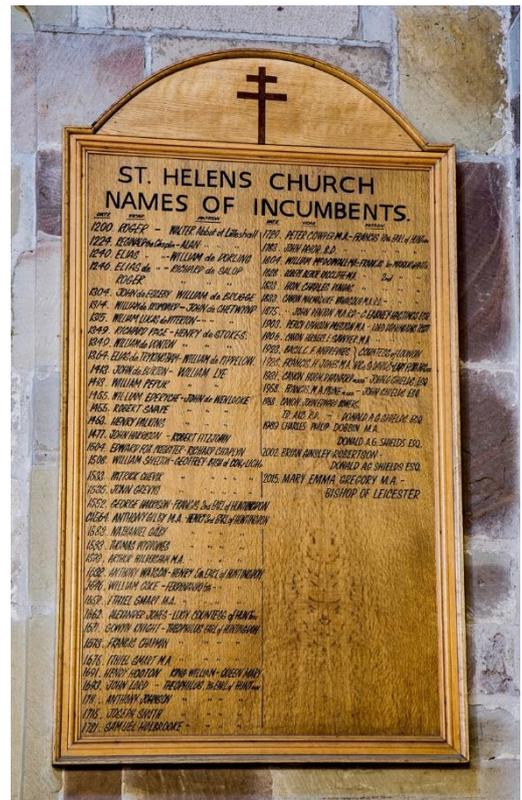


Ithiel Smart : a political Rector of the Civil War.

(c 1598 - 22nd Nov 1661)

The Reformation in England began with Henry VIII in the 1530s but did not end there; many of the changes to medieval churches were carried out in the reign of Edward VI in the 1540s and continued in the reign of Elizabeth I and during the Civil War in the mid 17th century. St Helen's was no stranger to change during those times, and the black and white photos we have of the interior before the late 19th century changes give us an indication of some of the changes which were carried out during this time. A high medieval parish church, such as St Helen's was when it was built by William Hastings, would have looked very different to the church in the time of Charles II, when his Coat of Arms, now at the back of the church, was placed over the chancel arch.

The parish of Ashby de la Zouch was a centre of Puritanism in the 16th and 17th centuries, led by the 'Protestant' Earl, Henry Hastings. He appointed a number of Puritan Rectors during his life (look at the list on the wooden board of incumbents at the back of the church) including Anthony Gilby and Arthur Hildersham, about whom I have written previously; you can find those articles on the church website [https://www.sthelensashby.net/Groups/362493/Our Clergy.aspx](https://www.sthelensashby.net/Groups/362493/Our_Clergy.aspx)



One name which occurs on our incumbents' board is that of Ithiel Smart MA. He was born in around 1598 to the vicar of Preston Capes in Northamptonshire, Robert Smarte. Ithiel went to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1617 as a *sizar*, a poor scholar admitted to a college in return for domestic work.

He was ordained in 1625 and appointed vicar of Wombourne, a village between Wolverhampton and Stourbridge. His first act was to sack the Parish Clerk, a role which required the holder "*to be of honest conversation and sufficient for his reading, writing and also for his competent skill in singing...*" Perhaps he wasn't any of those things! Ithiel then set about improving both the church and the vicarage, noting that both were in a poor state of repair.

Around this time, William Laud, Charles I's Archbishop of Canterbury, began visiting parishes and encouraging churches to reintroduce religious images which had been removed under the regimes of Edward and Elizabeth. Laudian reforms required that altars be reinstated against the east wall of the chancel, away from centre where they had been placed since Elizabeth I's day. Pews which impeded views of the altar were to be reduced in height.

Ithiel Smart, possibly influenced by his time at Cambridge, replaced the fence around the churchyard at Wombourne, adding a gate to prevent animals entering; he added a rail to the chancel, around the communion table, now called an altar again, and had sentences – usually the Lord's Prayer, Creed or Ten Commandments – painted on the walls. In 1639 he had the church porch gated, railed and bolted in order that "*idle and impotent people might not lodge therein as in former times*".

Smart's last entry into the registers at Womborne was in May 1642, as the English Civil War began. It would be 6 years before he returned, and it is suggested that he may have gone to serve with the Commonwealth army. He certainly spent time in London. In 1644 he published '*A more exact and perfect relation of the treachery, apprehension, conviction, condemnation, confession, and execution, of Francis Pitt, aged 65: Who was executed in Smithfield on Saturday, October the 12, 1644. For endeavouring to betray the garrison of Rushall-Hall in the county of Stafford, to the enemy*' - Smart was a friend and minister to Francis Pitt. In 1645 he was one of the signatories to a Plea to Parliament to establish a Presbyterian government.

Ithiel Smart returned to Wombourne for a while, but resigned in 1652. In July that year he became Vicar of St. Helen's. Little is known about his time here, but he had apparently lost his zeal for politics and quietly got on with his job. He remained in this parish until his death in 1661. All that remains of him is the obituary in the registers:

"Mr. Ithiel Smart, Minister of Ashby, a worthy and faithful servant of God, a famous Divine and a painful Preacher, ye comfort of God's people in his time, departed this life ye 22nd. November and was interred in the Chauncel of our Parrish Church in Ashby ye six and twentieth of November 1661".

Ithiel's elder son, also called Ithiel, followed his father to Cambridge and also became Vicar of St. Helen's in 1676 – hence a second Ithiel Smart on the incumbents' board.

Anne Heaton
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(I am indebted to Margaret King, ex-churchwarden of Wombourne Parish Church, for her paper on Ithiel Smart published by the Wombourne History Group in 2016.)