

Audlem 1311

On the board on the West wall of the church are the names and dates of the men believed to have been Vicars of Audlem; the first name is Richard Randolph who began his ministry in 1311.

There was no mention of a church in the Domesday book entry of 1086. The first known reference to a church here comes in 1281 when the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham, passed through the village whilst visiting the area and noted 'a church long vacant'. He arranged with Thomas de Audeleme that the Priory of St. Thomas in Stafford should have the advowson of the parish ie the responsibility for supplying a vicar. In return Thomas de Audeleme and his successors had the right to present a Canon to the Priory who would say masses for the soul of a designated person. This was very desirable at a time when people believed that such masses shortened the time spent in Purgatory.

The Priory belonged to the Augustinian Canons, an Order of Friars whose members lived in a community but were dedicated to teaching and preaching in the surrounding parishes.

The Order now had the right to the 'Great tithes' of the parish (2/3) whilst the 'vicar' received the 'Small tithe' worth 1/3. The Priory seems to have varied in the way it carried out its charge. Men were sent to Audlem who were not fully qualified priests able to carry out satisfactorily all the duties of a vicar. The Priory records mention the need for 'suitable chaplains' for Audlem so we might wonder if John Bacford who only lasted a few months in 1403 was not such a one.

A great deal would depend on the personality and training of the vicar. It is extremely unlikely that he would have any book other than a service book. If he had spent many years in a religious community hearing the daily services he would know many of the psalms and gospels by heart. People were more dependent on memory in a time before reading was a common skill and when books were rare and expensive. The wonderful copies of the Psalms, Gospels, Old and New Testaments, as well as Devotional books, which have survived from the Middle Ages, were the treasured possessions of wealthy Monasteries, Cathedrals Churches and members of rich and important families.

The Seal Discovered in 1995

When trying his metal detecting skills on the site of a Medieval Fair a mile from the centre of Lichfield Mr Pearson from Wolverhampton found a small ancient Seal, less than an inch in length.

He referred it to The Keeper of Antiquities at the British Museum who interpreted the inscription as: ‘The Seal of the Vicar of Audelyme’ and dated it as ‘early 14th Century’.

We cannot know whether this belonged to Richard Randolf but it would be understandable for the vicar of Audlem to visit Lichfield as the parish was in the Diocese of Lichfield and Coventry which at that time stretched north into modern Lancashire.

We do not know what the church looked like at this time but it was probably a low rectangular building. The south doorway is thought by

Pevsner to date from late 13th Century and to be the oldest part of the present church.

The Parish of Audlem was essentially an agricultural community whose life was regulated by the yearly cycle of the seasons. This pattern was interwoven with the calendar of the Church. The welfare of all the inhabitants depended on the produce of the land. A late Spring, heavy rain, drought or blight could mean hardship or even starvation. The customs and prayers connected with ploughing, planting and harvest had great significance. The church also gave reasons for celebrations. The main festivals of the church's year were a break in the relentless round of work. The other excuse for a holiday was the special day of a saint. Each saint had a 'Red-letter' day. The lives of the saints were the glimpses of the world outside and were tales of wonder.

A church would mark the day of its own patron with a service and holiday. Audlem had from 1296, the right to hold a fair for three days on the eve, day and morrow of the feast of Saint James.

The weekly market and annual fair made Audlem into a meeting place and gave the inhabitants a chance to make money.

The discovery of the site of a pottery kiln in the 1940s and of a grain drying kiln in the 1990s, both situated on the bank north of the church and both dated to the early 14th century indicate trade and a community supporting craftsmen and small enterprises.

The photographs of the reconstituted pots were taken in 1996 at the time of the celebrations for 700 years of a Market Charter. The Grosvenor museum allowed the pots to come back to Audlem for four days!

Everyone depended on the land for the materials to build a shelter, to provide food, warmth and clothing. The dwellings of those who worked on the land whether they were serfs or had land to cultivate for themselves, were timber-framed, mud and thatch, dark, smoke-filled, damp hovels. This was the standard of the time. Possessions were few and were dependent on the materials available locally;-wood, bone and horn provided utensils, vessels and casks, wool and flax gave clothing, animal skins supplied leather which was used on the land and in the home for innumerable tasks, from the making of buckets, and shoes to hinges and reins. It was a time when nothing was wasted!!

Metal items were expensive and cherished. A cooking pot and iron tipped tools and cutting implements were the basic possessions.

The diet was meagre, dependent upon the cooking pot heated over a fire in the centre of the hut in winter outside in summer.

The staple food was a gruel or porridge made of grains and peas and beans. Cabbage, onions, leeks, and parsley went into the pot in season.

The extras of poultry eggs milk pork or even beef depended on the status of the family and whether they owned animals.

Poached rabbit or hare was a risky supplement. In this district there would be no shortage of salt to preserve the meat for winter. A weak ale was brewed.