

ASSOCIATED FEATURES

The Vicarage

During the year 1842 George Barron Northcote and Joseph Buscombe Poole entered into a bond with the Bishop of Bath and Wells “*for securing the due application of £1182..6s..0d. (£1182.30p) to the purposes within mentioned...to receive and apply the money authorized to be borrowed by mortgage of the Glebe tithes rents rent charges and other profits and encashments of the said Vicarage for the purpose of rebuilding the Parsonage house and Offices.*” This money was in addition to the sum of £86..15s..4d. (c£86.77p) from the “*Representatives of the late Incumbent of the said Living*” and the sum of £1095..10s..8d. (£1095.53p) “*received or about to be received...from the Governors of the Bounty of Queen Anne for the Augmentation of the maintenance of the Poor Clergy.*” Making a grand total of £2,364..12s..0d. (£2364.60p).

The Rev. Joseph Ditcher, “*Clerk Vicar of the Vicarage and parish church of Southbrent,*” could hardly be referred to as “*poor clergy.*” The original objective had, however, been modified to state that it was, “*to promote the residence of the parochial clergy by making provision for the more speedy and effectual building rebuilding repairing or purchasing houses and other necessary buildings and tenements for the use of their benefices.*” Even this appears rather a lame excuse for such a large expenditure, for it was admitted that the “*State and Condition of the present Vicarage House...is but partially dilapidated.*”

Obviously, it was necessary to provide some plausible justification. The plans state, “*the reason for rebuilding it is, that the rooms are neither sufficiently large nor numerous, and owing to the construction of the building they will not admit of being either enlarged or increased in number simply by Altering them.*” Apparently, the workmanship was also, “*so slight and of such a common and mean description as would not be permitted in a modern built house, added to which the rooms are low, the sitting rooms being 9 ft high, the Chambers 8 ft 6 high.*” (to put that in context, my downstairs rooms are around 7 ft 6 high and upstairs are about 7 ft!). In fact, the main reason for the rebuild may well be the absentee vicar, or vicars, prior to Joseph Ditcher, which would mean that the vicarage had been left empty for some considerable period.

There then follows information which provides some insight into what the old vicarage actually looked like. “*At present they comprise a Drawing Room 16 by 12. A Study 11 by 7. A Dining Room 15½by 15½ with a small Cellar and Pantry entered from it. There is no Hall nor Vestibule. The stairs as well as the entrances to the Drawing Room & Dining Room being close to the entrance door. There is a Larder and Pantry in the*

rear. There are about three chambers each about 16 by 11 and three other rooms little better than Closets being about 8½ by 8.”

A detailed record of the subsequent plans and building works still exists in the South West Heritage records (D/D/Bbm 89), from which these details have been taken.

Some aspects of the former vicarage were re-used, but only where explicitly permitted. “*Some of the best of the old sashes shutters &c may be used in the China Pantry, Pantry, back stairs, Water Closets and Store Room,*” they inform us. Presumably the old vicarage was not very old, or there had been extensive repairs or rebuilding during the previous century, as sash windows were only introduced into this country at the start of the eighteenth century. This is also evidenced by other details mentioned. Roof slates, for instance, could be “*lain by for re-use,*” whereas earlier properties would have been more likely to have had thatch on their roofs. Stone and brick work from the “*present house*” were to be “*Cleanse[d] and stow[ed] away for future use,*” although bricks were not introduced into Somerset until the late seventeenth century and were not in general use until the eighteenth century.

It is fascinating to read some of the detail. “*Rod dirt to be used in making the Plaster in preference to sea sand.*” “*Open, examine, cleanse and thoroughly repair if necessary, the present well and assist in fixing any new Docks or pump and recover the same effectually. The mortar is to be composed of 1/3rd of lime to 2/3^{rds} of sharp sand or Ashes well mixed and tempered with as little water as possible.*” “*The recesses in the rooms to be Gothic Arched Form, the flues as near to a circle as possible and parget them with Cow dung Mortar and ruckle and clean them at the finishing of the building.*” Pargetting is a decorative moulding, fashionable throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, though normally considered out of favour later than this. “*Paint and limewash the cellar walls.*” These cellars are shown as a beer cellar and a wine cellar, linked together, and located between the hall and the kitchen. They were not below the ground floor. “*The stable, Coach House and Steps to be taken down (and rebuilt).*”

Today the vicarage is in private hands and is known as St. Michael’s House.

The Graveyard

Most of the early graves still extant at St. Michael’s are to be found to the south of the church, though some have been moved from their original position. It would have been considered disrespectful to bury the dead on the unfashionable north side until relatively recent times, when pressures for space made this a necessity.

Old pictures, from the nineteenth century, show a railed area just beyond the south wall of the vestry and a tomb beyond this. Both are easily visible in the c1870 picture by Robert Gillo (on the front cover), though the railed area is not visible in the c1831 Buckler picture (inside the front cover) and the tomb is a little more difficult to see as it has gravestones in front at either end and another at an angle in front of its left hand end (look below the vestry door). The tomb is dedicated to Edward Symes, the village surgeon in his day, and his family, and records that he died in 1781. It has been the subject of a major renovation recently and it could be seen during that process that some major changes did take place during the nineteenth century and probably also in the twentieth century.

In the South West Heritage Centre records there is an 1846 document entitled, “*The articles of Inquiry to be answered In Writing by the Churchwardens and Chapelwardens,*” which states, “*Yard out of repair but about to be repaired.*” Repairs to the churchyard have always been a recurring concern and other records show that maintenance was often on the agenda. Within the Churchwardens Accounts of 1777 it says that 15/- (75p) had been spent “*halling (hauling) 6 load of stones to the Church Causeway.*” A further 14/- (70p) went on “*riveing (raking or splitting) and breaking the 6 load of Stones.*” In the same year 6/- (30p) was spent, “*in getting the yew trees,*” a further 7/6d (37.5p) in “*taking them up,*” and 2/2d (c11p) “*planting the Yew Trees.*”

Additional “*Disbursements about Church Causeway,*” are recorded again three, four and five years later and this was quickly followed by a bill, “*for beading up y^e Old Causeway and forming of new Road,*” at a cost of 13/- (65p). (I guess this is the path which goes from the lych gate to the south entrance to the church. As an aside, a lych gate is a covered gate, normally positioned at the entrance to a churchyard, which was used to

shelter a coffin until the vicar was ready to commence the funeral.) There is also a load of 80 “*tun of stones from Brent Hill at 3d per load.*” It does not explicitly state whether that was for this cause, but that is quite a lot of stone, which presumably came from the quarries which can still be seen on the top of the Knoll (close to the pillar giving directions to points of interest in the local landscape. Which does mean that quite a lot of potentially valuable Pre-Roman and Roman archaeology may well have been lost at that time.

Other work continued on other aspects of the churchyard. “*Paid Shepherd Heath for 18 days work at 2s (10p) per Day for making Step by y^e Ch Porch and Steps and a Gout (drain) for y^e Water by y^e Ch Yard Hatch (wicket door), y^e Ch yard Wall and new House Roof and Window, etc.*” Presumably the grout was filled with stones, as there is an additional entry, paying 4/- (20p) for doing just that and “*breaking up ye stones about ye same.*” In 1775 payment is made for painting and repairing the railing round the churchyard. The sum involved does seem rather high for a carpenter, at £5..18s..0d. (£5.90p), so may have involved additional tasks. There was also a sum of 2/6d (12.5p) for wheeling dung, something which may relate to the yew trees, for they were still being looked after, the sum of 4d. (c1.7p) being paid several times for watering them.

Some very major reconstruction work could have taken place throughout that year as Jn^o Sealey is paid the large sum of £11..0s..10d. (£11.04p) for “*Work about y^e Ch and Ch-yard as appears by his Bill.*” How much of this was for the church and how much for the yard is not detailed and the bill is no longer available. However, there is an item which may well be included in that bill, which is something that few now notice, but that is becoming rare in this part of the country and should, I believe, be better known in order to retain an interesting feature into the future. Reference to the steps mentioned above, does suggest that work was carried out at this time to provide the steps which lead from the road opposite the door which leads into the Vicarage garden, up to the south porch. Prior to that date it may well be that everyone entered the church from the lych gate. The need for steps also shows that the graveyard was quite a bit higher than Church Lane then, as it is now. To support the yard there is a brick wall, which presumably replaced some earlier form of support. Parts of it have obviously had to be replaced in fairly recent years, probably due to collapses. This can be seen because the new bricks are all set in what is known as “*stretcher bond,*” i.e. they all display the long side of the brick. Stretcher Bond first appeared in the late nineteenth century, but became in widespread use in the twentieth century. Some parts of the wall, however, are in “*English Garden Bond.*” Prior to the widespread use of stretcher bond, Flemish bond was the normal way of laying bricks. That consists of a row of alternating headers (displaying the short end of the brick) and stretchers in each row, with the following row doing the same but ensuring that headers and stretchers alternate on the vertical plain as well. Many examples of Flemish bond can still be seen in Brent Knoll. Another brickwork style was English Bond, which had a row of all headers, followed by a row of all stretchers, which was popular up until the late eighteenth century. Following that, English Garden Bond came into fashion around the end of the eighteenth century. It had three rows of stretchers followed by a row of headers, which is what can be seen in all the older parts of this wall. The dating of this ties in nicely with the work done by Jn^o Sealey around 1775.

Almost exactly one hundred years later, in 1876, a Vestry Meeting (records now held by South West Heritage Trust) discussed the “*sad state of the churchyard.*” A committee, comprising Messrs Lee, Eagar, Poole, Body and Harris, were appointed to “*consider the desirability of making a plan of the churchyard and the Graves. Also, the propriety of enlarging the churchyard.*” Lack of space had become critical by 1880, when a Mrs Lumley offered thirty perches between the churchyard and Courthay (now Old Courthay) provided they put up a “*proper iorn (sic, translates as “iron”) fence and reserve a portion for her own burial place at the upper end.*”!

In October 1879 it was reported in the local press that the Revd. A. O. Fitzgerald, the vicar of South Brent, had requested the Medical Officer of Health for the district to bring the overcrowded state of the churchyard to the notice of the Axbridge Board of Guardians (this was prior to the establishment of the Axbridge Rural District Council). Apparently, it had devolved onto the Royal Sanitary Authority (which the Board represented locally) to take action where there was insufficient space for burials and no alternative space has been provided. It was noted that “*the churchyard...is situate on the side of a hill, and it was notorious that the drainage therefrom had been the source of fever for some time.*” The cost was chargeable to the rates, but as

Worle, for instance, had decided to handle a similar issue themselves, they suggested that South Brent should finance the purchase of about half an acre of land for a cemetery.

Surprisingly, the question came up again in 1886. This time a committee of six was appointed to purchase land for the cemetery. Mrs. Phelps was now the owner of Courthay and for £435, plus £25 for legal expenses, conveyance and mortgaging from her, she offered to sell both the house and its land to the Church. Things had been settled by 1889, when the house was put up for sale, minus the land now acquired for the cemetery. A small dispute regarding the timber rights had arisen, as the Lord of the Manor claimed the trees by the lane as his right. It must have been amicably settled as the timber was advertised for sale along with the house.

By 1908 there may have been further pressure regarding space for burials, as it was proposed “*that out parishioners be charged a prohibitive fee of ten guineas (£10..10s..0d = £10.50p) for any new ground broken in the churchyard.*”

At the eastern end of the graveyard is the external War Memorial. This location was chosen, as the Weston Mercury reported, because it is the most “*elevated part,*” so that it could be “*seen from the main road, railway and practically all parts of the village.*” It was completed from “*Doubling stone especially selected from the Chelynch bed,*” and was dedicated and unveiled on the 2nd September 1921. Prior to the ceremony a muffled peal was rung, into which was introduced a method known as “*the whole pull and stand.*” “*Between the rounds the tenor bell gave a distinct knell, this was done seventeen times to indicate the number of men from the parish who fell in the late war,*” the Weston Mercury continued.

Church House, Poor House and School.

In 1776 an item appeared in the Churchwardens Accounts, “*Pd W^m Wall for righting the church house.*” Church houses arose when the nave of the church was no longer able to support festivals and, even more importantly for the local church finances, church ales. They became popular when it was no longer acceptable to have revels in the nave of the church, where they had traditionally been before seating was introduced. Exactly where the church house was is uncertain. It must have been near to the church, but no obvious site occurs. It is possible it could have been where what is now Old Courthay stands as there is nothing to suggest that the house that is there now is any older than the seventeenth century, although its name suggest it may have had an older pedigree. Or, of course, it may have disappeared when one of the churchyard expansions happened. It seems unlikely that it was in the vicarage garden, where tradition has it that the Revd. Benoni Hill, vicar from 1671 to 1699, gave a small building for use as a school. The building that survives there is hardly large enough for a church house.

There are two old histories of Brent Knoll which survive from members of the local school. The first was “*Written by the pupils of Brent Knoll VC School about 1922. (VC = Voluntary Controlled). It notes that “the Rev, Benoni Hill became vicar in 1671 and at a vestry meeting ‘craved for 12/- (60p) of his rate towards the upkeep of the school in the vicarage ground.’ This room remained as a school until the middle of the last century (i.e. the 19th century). It is now used as a Scout’s house and would hold only twenty-five scholars.*” Subsequent to that the Guides moved in to make use of the building, the skeleton of which still remains in the grounds of St. Michael’s House.

The second history was written by Alan Oliver, Headmaster of Brent Knoll School, in 1978 “*with grateful thanks to Mrs. Mary Frost for much of the information*” It suggests that “*the school was established in a hut in the Vicarage grounds, a wooden structure with a stone fireplace. It was run as a “Dame” school, by two maiden ladies, the pupils paying probably twopence a week in school fees.*”

There was also a Poor House in the village, as one would expect. Prior to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which established the centralised workhouses, each parish made its own provisions for the poor and some use continued even after the Act. Part of this would have been somewhere for them to live. In 1782/3 the Churchwardens “*Paid for a Load of Stone for y^e Gutter and Stepes by y^e poor House and Gate – 10/6*” (52.5p). another reference in the same year mentions “*Pd Tho^s Peter for first beating up y^e Gout by y^e Poor*

House.” This Poor House was situated some distance from the church and was known until recently as Old Brent Cottage, but is now 75 Brent Street.

Old Books

There are two books of historic interest in St. Michael’s Church. One of them is a bound volume of music which has a legend on its cover which states, “*G. Stone Esq. To South Brent Choir.*” This book includes a “*Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, Composed and most Respectfully Dedicated by Permission to Will^m Shirley, By Henry Tolhurst, Chart Sutton, Kent,*” followed by three collections of anthems and psalms, all composed by H. Tolhurst, except for the last, which is “*Composed by Thomas Clark, Canterbury.*”

Henry Tolhurst died at the very young age of thirty-six and the Maidstone Journal (the local paper) published an obituary which stated, “On Sunday night the remains of Mr Henry Tolhurst of this town (a celebrated Psalm Singer and Musician) were interred at Langley, the corpse was preceded by a Band of Music, and the place of internment attended by some hundreds of spectators, many of whom seemed deeply affected at this solemn spectacle.”

Gabriel Stone was a churchwarden of St. Michael’s in the period 1786 to 1789 and again between, 1804 and 1813.

There is also a large prayer book, dated 1822, and printed at the Clarendon Press, Oxford. However, that date is misleading as it contains thanksgivings for “*our sovereign lady VICTORIA, as on the day (the 20th June) set over us by thy grace and providence to be our Queen; and so together with her blessed Adelaide the Queen Dowager, and all the Royal Family.*” As Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837 and the Dowager Queen Adelaide died in 1849, this must be a new updated edition, republished sometime between those two dates.

The full title of the book is “*The Book of Common Prayer and administration of The Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the use of the United Church of England and Ireland’ together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be sung or said in churches; Form and Manner Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.*” Which is quite a mouthful!

It starts with the “*Acts for the Uniformity of Common Prayer, etc.*” There are two of these in this edition; the first from the time of Elizabeth I (1559), imposed penalties, including imprisonment for those ministers who did not comply with the strict use of the Prayer Book defined therein: six months for a first offence; one year and the loss of a living for a second offence; life imprisonment for a third offence. The second, enacted during the reign of Charles II (1662), included “*A form of Prayer with Thanksgiving for the happy deliverance of King James I and the three estates of England [Nobility, Clergy and the House of Commons], from the most traitorous and bloody-intended Massacre by Gunpowder: and also for the happy Arrival of His Majesty King William on this Day, for the deliverance of our Church and Nation from POPISH Tyranny and arbitrary power,*” which was to be performed on the fifth day of November, a National Holiday until 1859. The prayers offer thanks and praise for the Gunpowder deliverance “*by Popish treachery appointed as sheep to the slaughter, in a most barbarous and savage manner, beyond the example of former ages.*”

Originally an effigy of the pope was burnt, but this later changed to become the now more familiar Guy Fawkes effigy. In the Churchwardens Accounts for 1777 there is an example of the type of festivities held under John Harden’s disbursements:

Paid for 50lb of beef at 3d per pound	0..12..6
Also for 2 peck of Potatoes and 2lb of salt	0.. 1..2

John Symes, the other churchwarden, included further disbursements:

Crave allowance for a Hogshead of Cyder	1.. 0..0
Pd for 77lb of beef at 1¾d per lb & 14lb of salt	0..12..3

It is probably fair to assume that the beef at 3d per pound was for the gentry, whilst that at 1¾d per pound was for the poor. A hogshead was around fifty gallons, so it looks as though they were intending to have a great party, presumably supplemented by the participants. No other similar expenditure is recorded ay any other

time of the year, which suggests that this was a highlight of the year. However, by the start of the nineteenth century similar entries cannot be found, though there are payments recorded for the bell ringers on that date. Another entry in the Prayer Book records: “*A form of Prayer with Fasting,*” which was to be “*used yearly on the Thirtieth of January; being the Day of the Martyrdom of the Blessed King CHARLES the First; to implore the mercy of God, that neither the Guilt of that sacred and innocent blood, nor those other sins, by which God was provoked to deliver up both us and our King into the hands of cruel and unreasonable men, may at any time hereafter be visited upon us or our posterity.*”

On the twenty ninth of May another festival, now largely forgotten, was also a public holiday. It was to remember “*the wonderful deliverance of these Kingdoms from THE GREAT REBELLION, and all the Miseries and Oppressions consequent thereupon, under which they had so long groaned*” This deliverance was from, “*the unnatural Rebellion, Usurpation, and Tyranny of ungodly and cruel men, and from the same sad confusions and ruin thereupon ensuing.*” Later we learn that God “*didst...disappoint and overthrow the wicked designs of those traitorous, heady and high-minded men who, under the pretence of Religion and thy most holy Name, had contrived, and well-nigh effected, the utter destruction of this Church and Kingdom.*” It was more commonly known as “Oak Apple Day,” commemorating Charles II’s famous escape from Parliamentary troops by hiding in an oak tree, but was also the day he entered London on his restoration and, in fact, his birthday. It was discontinued by the same Act of Parliament which affected the November the fifth holiday. There is some enjoyable archaic language used in some of these acts; for instance, the use of the word “*eftsoons*” [translation = immediately], or the title “*Justice of Oyer and Determiner,*” [a commission issued to judges on a circuit to hold courts (OED)] or a method of being prosecuted, reminiscent of the trials of witches, where conviction rests on “*the notorious evidence of the fact.*” [facts which are so well-known that they are obvious to everyone and therefore indisputable, so do not need to be proven]. Also, provision was to be made for the Prayer Book to be translated into Welsh and used in that language, though, it was noted, a copy of the English version was to be placed beside it. This had nothing to do with political correctness, however, as it not only meant that the Welsh parishes would have to buy two books instead of one, at their own not inconsiderable expense, but also it was to ensure that “*such as do not understand the said Language [English] may, by conferring both Tongues together, the sooner attain to the Knowledge of the English Tongue.*”

Of course, things are moved around over time, so it is not always possible to be sure that items are still in the same place as when they are recorded. That is particularly true of portable items, which could include two Glastonbury chairs and an armchair with a decorated back, along with five candlesticks which, unfortunately, are in their modern hideaway normally, Two are brass, about five feet (150cm) high, one is wooden, about three foot six inches (45cm) high and two are of mixed materials, having a wooden base two feet (60cm) high and a brass upper section one foot six inches (45cm) high.