St Helen’s Church, Ashby De La Zouch

the 15th century church

of centaurun here in Ashby de la Zouch has

many interesting things inside it

such as an alabaster tomb of Francis and

Catherine Hastings

an effigy of an unknown pilgrim and a

rare fingerpillary

but today i really wanted to highlight

some things about the church that people

don't often know

one is its unusual orientation

and the other is a rare timepiece on the

bell tower

so today I’m here with Julie Starkey who

has been researching the history of the

church for many years

and I’m hoping that she can tell us more

good morning good morning Linda

um i was once involved in an

archaeological investigation

here that was looking inside the church

and one of the things they discovered

was its unusual orientation

i wonder if you could tell us a little

bit more about why they thought that was

well most early Christian churches are

on a due east orientation

but saint Helens as you've said is

unusual

saint Helens does not face due east it

sends an angle of 63 degrees

so what the archaeologists looked at

was the years in which the sun rose at

63 degrees on Easter day

and I’ve got the archaeologists report

in front of me here

to our knowledge St Helens was

built by William lord Hastings in

around 1470 but

it's possible that he built the present

church

on the site of an earlier church

now the dates the archaeologists came up

with

for possible building of the church

were 1318 1329

1356 1375

or 1386

then they looked again at this at the

15th century

when the work of William Hastings was

known to have taken place

and they came up with 1470 and

1486 which are all dates

close to what we know to be

the construction of the church we

largely see here today

thanks Julie that was really interesting

and so can we go around now and have a

look at the bell tower and look at this

really fabulous timepiece that you've

got on there

of course

wow you know I’m a real lover of

sundials i look for them everywhere but

i can't say I’ve ever seen one that's

like that before

so please tell me more about it do

you know Linda i don't think I’ve ever

seen one like that before I’ve seen

different

types of sundials on towers but never

one quite like this

so it's an unusual type of sundial as

well

the nomon on this sundial the metal bit

doesn't point directly downwards it is

at an

angle it's known as a declining

vertical sundial it goes back to what we

said earlier about the unusual

alignment of the church at 63 degrees

now the knowledge to create a sundial of

this type a declining vertical

sundial was only known in Europe from

about 1450.

now William lord Hastings who raised the

tower we think in the 1470s

was one of the most powerful men of his

age he was the king's right hand man he

was lord

chamberlain to king Edward iv

he was a wealthy man he would have been

well read

and he would have been well travelled so

it's likely that he would have been

aware

of the best craftsmen of his age and he

brought

somebody to Ashby who had the knowledge

to create this declining vertical

sundial that we have here

you can tell that the sundial was

put onto the tower at the time the tower

was raised in the 1470s

if you look at the stonework below it

there's a lot of weathering on the

stonework

and there are some later repairs

those red pantiles that are on there are

much later repairs

but if you look directly beneath the

roman numerals for 12

you can see two stone blocks there in

the tower

that are raised several centimetres

from the tower and they would probably

have gone

right round the circumference of the

sundial

at the time it was constructed but that

is our clue

that tells us that that sundial was put

on the tower in the 1470s

i think one of the things i find that's

really different about it

is that it has very few numbers on it

and most interesting

is that the 12 is at the bottom so

also does it actually work well when the

sun's out can you still tell the time by

it

yes you can still tell the time by it

very accurately indeed as long as we're

on Greenwich mean time

if we're on British summer time you have

to

allow that hour

you'll notice that the lines and

the numerals aren't regular intervals

either

and that is just to allow for the way

the sun hits the gnome on and therefore

the shadow

hits the lines and the numbers

but yes it's very accurate within

about 15 minutes

and of course it would have been very

useful

at the time that it was built because at

the same time William Hastings was

raising the tower

and building the church here he was

doing a lot of work on the castle

which is about 100 meters behind us

that way and his main sitting room

in the castle his solar would have

looked

directly at the sundial so

anybody sitting in there on a sunny day

would have been able to tell the time

I’m sure you'll agree that there's just

so much hidden heritage around

us isn't there is and sometimes

you know we have busy lives it's easy to

just walk by

old buildings without actually stopping

and just having a look

and for places like this you know they

often have volunteers who are full of

knowledge

guidebooks there are websites you can

look at but i think the main thing is to

just

stop occasionally and just look around

and see what's around us

and you find beautiful things like you

know such an amazing sundial

and then interesting things like an

orientation of a church you know

who knew just by walking by