Since the completion of the great west tower of Halifax Parish Church in the late fifteenth century four grotesque, spouting gargoyles have enjoyed a bird’s-eye view of Halifax. They have witnessed not only the faith journey of a vibrant community centred on Halifax’s historic Parish Church, but also the vicissitudes, which have shaped the history of the town of Halifax.

The pre-conquest history of Christianity in Halifax remains obscure. It has been suggested that there may have been a hermitage on the banks of the Hebble dedicated to Saint John the Baptist dating from the seventh century mission of Paulinus to the North or possibly a later Saxon Church linked with the Anglian parish of Dewsbury, but both theories remain conjectural.
Even after 1066, evidence is sparse, and there is no specific reference to a church or priest at Halifax in the Domesday Survey. However, the gift between 1078 and 1081 by the second Earl of Warenne, lord of the manor of Wakefield, of the rents and dues of the sub-manor of Halifax-cum-Heptonstall to the Benedictine Priory of Lewes, founded by his father, is documented, and it appears likely that the black-robed Cluniac monks had constructed a new 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 incorporated into a late-thirteenth rebuilding after the appointment of the first Vicar of Halifax, Ingelard Turbard, in 1274. Surviving Early English lancet windows in a three-bay length of masonry in the north wall have been attributed to this phase of rebuilding. Before 1274, absentee rectors, including such distinguished figures as John Talvace, later Archbishop of Lyons, Hubert Walter, later Archbishop of Canterbury and William Champvent, later Bishop of Lausanne, had administered the church.
A medieval grave cover in the south porch dated 1150, depicting a pair of cropper’s shears, provides the earliest evidence for the textile industry in Calderdale. Although plague, which claimed the lives of three later vicars, caused considerable economic and social dislocation in the late fourteenth century, during the fifteenth century the church was substantially enlarged in a magnificent perpendicular rebuilding in order to offer more spacious accommodation for the growing population of the parish sustained by the expanding textile industry.

Halifax Parish Church experienced the impact of successive religious changes in the sixteenth century during a period when the flourishing cloth trade in the parish of Halifax was hailed by the Elizabethan antiquary, William Camden, as one of the wonders of the Tudor Age.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the living at Halifax was held by Dr Thomas Brent, an ambitious pluralist, who had also served variously as a courtier, almoner and executor to Edward IV’s queen and chaplain to Henry VII. He was succeeded as Vicar of Halifax from 1502 to 1521 by one of the leading figures of the pre-Reformation Church, William Rokeby, who was also Archbishop of Dublin from 1511 and officiated at the baptism of Mary Tudor in 1516.

Following his death in Halifax, his heart and bowels, entombed in a lead casket were buried beneath the chancel of Halifax Parish Church, but later transferred to the chantry chapel founded in his memory in 1533.
In 1535, Dr Robert Holdsworth, Vicar of Halifax 1525-56, a wealthy pluralist and theological conservative, gloomily declared in the year following Henry VIII’s breach with Rome that ‘if the king reign any space he will take all that we ever had … and therefore I pray God send him a short reign’. He was fined heavily for treasonable speech, but his fears were realised when in 1537 the Cluniac priory of Lewes was dissolved and its estates transferred ultimately to the crown. In 1538 Holdsworth dutifully placed an English Bible in Halifax Parish Church and subsequently Halifax wills confirm a growing Protestant commitment amongst the laity. Holdsworth later closed the chantries in the parish following the enactment of the Chantries Act of 1548 and adopted Cranmer’s new English prayer book for worship on Easter Day 1549.

During the Catholic reaction of Mary Tudor’s reign (1553-58), Holdsworth readily restored the Latin mass and after his death a three-bay chantry chapel was constructed on the south wall, but the parish of Halifax began to display an increasingly militant Protestantism, particularly after Robert Ferrar, a native of the parish, went to the stake at Carmarthen in 1555 for refusing to renounce his ‘heresies, schisms and errors’.
However, the Elizabethan church settlement, embodied in the acts of supremacy and uniformity of 1559, was accepted with minimal opposition in the parish and in 1569-70 the parish remained famously loyal to the Queen during the Catholic rebellion of the northern earls.

- Halifax Parish Church witnessed further upheavals during the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century, a period of bitter conflict, which caused severe disruption to the local textile trade. A Puritan stronghold, Halifax suffered occupation by both Royalist troops after the Royalist victory at Adwalton Moor in 1643 and by Parliamentarian forces after the Royalist defeat at Marston Moor.

Dr John Favour’s energetic and inspiring ministry as Vicar of Halifax from 1593 to 1623 promoted the growth of Puritanism in the parish and an upsurge in charitable bequests including the endowment of Heath Grammar School. Favour’s Puritan successors, included Dr Robert Clay, Vicar of Halifax from 1624-28, who converted the charnel house in the crypt in 1626 into a parochial chained library, whose collection of rare books is now housed in the University of York.

However, the Laudian Vicar, Dr Richard Marsh appointed in 1638, sought to restore the liturgical practice of the Pre-Reformation Church, arousing the opposition of the Puritan laity. He fled on the outbreak of the Civil War to join the royalist forces, but was taken prisoner at Manchester and the revenues of the vicarage helped to finance the forces of Lord Ferdinando Fairfax.

The Puritan stronghold of Halifax suffered a Royalist army of occupation after the Royalist victory at Adwalton Moor in June 1643, but the town reverted to Parliamentarian control early in the following year, which ended with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

However, a native of the parish of Halifax of Puritan descent, Dr John Tillotson, later preached the thanksgiving sermon for the accession of William and Mary after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and was subsequently appointed Archbishop of Canterbury and the remains of the influential Dissenting preacher, Oliver Heywood were interred in the Parish Church in 1702.
Enduring symbols of the Commonwealth period were the distinctive plain-glazed windows, donated by Dorothy Waterhouse in memory of her husband Nathaniel, a Halifax Puritan merchant and benefactor of the poor in 1652, the year that the Commonwealth Arms were installed in the church.

The font, which had been unceremoniously removed by Scottish Presbyterian soldiers in April 1645 was reinstated at the Restoration, when Dr Marsh returned to ‘administer the sacrament with surplice and red tippet’ and perform the first baptisms in February 1661, ousting the Puritan incumbent, Eli Bentley.
Old Tristram, an effigy of a licensed beggar who operated within the precincts of Halifax Parish Church during the late seventeenth century clutching an alms box and bearing a scroll with the legend: ‘Pray Remember the Poor’ is testimony to the economic hardship experienced by many during this period.

The ecclesiastical provision within Halifax parish, the largest parish in Yorkshire and the third largest in England, was increasingly stretched as its population began to grow with the expansion of the textile industry in the eighteenth century. Evangelical Nonconformity and especially Methodism thrived in the industrial villages and hamlets of the sprawling parish, posing a fresh challenge to the Established Church in Halifax, which by the end of the century had its first Evangelical Vicar.

John Wesley first visited the parish of Halifax in 1742 when he paid a courtesy call on the vicar Dr George Legh, describing him as ‘a candid enquirer after the truth’. Legh allowed Wesley and other Evangelical Anglicans to preach at the Parish Church and on one occasion lent Wesley his servant and horse to enable him to preach at Huddersfield. The Revd Dr Henry William Coulthurst, the first Evangelical Vicar of Halifax, founded a second Anglican church for the expanding town in 1795 dedicated to the Holy Trinity. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the first Halifax Dispensary in 1807 and the foundation of the Loyal Georgean Society. As a magistrate he later played a prominent role in suppressing the Luddite disturbances in the parish in 1812.

His successor, the Revd Samuel Knight (1757-1827) was the son of the Nonconformist Titus Knight, a coal-miner convert of John Wesley, who founded the neighbouring Square Chapel, the most magnificent Nonconformist Meeting House to be constructed in the town during the Georgian era.
During this period, Halifax also gained a reputation as ‘the most musical spot for its size in the kingdom’. Joah Bates, the talented son of Henry Bates, the Halifax Parish Clerk and innkeeper of the Ring O’ Bells, sang in the Parish Church choir and later achieved celebrity as the Director of the Handel Commemoration in London in 1784. He was probably responsible for introducing Handel’s celebrated oratorio, *The Messiah*, to the residents of Halifax. The oratorio was performed after the installation of an organ built by the renowned Swiss organ builder John Snetzler at Halifax Parish Church in 1766. The first organist was William Herschel, later the King’s Astronomer. One visitor to Halifax, commented in 1788 that even clothiers heaving bales of cloth at the neighbouring Piece Hall could be heard roaring out snatches from the Oratorio such as: ‘For his yoke is easy and his burden is light’.

In the year of Queen Victoria’s accession, the diarist Anne Lister described Halifax as ‘a large smoke-canopied commercial town’. In the year that Queen Victoria died, Halifax’s population peaked at nearly 105,000. During this era of industrial expansion the churches within the ancient parish became better equipped to face the challenges of the age of industrial expansion and Halifax Parish Church underwent a major restoration.

The Revd Charles Musgrave (1792-1875), brother of Thomas Musgrave (1788-1860), the Archbishop of York, was the longest serving vicar in the history of Halifax Parish Church, ministering in Halifax for nearly half a century from 1827 to 1875. When he became Vicar of Halifax only one entirely new church had been consecrated in Halifax since the Reformation. His ambitious church building programme saw the construction or complete restoration of no fewer than thirty-eight churches within the ancient parish.

An attempt in 1875 to make Halifax the nucleus of a new diocese for the industrial West Riding, however, proved abortive and a new diocese based on Wakefield was not finally established until 1888.
During Musgrave’s ministry, the Halifax industrialist Edward Akroyd presented a new stained glass east window by George Hedgeland in 1856, based upon a prize-winning design from the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which Halifax manufactures had been well represented.

It was Musgrave’s successor, the Revd Francis Pigou (1832-1916), Vicar of Halifax from 1875 to 1889, however, who recognised the need for a complete restoration and refurbishment of the medieval parish church. In his autobiography, he graphically recalled ‘the forlorn-looking state’ of the building:

”... throughout the nave were high square pews in which it was whispered in my ear that rubbers of whist were sometimes played ... the spacious Choir itself was in a most dilapidated state ... large nails in the carved oak mullions served as pegs on which to hang hats; dust here, disorder there. But worst of all was the fact that it was a vast charnel-house ... the floor was strewn with human remains.”
The restoration 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, altered floor levels, removed the old plaster and the three-decker pulpit and provided a lavish new organ casing designed by John Oldrid Scott, but retained most of church’s historic features.

Pigou’s successor, Archdeacon Brooke, Vicar of Halifax from 1889 to 1904, was no less vehement in attempting to raise awareness of the conditions of slum dwellers in the vicinity of Halifax Parish Church. In a sermon preached at Halifax Parish Church he condemned: ‘... the conditions under which vast masses of our fellow-countrymen are living in our large towns’ and ‘... the awful contrasts of luxury and degraded wretchedness’.

- Halifax people suffered the devastating impact of two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century and also experienced the more prolonged 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 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 Halifax War Memorial, modelled on the cenotaph in Whitehall, was dedicated by the Right Reverend Bishop George Horsfall Frodsham, Vicar of Halifax from 1920 to 1937, on 15 October 1922. Originally situated in Belle Vue Park, it was re-located to a site adjacent to the Parish Church in Duffy’s Park in the 1980s.

It commemorates no fewer than 2,226 victims from Halifax of the First World War (1914-1918), some 588 victims of the Second World War (1939-1945) and also members of the armed services who lost their lives in the Korean War (1950-1953) and later conflicts.
The Chapel of the Resurrection at the east end of the south aisle was adopted by the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment in 1951 as their regimental chapel, containing the Regimental Book of Remembrance and the Colours of the 33rd Regiment of Foot, later to become the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment, including those carried in the Waterloo and Crimean campaigns.
During the post-war era, the Reverend Eric Treacy (1907-1978) became one of the most influential and respected Vicars of Halifax. Holding office from 1950 to 1962, he was dubbed ‘the Ecclesiastical Mayor of Halifax’. He later became successively Bishop of Pontefract and Bishop of Wakefield.

He initiated the scheme to provide a pedestrian precinct around the church involving the closure of Upper Kirkgate and the lower part of Causeway to vehicles and gained distinction as a railway photographer. A monument under the tower of Halifax Parish Church records his sudden death on Appleby Station.

- The Piece Hall and the creation of Eureka, the UK’s first interactive children’s museum on the site of the former railway goods yard adjacent to Halifax Parish Church has presented new opportunities for witness in the new millennium. Moreover, changing attitudes to women’s ministry in the Church of England resulted in the appointment of the first woman vicar of Halifax in 2001.

The installation of a new translucent glass doorway and improved illumination to create a more welcoming entrance at the south-west porch, which was dedicated by the Bishop of Wakefield in October 2005, symbolises 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. The acclamation of the patronal saint of Halifax Parish Church, John the Baptist, when Jesus approached him for baptism, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’, carved into the wooden cross-bar, re-affirms the relevance of the Christian gospel in the twenty first century.

The re-ordering of the west end of the church as part of a two million pound renovation of the church and its environs to enable access for all and to create an oasis of peace and space for fellowship over refreshments after worship and the growing number of other celebratory events now hosted by the church. Moreover the church is now open daily for prayer, private meditation, solace and worship and a series of trails emanating from the Parish Church encourage visitors to explore the historic environment of the church and the town.
The strong musical tradition of Halifax Parish Church continues to develop under the church’s first woman vicar, the Revd Wendy Wilby, a chaplain to the Royal School of Church Music, appointed in 2001. She pronounced the blessing at a memorable, televised *Songs of Praise* recording in 2003, featuring a new arrangement of a tune by the eighteenth century Halifax composer, Accepted Widdop (1750-1801); contributions from the Halifax Choral Society and the Black Dyke Band, and an inter-denominational congregation of Christians from across Calderdale.

The Overgate Hospice Choir also regularly performs concerts at the church in support of the Overgate Hospice at Elland, including Handel’s celebrated oratorio, *The Messiah*.

*In October 2005, Bishop Stephen also dedicated an additional treble bell to complement the outstanding existing range of bells and to provide opportunities for ringing more of the historic bells in the great west tower more frequently.*

In 2007 the Revd Canon Hilary Barber succeeded Wendy Wilby as Vicar, and in 2009 the Parish Church was designated Minster in recognition of its great church status and monastic tradition.

The Minster continues to move with the times, focussing on its civic role, visitor venue and event location as well as its parochial activities. In 2016 a major development was the re-design of the front of the Nave, with new flooring and a removable dais, creating a very flexible space. In 2018, a new Nave Altar and Choir Stalls are planned.