

St Margaret's Chapel Tower

By Bill Bethom, Ronnie Parkinson and Joe Scott, Oct. 2001



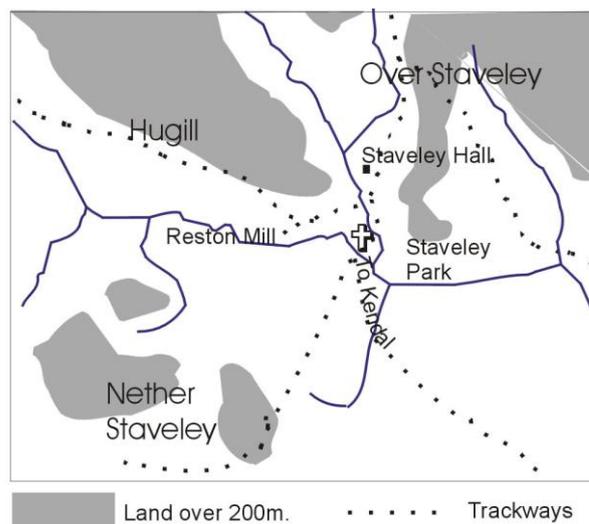
A drawing probably made just before the demolition of the old Chapel in 1866

St Margaret's Chapel was built nearly 700 years ago. William Thweng, Lord of Kendale, gave the land in 1338, and the lower part of the tower, judging by its architecture, was built in the next few decades. The remainder of the original building may have been made of timber and thatch, later to be replaced by the stone chapel that was demolished in 1866.

Why build a Chapel there - and why then?

The house opposite the Tower is called "Cross House". In the 1690s Thomas Machell wrote "Staveley chapel is a fair building opposite to the cross and at the lower end of the village." This cross was probably there before the chapel, and is likely to have been put there by the monks of Abbot Hall who ran the parish of Kendal, at a convenient spot where people from the hills around could come together. The footbridge behind the old churchyard is where there was probably a ford over the Kent and there were other fords across the Gowan from Nether Staveley. In the early 14th century, when Thweng gave land for the chapel, he also organised a weekly market and a yearly fair at Staveley. The market never took off, but the fair lasted until 1921. The local population had in the 1330s been rising for over a century on a wave of prosperity linked to the development of the Kendal wool

trade. In a 1332 tax document 29 property owners are listed in Staveley and Hugill (10 in Nether Staveley, 11 in Over Staveley and 8 in Hugill). This implies a population of perhaps 150, and helps to make sense of Thweng's plan to start a market and a fair and to build a chapel. Not many of these 150 lived where the village is now - the farmland was on the higher ground, not in the wet and heavily wooded valley bottoms.



Staveley, c.1338, with its cross (†) and its market-place/fairground where the village was to grow.

Some Changes to the old Tower

The original tower was much lower than at present. Probably at first it had no belfry - one of the bells bore the date 1589 - and was simply a place of safety, very like the pele towers that were being built about the same time by the local gentry. In the tower walls just inside the doors are two holes, about 6x6 inches square, just right to slot in a baulk of 6x6 timber to bar the door against any assault. From the tower you went through an archway into the nave.



The tower archway was blocked up when the old building was demolished and one of the windows from the old building inserted. The spiral stair up the tower is inside the walling on the left of this picture.

In 1744 a clock was installed, paid for by John Shacklock of Brow. It had only one hand, and its weights had to be wound up every other day. The clock face was a good deal lower down than the present one.



Knocking down the old Chapel

The plan opposite was drawn by Joseph Martindale, head-master of Staveley School at the time, and shows what the old building was like just before it was demolished in 1866.

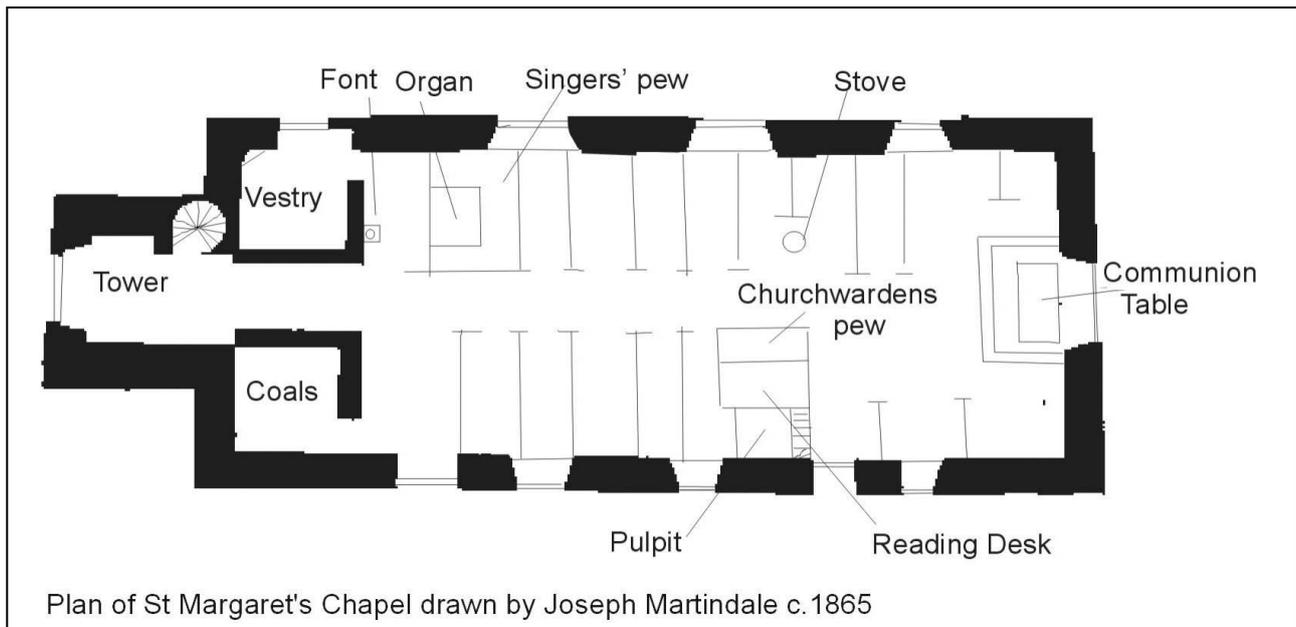
The architect who designed the new Church, J G Crowther, examined the old building in 1861. "The Church appears to have been built about the year 1485 in the style of architecture which then prevailed... The fabric, however was extensively altered and repaired towards the close of the last century, in the worst possible taste, so as to entirely destroy the original character of the building." Another report, by the Rural Dean in 1860 tells us that "The floor is in a very bad state; the pavement broken and the level below that of the ground outside. It is very damp." A comment written at the foot of this report, in handwriting very like that of Joseph Martindale tells us that "People get better accommodation at the dissenting places of worship than at the Parish Church".

These comments were part of a campaign to replace St Margaret's. In 1858 Staveley became for the first time a separate parish independent of Kendal, and its Curate, William Chaplin, became Vicar of Staveley. A young man, full of energy and ideas, he was keen on change, and found a kindred spirit in Martindale, newly appointed schoolmaster in 1859. Perhaps more important was the arrival in Staveley of R W Buckley, a London lawyer. In 1862 he inherited his uncle's large estate in Surrey and lands in Staveley and Hugill. He gave the land and a generous part of the money to build the new St James' Church which was opened in 1865.

No doubt J G Crowther, also planned the changes to the old tower. The arch at the back was walled up and one of the old 14th century windows inserted in it (*picture above left*). The old east window with its three lights may have been inserted in the front of the tower - above it are what may be the remains of an earlier window head.

Picture left

The works of the 1744 clock are still in the Tower



A Jubilee Clock and a new top for the Tower

Britain and Staveley had plenty to celebrate in 1887. The fifty years of Queen Victoria's reign had seen Britain lead the world in industry, trade and empire, and Staveley with its railway station, its bobbin mills and its gas works, had rebuilt itself as a prosperous industrial village. On Jubilee day, 6th June, Staveley celebrated with a procession half a mile long led by two local bands and including John Johnson, the oldest man in the village who remembered George III's Jubilee of 1810. Schoolchildren got a medal and a free tea at New Hall Farm, the Volunteers fired off a loyal volley on the Ayland, and at night there were fireworks and a bonfire on Reston Scar. The permanent memorial was the rebuilding of the top of St Margaret's Tower and the insertion of the new clock.



The tower from the churchyard 2001

The Vicar, William Chaplin, chaired the Committee which organised the rebuilding, to the design of Joseph Bintley, architect, of Common Head. Compare the picture (*above right*) with the old drawing on p.1 to see the change. The new clock itself was provided by W B Thornton, who from a local beginning as a bobbin worker, had made good in London as a lawyer. He it was who started the new clock August 1887. The list of subscribers to the changes gives 184 names of locals or former locals, from W B Thornton-£90.11s.6d. to "A Friend" 1s.



The works of the clock 2001

St Margaret's Tower since 1887

Somebody had to wind the new clock every week, and to maintain the fabric of the tower, and the committee which had organised the changes in 1887 undertook these responsibilities. With many changes of personnel this arrangement has continued ever since. To pay for work done the Clock Committee ran a village Shrovetide tea party until 1940. Since then, apart from £3 a year from a legacy made in 1916, the Committee has raised funds locally as they were needed.

In 1988 National Heritage funded a major refurbishing costing £6826. Broken panes in the leaded lights had been blamed on stone-throwing youths, but it was found that the glass had been broken *outwards* by birds flying in through the louvres in the bell loft and trying to fly out through the glass! The leaded lights were repaired and wire screens fixed to keep the birds out in future. At the same time gutters and rainwater pipes were restored, the interior render of the tower renewed, and the ancient oak double doors repaired.

In 2000 £1300 was raised locally to supplement an insurance payment for the repair of the clock after storm damage. At the same time a steel cross made by Bill Bethom was placed on the west gable of the tower to replace the 1887 stone cross which had deteriorated and fallen off.

J C Robinson, Headmaster of Staveley School, and a trustee of the Clock Tower Fund since 1928 wrote in 1961, "For a period of at least fifty years the winding and maintenance was voluntarily performed by Mr. Roger Blamire, involving visits to the clock by way of a narrow stone spiral staircase leading to the clock loft, every Saturday night." (Roger Blamire kept Staveley Post Office and was agent for Martins Bank.) From 1934 John Beetham wound the clock and in 1964 Bill Bethom took on the job. In 2001 Bill's son Chris is the clock winder. The Tower and its clock represent the continuity of modern Staveley with its Victorian as well as with its mediaeval past.

Sources

This paper is based on materials collected by Bill Bethom and Ronnie Parkinson.

A typescript dated 1961 by J C Robinson, and a printed "Old Tower, Clock and Bell" financial account by the Committee dated Christmas 1888 are in the possession of the Society.

The drawing of the old Chapel on p.1 is from E W J McConnel, *Tales of Old Staveley* (Staveley 1942).

The plan on p.3 is based on that in WPR/68 in the Kendal Record Office.

Reports quoted on p.2 are in WPR/68 in the Kendal Record Office.

The Clock Committee minutes 1888-1914 and 1963-date are in possession of the Vicar of Staveley.

Thomas Machell's description is in J. Ewing *The Antiquary on Horseback*, 1963.

The 1887 Jubilee events in Staveley are described in the *Westmorland Gazette* of 25 June 1887.



Plaque provided by W B Thornton in 1887