great Christian story it portrays, ponder the continuity and change of life – that of the centuries at Halifax Minster, and that of your own life and family.
Destruction and Restoration

Sit in the Duke of Wellington’s Regimental Chapel (8), and face the plain glass windows to the South.

These are the Commonwealth Windows, installed here and at the West end of the church (2) to replace the stained glass destroyed in the 16th 17th Centuries.

Consider the simplicity, yet beauty, of the design. Recognise that without the destruction there would have been no reason to restore.

In this place where we are reminded of military might and its effect, allow yourself to identify, both in history and in your own life’s journey where gifts of beauty and love have emerged from periods of painful loss.

Is this the nature of human life on earth?

Retained in Memory

In leaving the Duke’s chapel (8) note the Chrysanthemum window on your left. This window is given to perpetuate the memory of a former worshipper.

Sit in the Rokeby Chapel (4), or the Holdsworth Chapel (9), and realise these chapels were built to remember and pray for former vicars of the parish.

We do not need monuments to leave our mark on the world. Like the flame for ever burning in the Holdsworth Chapel, the things we have done change what there is and what will be.
Medieval Foundations

There may have been a hermitage dedicated to Saint John the Baptist dating from the seventh century or a Saxon Church linked with Dewsbury. It is thought that the Cluniac monks had constructed a church at Halifax by the early twelfth century. Fragments of an Anglo-Norman Church situated to the north of the present building are clearly discernible in the distinctive carved chevron stonework. A medieval grave cover in the south porch (10) (dated 1150), depicting a Pair of cropper’s shears, provides the earliest evidence for the textile industry in Calderdale.

The church was substantially enlarged in a Perpendicular style, from 1437 (3), with the construction of the tower in 1449 (2).

Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the Elizabethan Church Settlement:

Halifax Parish Church experienced the impact of successive religious changes in the sixteenth century when the cloth trade flourished in Halifax.

William Rokeby (Vicar 1502 to 1521), was also Archbishop of Dublin from 1511 and officiated at the baptism of Mary Tudor in 1516. Following his death, his heart and bowels, entombed in a lead casket were buried beneath the chantry chapel (4) founded in his memory in 1533.

Following Henry VIII’s breach with Rome in 1538 Dr Robert Holdsworth, (Vicar 1525-56), dutifully placed an English Bible in Halifax Parish Church and adopted Cranmer’s new English prayer book for worship from 1549 demonstrating a growing Protestant commitment. However, during the Catholic reaction of Mary Tudor’s reign (1553-58), Holdsworth readily restored the Latin mass and after his death a chantry chapel was constructed on the south wall (9).

Later the parish of Halifax again displayed an increasingly militant Protestantism, until the Elizabethan church settlement was accepted with minimal opposition in the parish.

Century of Revolution

Halifax Parish Church witnessed further upheavals during the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century when Halifax, as a Puritan stronghold, suffered occupation sequentially by Royalist and Parliamentarian forces.

Dr John Favour (Vicar 1593 - 1623) promoted Puritanism and his successor Dr Robert Clay (1624- 28) assembled the parochial chained library, a collection of rare books now housed in the University of York.

Dr Richard Marsh appointed, vicar in 1638, sought to restore the liturgical practice of the Pre-Reformation Church, arousing the opposition of the Puritan laity.

Enduring symbols of the Commonwealth period were the distinctive plain-glazed windows, donated by Dorothy Waterhouse in memory of her husband in 1652, when the Commonwealth Arms were also installed.

The font, which had been removed in 1645 was reinstated in 1661 and used again for baptisms.

Old Tristram (12) an effigy of a licensed beggar of the late seventeenth century gives testimony to the hardship experienced by many during this period.

By the end of the 17th Century Halifax had its first evangelical vicar; the Revd Dr Henry William Coulthurst (1763 - 1817).

Handel's Messiah was performed in the church after the installation of an organ built by John Snetzler in 1766 (5) and the first organist was William Herschel, later became personal astronomer to King George III.
The Light of the World

Christ is the traditional Christian expression of the transcendent: a presence often signified as light shining in the world.

‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it’

John 1:5

We pass on our light to others in the same way as we received it.

Before leaving you may wish to light a candle, so that as you carry away in your heart the insight you have received, you will be reminded that the light of the world burns on eternally in this place.

If you have experienced the spirit in your time here, join us in our services of worship when we come together, discovering also the light of the world in one another.

What have you received and what might your legacy might be?

‘Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace.’

Luke 2:29

[Historical research courtesy of Dr John A. Hargreaves.]

---

Industrial Expansion and the Victorian Restoration

In 1903 Halifax’s population, peaked at nearly 105,000.

An abortive attempt was made in 1875 to make Halifax the nucleus of a new diocese for the West Riding, however, a new diocese based on Wakefield was established in 1888.

During the era of the Industrial expansion Halifax Parish Church underwent major restoration.

During Charles Musgrave’s ministry (1827-1875), Edward Akroyd’s endeavours led to the installation, in 1856, of a new stained glass East Window (6) by George Hedgeland who had won a design award at the Great Exhibition of 1851. His successor, the Revd Francis Pigou, Vicar of Halifax from 1875-1889, oversaw a complete restoration and refurbishment of the medieval parish church. The work (completed under the direction of Sir George Gilbert Scott and his son John Oldrid Scott between May 1878 and October 1879 at a cost of £20,000) removed the eighteenth century galleries, lowered the height of the pews (3), altered floor levels, removed the old plaster and the three decker pulpit, and provided a lavish new organ casing designed by John Oldrid Scott (5).

Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries: War, Peace and New Opportunities

Halifax people suffered the devastating impact of the two world wars and subsequently the economic and social effects of the decline of manufacturing.

The Parish Church became the focus of civic remembrance particularly after the establishment of the Duke of Wellington’s regimental chapel (8) in the Parish Church in 1951 and the re-location of the war memorial to a site adjoining the Parish Church in the 1980s.

The development of tourism in post-industrial Halifax has presented new opportunities for witness in the new millennium. The installation of a new translucent glass doorway to create a more welcoming entrance at the south-west porch (10) in 2005, and the re-ordering of the front of the Nave (3) in 2016 to provide a large open area for worship and other large scale events symbolise the church’s continuing commitment to serve both the local community and the growing number of visitors to the town in the post-industrial era.