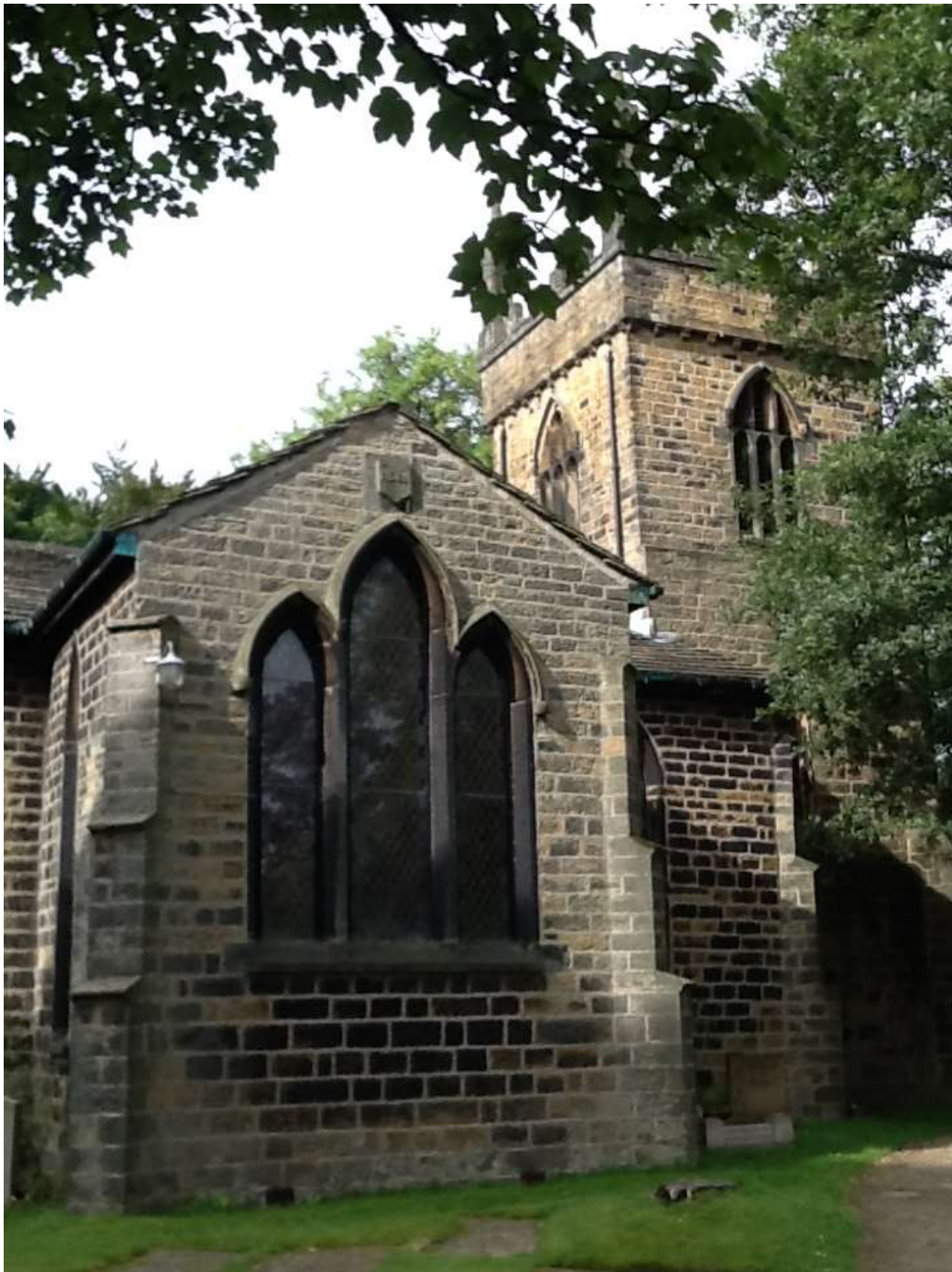


Christ Church Ainsworth

(The Church of Christ in Cockey, otherwise Ainsworth)

(by Rev'd D Thomson, given as a talk to the History Society on 13th August 2013)



General Background:

Strictly speaking the Church comprises those people who are Christians and in that sense the origins of the Church in what is now Ainsworth are obscure. There is no evidence one way or the other regarding a Christian presence in Roman times and during the early Middle Ages this area fell under the control of the pagan kingdom of Mercia.

At that time, what is now South Lancashire was known as *Inter Ripam et Mersam*, the land between the Ribble and the Mersey. It was a chaotic border region nominally under the control of the kings of Mercia. The border between the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria was not far from here; to the North it ran along the Ribble and to the East along the Pennines. In 597 St Augustine was sent by the Pope to convert the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, beginning with Kent. Mercia was converted long after the others. In about 669 St Chad was appointed Bishop of Lichfield and was sent by the king to convert the population of the Mercia. It may be that this is how Christianity gained a foothold or returned to this area. This seems likely given that we came under the historic diocese of Lichfield until the mid-16th century.

Whether there was a chapel here from that time is unknown. However, parishes didn't begin to come into existence until the 11th Century and the Anglo-Saxon way of doing things was to establish a Minster Church in a town and from these monks, nuns and priests would spread out into the countryside to serve the spiritual needs of the rural populace. There is no evidence but there may have been a shine or a Celtic cross, or as in so many other parts of the country, there could have been a simple wooden church in this area to which people went.

The Church in Ainsworth

The fact is that the origins of this lovely church building are obscure. It is known that there has been a church on the current site for centuries; certainly pre-Reformation and at least from the 1400s but possibly earlier.

The earliest mention of the church building known so far is in an old court document dating from 1514 or 1515 found in the Muniment Room of Old Middleton Hall. There was a dispute over trespass between the Lords of the Manor of Middleton and Radcliffe; Sir Richard Assheton of Middleton prosecuted Robert Aynesworth of Radcliffe for trespass on Cokkamore and some of the witnesses mentioned the chapel.

Sir Olvy Issherwode, testified that he had been the parish priest of Middleton for 37 years and had heard the confessions of the "crustun pepull of the Hamell of Aynesworth." William Mandevell, Proctor of Middleton, also mentions the "Chapell of Cokkeymore".

Sir Richard Assheton was a war hero from the Battle of Flodden 1513 having raised a company of archers from Middleton for the war against the Scots and, as Lord of the Manor here, it may be that some of those archers came from Ainsworth.

It is thought that the church was a Chantry Chapel build by the Lord of the Manor, who then allowed his tenants to use it. The evidence for this is a Patent Roll of 1589 which refers to a grant of land that was originally in the tenure of Ralph Assheton, Lord of the Manor of Middleton, including "all that our late chantry in the chapel of Chokeney alia Cockey alias Cockley." (A chantry was a trust fund from which priests were paid during medieval times to say a mass for the souls of dead relatives with a view to shortening their time in purgatory. Normally churches would have a side chapel set aside for the

purpose but sometimes the rich would erect a private chapel – known as a Chantry Chapel – and pay for a resident priest. Although these chapels were private property, the owners would allow others to make use of them and that is probably the origin of our church here in Ainsworth).

Early Church building

In 1586 the Elizabethan writer William Camden mentions seeing Cockley, a wooden chapel set round with trees. This leads to the suggestion that it was probably a half-timbered building in the style known as Tudor. And it is shown on Saxton's map of 1577 as having a spire.

Then, in about 1640, the wooden chapel was replaced by a stone building. The date is based upon a comment by a vicar, Robert Evanson who in 1867 said that the old church had stood for 200 years before it was replaced in 1831.

In 1909 Mrs Hardman, an elderly resident said that she remembered the old church prior to the alterations of 1831. She described it as a plain building with a small ornamented bell tower. This description was supported by the Parish Magazine of 1912, adding that it had lancet windows and was ornamented with stone balls.

The church was in the centre of a common and at some point the churchyard was surrounded by a moat. Whether this was defensive or just to keep cattle out is not known, but some evidence of a moat can still be seen today.

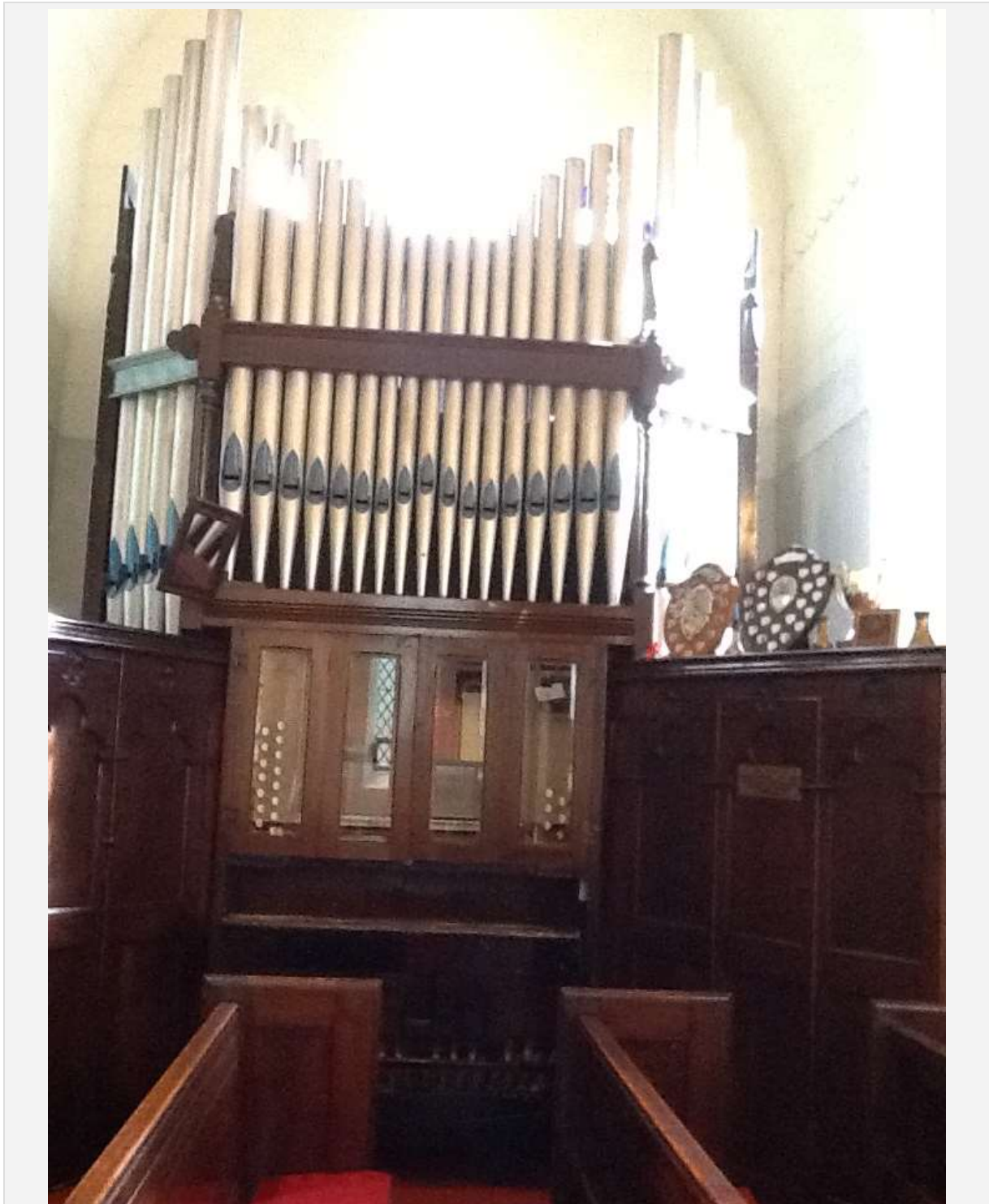
The Current Building

In 1831 the church was partly rebuilt and it thought that part of the South wall may survive from the original stone church. The building was enlarged by the addition of a short chancel, the tower and galleries that went around three sides. The rebuilt chapel was consecrated by the Bishop of Chester in 1832 and was dedicated "the Church of Christ in Cockley otherwise Ainsworth". Sometime between 1836 and 1850 the tower was partially pulled down and then raised 23ft.

In 1842 the vicar at the time, Richard Heslop, was suspended for three years for drunkenness.

The church building was neglected and in 1852 and architect employed by the new vicar George Ridley Carr found the building in danger of imminent collapse and demolition and rebuilding was suggested. It was repaired instead.





The organ, with coat hooks top right

In 1842 a small transept (where the organ now sits) was added to the North wall to provide extra accommodation. It originally contained benches, seating fifty, which were free and intended for the poor of the Parish. The ground floor was occupied by the Sunday Scholars

In 1876 Henry Whitehead, who gave the recreation ground to the village, purchased the beautifully carved altar, priest's stall, pulpit and lectern second hand from Bury Parish Church.



The Altar



The Priest's Stall



The lectern and Pulpit

Then, in 1882 the clergy vestry was added to the South side and the organ was moved downstairs to the front of church.

The best pews, the proprietary pews, ones that people paid an annual rent for, were in the gallery, with singers located in the tower portion of the gallery, which remains today. Later on, the choir was brought down into the main body of the church.

(Incidentally, Hilda Lord mentions that just over 100 years ago her mother and aunt led a strike of junior choristers because they weren't paid, unlike the adults. They went back to work after the vicar promised to pay for an annual charabanc trip for the junior choir.).

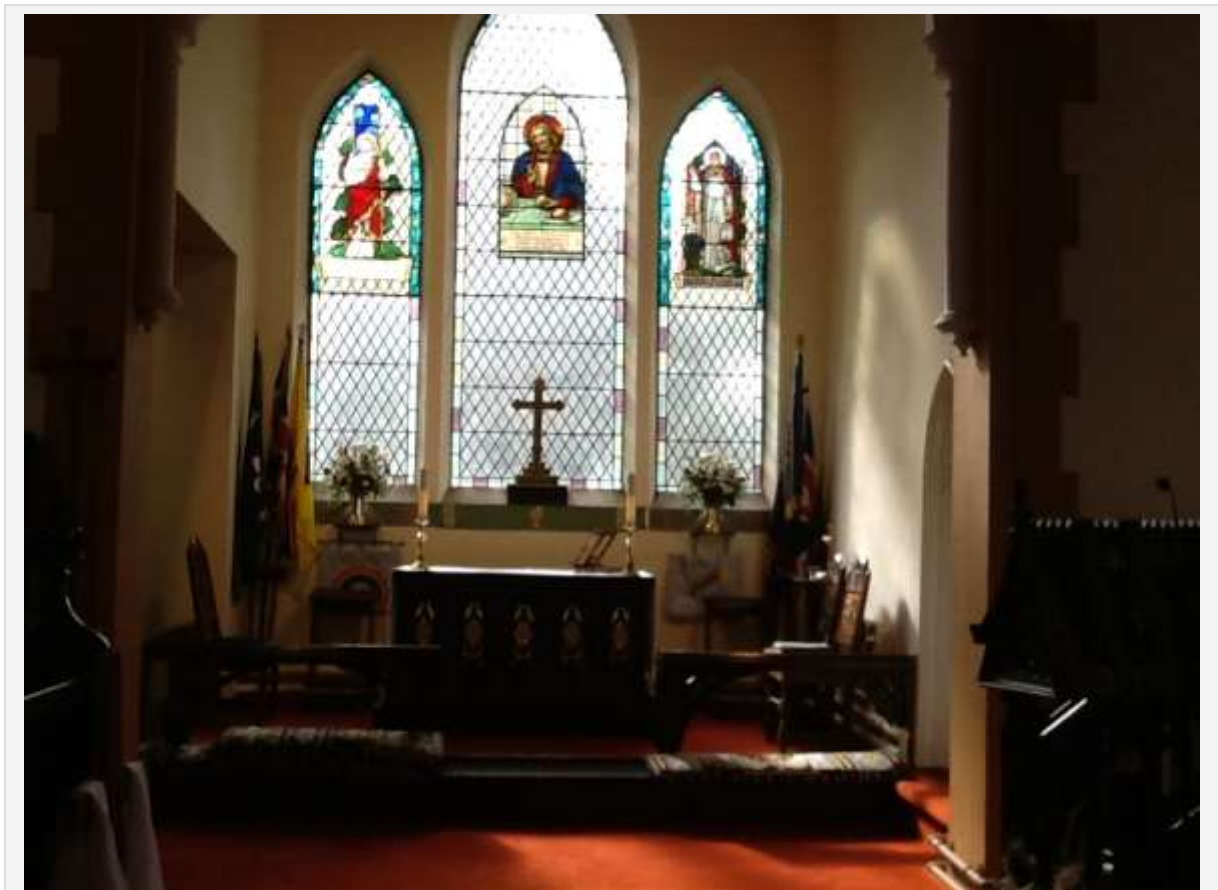
Downstairs the seating consisted of box-pews – pews with doors – along each wall and benches in the middle. The current Choir Vestry was originally a private pew, with its own entrance and fireplace.

The present pews were installed in about 1908 when the church was re-floored. The gravestones, which were originally in one of the aisles of the church, were re-positioned outside, although the bodies remain under the floor of the church.



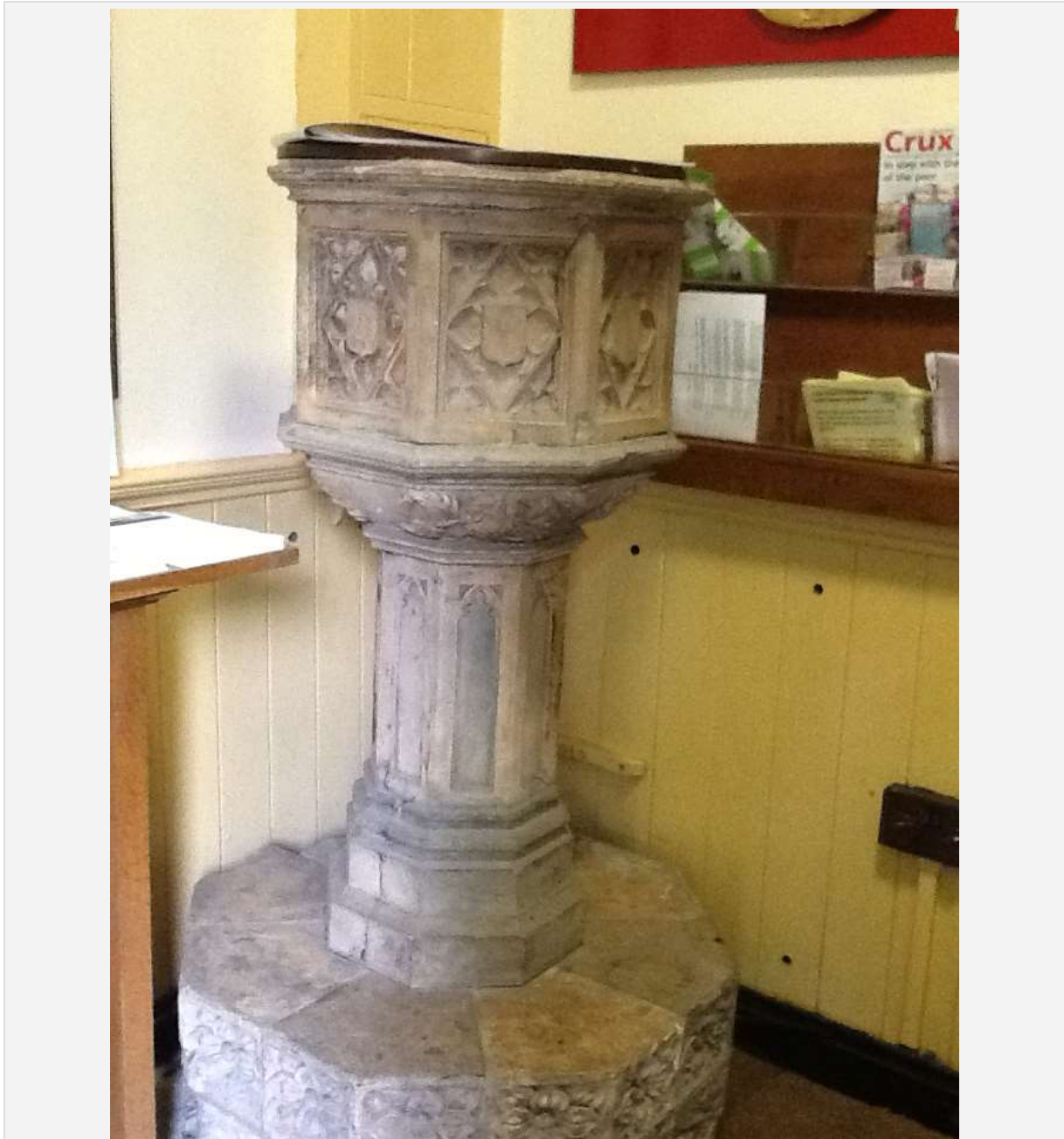
The Reredos

The reredos was also moved to underneath the sanctuary window and its position there explains why the stained glass windows only come down hallway.



the Stained Glass Windows

It was then that the pews and gallery were taken out of the transept and a new organ installed there, which still remains in 2013. You can still see some coat hooks from when there was a gallery there. At this time the old terracotta font, installed in 1831 was moved. It may have been manufactured locally at Moorside Brick and Tile works. The font can now be seen in the porch of the church



The Old Font

Apart from the addition of an inside toilet, the occasional lick of paint and repositioning of the altar further forward, the church interior has remained largely unchanged since 1964. At that time, under Rev'd Ken Bullock's leadership a large amount of repair work was undertaken and the side galleries were taken down. At the same time the pulpit was lowered and moved, choir vestry extended, the reredos moved to become a dividing wall between the choir vestry and sanctuary and alterations made to the clergy and choir stalls.

And that takes us to the thriving church of today!



Primary sources:

Rev'd R. P. Bullock, *The Story of Cockey Moor otherwise Ainsworth*, 1973.

Rev'd R. P. Bullock, *A History of the Parish of Ainsworth* (2nd Edition), 1980.