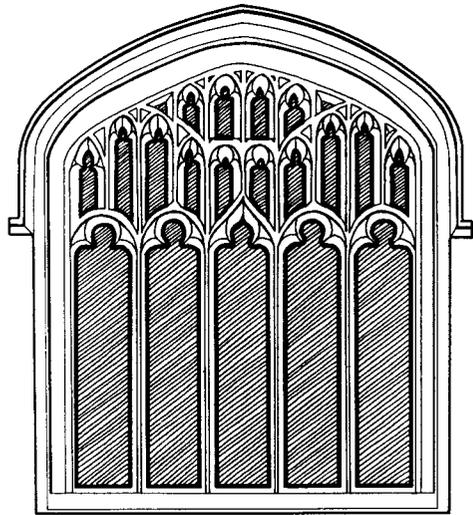


## Historic Churches of West Yorkshire



### Thornhill Church

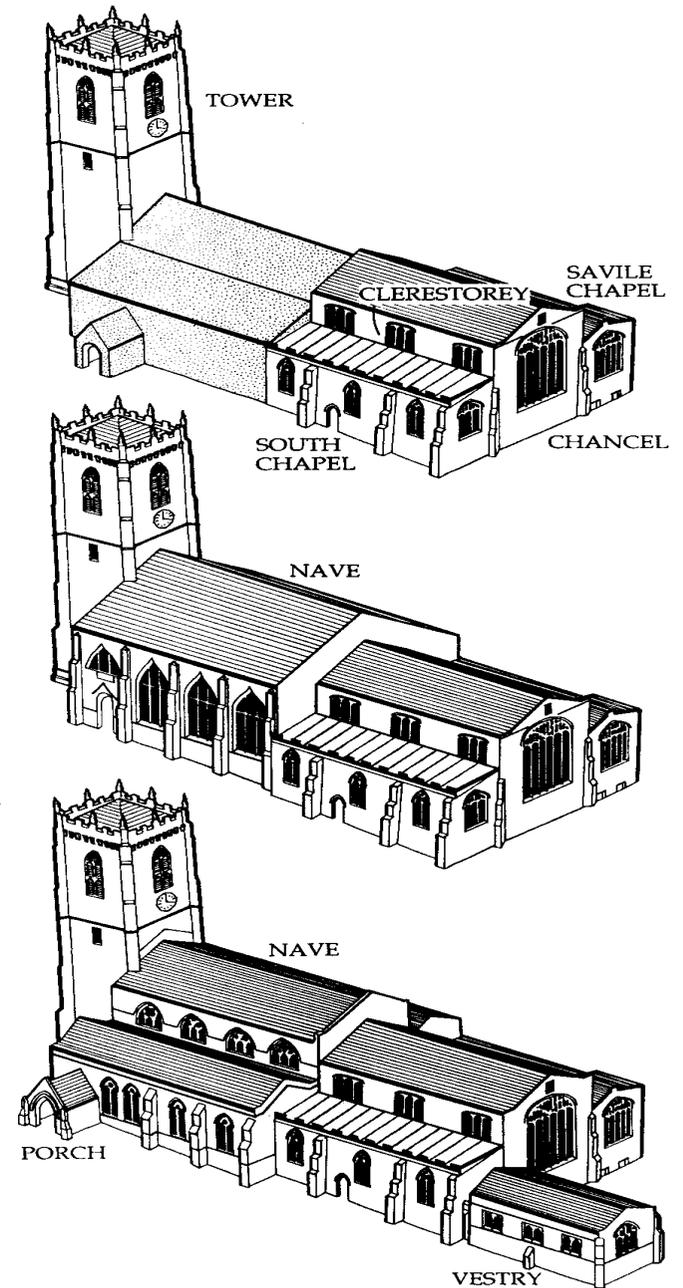
is dedicated to St Michael and All Angels and stands on the south side of the Calder valley, five miles west of Wakefield. There has been a church on the site since Anglo-Saxon times. Since the late 14th century its history has been closely linked with that of the important Savile family; the ruins of their moated manor house lie in the park to the east of the church. The church is of interest both as an historic building, and for the important monuments and outstanding medieval stained glass which it contains. The illustration below shows the 15th-century 'Doom' window, which contains stained glass depicting the general resurrection on the Day of Judgement. This leaflet aims to explain something of the building's history, and provides a brief guide to the stained glass and monuments. Further information on other guides to historic buildings in the county can be obtained from the West Yorkshire Archaeology Service, PO Box 30, Nepshaw Lane South, Leeds LS27 0UG.

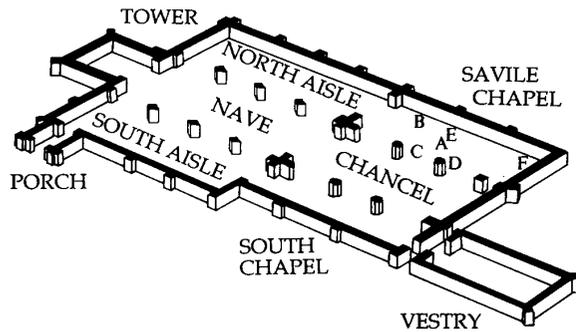
### The development of the church

Thornhill church is first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, but the fragments of Anglo-Saxon memorials - crosses and a graveslab - indicate that there has been a church here since at least the 9th century. Fragments of stones carved in the Norman and Early English styles mark rebuilding or extensions in the 12th and 13th centuries, but almost nothing of the present building is as old as this. The shaded nave, aisles and porch in the drawing on the left show approximately the size of buildings which would have been here. Also in the drawing are shown the oldest surviving parts of the church: the 15th-century tower, chancel and chancel chapels. Inscriptions on the stained glass windows give us precise dates for the chancel and the chapels. The Savile Chapel on the north was first built in 1447 and extended eastwards in 1493. The South Chapel was built in 1491 and the chancel was remodelled, 'clerestoried and arched' by 1499.

The nave of the church, probably an Anglo-Saxon or Norman structure modified and enlarged in the 13th century, was pulled down in the 18th century. By that time, preaching was seen as more important than ritual, and buildings were wanted in which as many pews as possible could be within earshot of the pulpit. In 1777 the medieval nave was rebuilt as a 'preaching box', in a mixed gothic and Classical style very like that of the alterations to Dewsbury church, carried out by the famous architect John Carr. The dedication slab of the 1777 nave survives, as does a photograph of the nave: it is shown in the drawing on the right.

With changes in churchmanship and architectural taste, the Victorians condemned the 1777 nave as 'Churchwarden's Gothic' and 'in poor style'. It was rebuilt (with aisles again) in 1877-9 by the architect G.E. Street at a cost of £12,000. The style of the architecture which he used was the 14th-century Decorated style; this was chosen because it was the one style not represented in the building or among the fragments of architectural stonework. Street, also added the present south porch and vestry, the latter projecting beyond the east end of the church.





### Outside the Church

The west tower looks to be of typical late 15th-century type, but clues suggest that it developed in several stages. The jambs of the west window are of different stone from the adjacent wall, and the tower has been heightened since the stair turret was added. On the east face of the tower can be seen the line of the low-pitched roof of the 1777 'preaching box' nave.

On the north side of the Savile Chapel the change in style and the type of stonework between the original 1447 building and the 1493 extension (see overleaf) is quite clear. At the east end of the Savile Chapel are two low blocked windows showing that there must be some sort of crypt beneath it; also notice the elaborate cross capping the gable end. The masonry of the lower part of the chancel east wall is earlier than the chancel window which itself is dated to 1499. On the south side of the South Chapel are remains of a blocked doorway which must be of post-medieval date as it would have cut through an original tomb recess inside. The window of the chapel may be 14th century, reused when the chapel was built in 1491. Before going inside the church notice how the ground slopes quite steeply from west to east; this peculiarity in siting is shared with Almondbury.

### Inside the Church

Above the tower arch the line of the medieval nave roof can be seen. The only other remnant of the medieval nave is the east wall of its north aisle, now the west wall of the Savile Chapel; part of its formerly external plinth is visible in the north-west corner of the chapel. At the south-west corner of the chapel can be seen the south jamb of an earlier arch, also apparently older than the present chapel; its lower part has been cut back, probably

to create a 'squint' through which the high altar could be seen from the aisle.

Also pre-dating the Savile Chapel, or at least its 1493 extension, is an opening in the chancel north wall that seems to have originally been a window. Both chapels retain their late 15th-century roofs, although they have lost the painted and gilded bosses they would once have had.

### The Glass

The medieval stained glass at Thornhill has been called the finest display in the north of England, outside the City of York. In the Savile Chapel the two western windows in the north wall have glass of 1447, one with a crucifixion, and the other including the figures of Thomas and Lady Savile, along with a request for prayers for their souls. The eastern window in the same wall, of 1493, shows scenes from the life of the Virgin. The east window of the chapel is a 'Doom', a popular medieval theme showing the Resurrection of the Dead and their admission to Heaven and Hell: sadly, a century of industrial pollution has caused the colours to fade, but fortunately accurate tracings of the designs were made in the 19th century: the drawing below is taken from them. The great east window of the Chancel, thought to be the work of French or Belgian craftsmen, shows another common medieval subject, the Tree of Jesse, illustrating the human descent of Christ from Jesse, the father of King David. The glass here appears in much better condition but some belongs to the 19th-century restoration.

### The Monuments

The earliest monuments in the church are the 9th-century Anglo-Saxon stones at the west end of the north aisle;



most are fragments of crosses, four with inscriptions (two in runic script) commemorating Berhtsuth, Eata, Ethelwini and Osberht, along with the names of those who set up the crosses and requests for prayers. Nearby are other stones including a Norman capital and part of a stone coffin.

In the Savile Chapel are several important tombs (lettered on the plan):

- (A) An effigy of a knight in chain mail, thought to be Sir John de Thornhill (d. 1322).
- (B) An alabaster tomb-chest with eighteen 'weepers' (small kneeling figures) around it and effigies thought to represent Sir John Savile (d. 1481) and his wife.
- (C) An oak tomb-chest set up in 1529 to commemorate a later Sir John (d. 1504) and his two wives.
- (D) The tomb of Sir George Savile (d. 1614) and his wife Anne, marked by a massive Renaissance monument.
- (E) An alabaster effigy of a later Sir George (d. 1622) carved by the famous sculptor Maximilian Colt.
- (F) A monument to Sir George Savile of Rufford (d. 1743); the Saviles moved to Rufford Abbey in Nottinghamshire after their manor was burned down by a Civil War siege in 1648.

At the west end of the nave are three earlier medieval cross slabs found in 1990 when the monument of the earlier Sir John was dismantled for conservation. Two show pairs of shears, a common female emblem, and a third a pair of scissors, perhaps denoting a tailor.

