

AUDIO TOUR OF SAINT ALKMUND'S, SHREWSBURY JUNE, 2022

1. WELCOME Welcome to Saint Alkmund's Church. A church dedicated to Alkmund has stood on this site, where the King's Market once was, since 912 A.D., making this the oldest church by foundation in Shrewsbury. People have worshipped here for over 1,100 years.

Only five other churches in the world are dedicated to Alkmund, all of them strung across the English Midlands. Alkmund was a Saxon Prince who challenged for the throne of the Kingdom of Northumbria. He failed in his attempt and was assassinated near to Derby round about the year 800. He remains the patron Saint of Derby, but there is little evidence that he was a particularly saintly man.

The choice of Alkmund for our church was probably a political act by Aethelflaeda, "Lady of the Mercians", daughter of Alfred the Great. She was a remarkable woman for her time, administrator, soldier and one of the most effective Saxon rulers in history. Aethelflaeda believed Alkmund to have been her ancestor, and she saw to it that the church was well endowed with money, land and priests.

Please now stand underneath the great Western arch, at the top of the two steps near the entrance, and face towards the glorious East window.

2. TOWER AND SPIRE The tower and spire directly above you is the oldest surviving part of the church, and has formed part of Shrewsbury's skyline since before Columbus discovered the New World. In 1485, when the spire was new, the future Henry VII passed close by the church on his way to the battlefield of Bosworth and the crown of England. The rest of the church that Henry saw, however, was demolished in 1793.

The disastrous collapse of Old Saint Chad's Church in 1788 led to the suggestion - supported by local builder John Carline - that the old churches were unsafe. At Saint Alkmund's, everything East of where you stand was taken down, tradition says some parts with the help of gunpowder! The church was rebuilt in Georgian style and reopened, with much celebration, on Easter Sunday, 1795.

Please now walk to the very centre of the church.

3. CENTRE OF THE CHURCH In 1795, as today, the view of St Alkmund's interior was dominated by the beautiful East window. It cost 200 guineas then - equivalent to anything up to 2 million pounds today. The central figure is called "Hope" in an attempt to deflect criticism by people who might otherwise think it a little too Papist!

The pews around you are very similar to the 1795 originals - but they were remodelled at the end of the Victorian era - originally each pew had its own door as well as its own number! Some pews were removed from the front to make room for the chancel step, and the pulpit was moved from the centre of the church to the side. Did someone think the central pulpit was too Methodist? You can never please everybody!

Above your head you once would have seen a beautiful plaster ceiling with stucco decoration - but by 1904 this had been covered over with the present wooden roof. Perhaps the plaster had fallen into a state of disrepair? At any rate, it is still there today, just hidden from view.

Changes always tend to divide opinion - one such change was the removal of most of the original Georgian cast iron window frames - only one is still visible from where you stand. Whether or not you prefer the Victorian stone frames and mullions, take a moment to imagine the play of light in this church 200 years ago, when all of the side windows were as large and as clear as the one in the North-East.

These cast iron Georgian frames came from nearby Coalbrookdale and were made only about a dozen years after the great Iron Bridge - so the frame you see is truly part of our industrial heritage. Two others remain, in the church kitchen and the West End vestry. Restored in 2004 with clear blown glass, the restorer added to each of these three windows a verse from George Herbert's poem "Teach me, my God and King in all things Thee to see". Look closely and see if you can find his engraving in the glass of the NE window.

Please now walk to the East window for a close-up view.

4. EAST WINDOW The great East window is not of stained glass, but is coloured with enamel paint. There are two sheets of glass - a double thickness - painted on each side by the famous Birmingham master Francis Eginton. This unusual technique creates four layers of paint, giving a subtle, translucent effect, here seen especially in the sky around the figure of Hope. Eginton produced such windows for Lichfield and Salisbury Cathedrals, for Magdalen College in Oxford and for Saint George's Chapel at Windsor - among others. The frame of the East window, as with the NE side window we saw earlier, is of cast iron, but this frame was gilded in 1799 and that gilding has recently been restored.

The figure of Hope wears Mary's traditional blue girdle and was borrowed from a much admired Italian painting - the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* by Guido Reni - but the background is different. See the Bible text at the foot of the window, which explains the Crown on which her eyes are fixed. Now look at the lowest pane of glass in the very centre, and you will see the reflection of the Crown of Life on the ground. The cross represents Faith and the chalice on the right Charity. This lovely window, then, visible from almost every part of Saint Alkmund's, carries to all who have eyes to see it the message of Faith, Hope and Charity.

Please now turn and face West.

5. THE WEST END The Victorians - and in particular, Reverend Charles Wightman and his dynamic wife Julia - didn't have much time for older styles of building, and were responsible for many 'improvements' to what Julia considered a rather ugly church... The changes to the pews, the pulpit, the roof and the window frames have already been mentioned, but at the end of the 19th century, major alterations were also being made to the West End of the church.

The gallery at the West End, which had carried a Gray's organ since 1823 as well as a clock, was removed and the great western arch under the spire opened as we see it today. The space on either side was enclosed to create two rooms, now used as kitchen and vestry, and the bells were re-hung higher in the tower to allow the arch to be opened. This last modification was a mistake - for the weight of the bells was too great to ring them together without risking the integrity of the tower.

Please now walk back towards where the organ presently stands.

6. THE ORGAN When the western gallery was removed, the organ was rebuilt in the NE corner of the building. The instrument that replaced it there in 1968 was of no particular merit - but we do know that there was an active choir in St Alkmund's through those years.

By the 1990s, the choir had gone, and the existing organ had fallen into a state of disrepair. The problem was solved in two stages, requiring some ingenious thinking and more than a little luck!! The old organ was advertised on E-Bay - the only condition of purchase being its entire removal! A small but enterprising group of Hungarians arrived with a van, and the organ departed to the European Union.

The present organ at one time stood in Addington Palace near Croydon - the headquarters of the Royal School of Church Music. When they moved from that site in the early 1990s, a new home was required, and the distinctive Art Deco cased instrument, familiar to thousands of church musicians, at length came to St Alkmund's.

It was designed by organ builders Harrison and Harrison for Sir Sydney Nicholson in 1931, as a versatile chamber organ to accompany services as well as a teaching instrument. We are pleased to say that it continues to fulfil both functions in its new situation at St Alkmund's - the scale and the scope of the organ fits ideally into the fine acoustic.

Organ enthusiasts can access further details about the instrument on our website (there is a QR code next to the organ). If there is no-one available to demonstrate it, here is a small sample from a Bach chorale. While the music is playing, please move close past the organ to find three brasses on the South wall. They were lost in 1793, but found and restored to the church nearly 200 years later.

organ playing portion of Bach chorale

7. THE SOUTH WALL

Leaving the brasses, please walk along towards the West.

The South wall is devoted in large part to the memory of those who gave their lives in the two World Wars.

Fourteen men from this parish died in the Great War of 1914 to 1918. Their names and other details are recorded below the Remembrance window. A further four names were added after the Second World War.

The Remembrance window was designed and installed in 1919, and provides a fitting focus for the memory of soldiers who, like Wilfred Owen, departed from this town - in most cases for the trenches of France and Belgium.

Now please walk through the pews to the opposite, North wall of the church.

8. THE NORTH WALL

Although dominated today by the East window and clear glass, there are some items of stained glass in the church. These include the Remembrance window, the West window (which includes portions of Tudor glass from the medieval church) and, on the North side, the Patriarchal panels, showing Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Abraham holds his sacrificial knife and stands with eyes downcast, as in the presence of God. Isaac, thankful for God's intervention which saved his life, holds a Bishop's staff. All three wear magnificent coloured robes.

To the right of these panels are memorials to the Jones family, the largest of which records the family of MP Thomas Tyrwhitt Jones of Stanley Hall. It is a sad reminder that in the early 19th century, privilege was no guarantee of longevity. Of the four children, three did not live to see their 25th birthday. The remaining son erected the monument, but his death at the age of 46 is also recorded in another tablet, further along the wall.

The most interesting memorials are beyond the next window and come from the medieval church. They commemorate two more Thomas Jones's - the earlier being Shrewsbury's first Lord Mayor, who died in 1642.

These memorials bring you to a further stained glass window and the 1897 pulpit, both donated by the Girls' Friendly Society - a Victoria society which still exists today. In 1897 it was in its heyday, with Queen Victoria as its patron, and promoted a good and a Christian life for working class girls.

Please now walk back along the centre aisle towards the entrance. On the walls of the tower facing you are two brass plaques - *please go to look at the one on the left.*

9. CHARLES AND JULIA WIGHTMAN

Charles Edward Leopold Wightman was Vicar of this church for over fifty years. His father John had been Vicar before him, and his remarkable wife Julia lived on for some years after him, so the Wightman name dominates the history of the church through the nineteenth century.

Charles' mother was daughter to a Russian princess, and close friend to Charlotte, Princess of Wales, second in line to the English throne. Charles took his names from his three royal godparents - Charlotte, her husband Leopold (later King of the Belgians) and Edward, Duke of Kent, father of Queen Victoria.

"Good Mr Wightman" was well enough liked and respected, but it was his remarkable wife Julia, who brought St Alkmund's eventually to national recognition. Her plaque may be found on the North side of the tower wall.

Julia Bainbrigg Wightman was a small, frail but determined woman. She and her husband Charles arrived to begin married life in the nearby St Alkmund's Vicarage in 1841. At that time, nearby Butchers' Row was a crowded slum where more than forty families, some with as many as twelve children, shared their dark living quarters with chickens - and worse.

Julia only counted six of these poor people at church - weekends for most local residents revolved around the eleven public houses within two minutes' walk of St Alkmund's. Saturday nights, Julia

records, were alive with “drunken mirth and revelry”, with “women’s voices conspicuous in the uproar”. The battle for hearts, minds - and souls - would not be won in middle class drawing rooms, but in the homes, taverns and streets where the poorer classes lived.

Julia started the Saint Alkmund’s Total Abstinence Society in 1858 with an unpromising attendance of four adults and two children. Numbers soon grew - Mrs Wightman did not preach at them, but provided parties in her garden, school lessons for children, interesting talks - for example, showing her members illustrated reports of the Royal Marriage that year, and illustrating a lecture on solar eclipses using three oranges as Sun, Moon and Earth. At the end of the talk, the oranges were shared...

Soon the Society numbered well over 1,000, as abstainers found their lives suddenly healthier and financially better off! 60 or 70 came to church each Sunday, standing in the aisles, and as many as twenty took Communion. In 1859 Julia published news of her work in a book called “Haste to the Rescue”, which sold 28,000 copies. This was followed by a second - “Annals of the Rescued” - as a follow-up, with stories of how the Society had transformed the lives of real people.

In 1872, Julia spoke to the National Temperance League, telling the story of Molly, a drunkard. The St Alkmund’s model was discussed and copied around the country and even beyond. Julia devoted much of her profits to buying the former Fox Inn in Princess Street and turning it into the Wightman Hall - an alcohol-free centre for rest, refreshment, a reading room and even a Ragged School. Now the Wightman Theatre, this was a very practical social reform, and Shrewsbury can be very thankful to Mrs Wightman for the many lives improved and even saved before she passed away in 1898.

Her husband, Charles, had died five years before her: Julia had the parapet and pinnacles of the tower restored in his memory, and also installed the font that stands near to you. It has the All-Seeing Eye of God, the Lamb, emblem of Christ, the dove for the Holy Spirit and the scallop shell, symbol of pilgrimage.

Now please walk so that you are standing again just inside the entrance, underneath the Tower.

There have been ringers at St Alkmund’s since medieval times - a ledger details the cost of providing them with ale. But the heyday of ringing in this church arrived in the year 1812. On Whit Sunday in the morning, the bells of St Alkmund’s rang Oxford Treble Bob Major - 5,280 changes in 3¼ hours - to celebrate the installation of a full peal of eight bells. This feat is recorded on one of the several painted boards on the wall of the tower, and others were added over the coming 100 years. Keen campanologists can find additional details about the bells on the church website.

Unfortunately, the raising of the bells proved unsafe for the spire, and the ringing of the bells ceased around about the time of the Great War. When the decision was taken to sell them off, in 1972, it was noted by one man that the bells were covered with the largest amount of pigeon guano that he had ever seen.

The bells, now cleaned, are still rung enthusiastically today in St Andrew’s Cathedral, Honolulu, the most distant home of English change ringing in the world. If you have time, the website has a link to a YouTube video which tells the story of the bells, their journey around the world, their restoration and their new home in Hawaii.

What better way of ending your tour than by hearing the bells of St Alkmund’s, which once were above your head, now ring out from 7,000 miles away?! We hope that you have enjoyed the tour -,please don’t forget to sign our Visitor’s Book before you leave.

[bells ringing]

Before you leave you will see many painted boards recording feats of bell-ringing and the names of the ringers involved, including the well-known Byolin family - but after 1909, the bells were in fact rarely rung as a peal. Today, they sound out again - but far away, for they were sold to St Andrew's Cathedral in Honolulu, where they are in regular use to this day. The church website includes a link to a fascinating YouTube video which tells the story of how the bells were moved halfway around the world.

A single 'Sanctus' bell remains here to call the faithful to worship, just as it had done in medieval times, when St Alkmund's was the alarm clock for Shrewsbury, and a bell was rung at four thirty each morning to get people up and ready for work.

After the death of her beloved husband Charles, Mrs Wightman had much work done to the tower and pinnacles in his memory. She was also responsible for the font by the entrance, which we shall see later.