

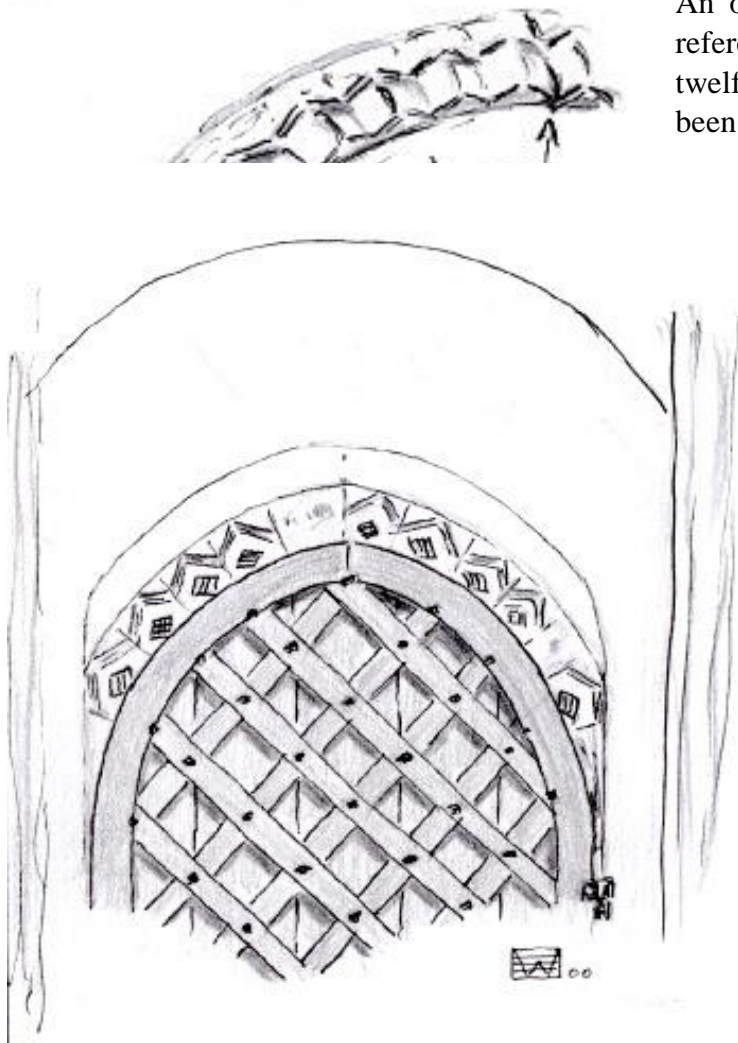


THE SOUTH PORCH AND DOORWAY

There is a stone porch leading up to a fine Norman arch, which encloses the south door at St. Michael's. Glynne refers to the arch as a "*semi-Norman doorway*;" which is precisely what it appears to be. A typical Norman frieze, decorating the outer arch, is married to a Gothic inner archway. Discussing the outer arch,

Glynne continues by describing it as, “*chevroned on imposts and the chevron moulding continued longitudinally down the jambs.*” Pevsner listed the same feature, but used a different terminology, when he referred to, “*the zigzag frieze at right angles to the wall in the outer arch moulding,*” though Orbach has now modified this to, “*with chevron at right angles to the wall in the outer arch and jambs.*”

Inside this outer arch is an altered opening, as Pevsner recognises when he states, “*The actual opening was heightened and made pointed at a later date.*” This must be correct for it is a Gothic arch, whose origins arise in the Early English style, which is closely associated locally with the building of the new cathedral at Wells, from the end of the twelfth century. This clearly suggests that South Brent acquired this internal arch either in the dying years of that century or at the start of the thirteenth century.



An original Norman arch fits nicely with the earliest reference to a church at South Brent in the first half of the twelfth century. A Gothic arch would certainly not have been used at that time. However, it was during the time when Robert of Winchester was Abbot of Glastonbury that “*the churches of Pilton and South Brent fell from the patronage of the monastery at Glastonbury into the hands of the clergy of Wells,*” as is related in “*The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*” as translated by James P. Carley. Robert was Abbot from 1171 to 1189. The great rebuilding programme in Wells Cathedral was started by Bishop Reginald FitzJocelin in 1176, which strongly suggests that the arch was modified to demonstrate that it was in the same style as the cathedral, that is, that it now was no longer owned by Glastonbury, but had become the property of Wells.

Local rumour, as related to me when I arrived in the village, suggested that the Norman arch had been imported from elsewhere. That is most unlikely as there are some definite indications that the modifications to the arch were done in situ. Looking closely at the stones comprising the outer arch it is apparent that some of them have been dislodged slightly so that they now

dip below the stones on either side of them. This is particularly true of two stones, one on the left-hand side of the arch, the other at the apex. If this had been done when the arch was originally built it would have been a relatively easy matter to rectify it, by re-assembling the structure. If it were done some decades later, when the wall of the nave above was still intact, the re-alignment would have been well-nigh impossible. Clearly this demonstrates that it is not an original feature but was altered at a later date.

Another even more compelling clue can be found by entering the doorway and looking at the reverse side of the stones making up the lower of the two external arches. They are adorned with a different, but still traditionally Norman zig-zag style decoration. Two rows of inverted chevrons are spaced apart with lozenge shaped decorations between them. At the top, towards the right-hand side, additional undecorated stones have obviously been inserted, presumably because some of the originals were broken when they were attempting to re-use them.

Clearly the original arch was a Norman style arch and, at some later time, the stones from the lower arch were removed, turned around, and re-inserted to form an innovative Gothic interior arch. Whilst this was being

done there was a small amount of slippage in the outer arch, which remains evident today. It may well have been this slippage which meant that no attempt was made to remove the outer arch.

Surprisingly, Collinson/Rack makes no mention of a Norman doorway. Was this the reason why the supposition arose that it was acquired from elsewhere, presumably sometime after 1789 when Collinson was published, but before Glynn published his survey of Somerset churches, as he mentions it when he recorded the South Brent church on the 21st May 1855? A Somerset Record Society publication of his work contains a picture by W. W. Wheatley, drawn in 1843, which shows the door in some detail, looking almost exactly as it does now.

Another feature, which also must be from the original building, can be seen on the eastern side of the door. It is a hole, which continues through from the door jambs into the wall of the nave. It is about 67.5 cms (2¼ feet) above ground level. At a similar height on the opposing wall is a small recess. Both are about 10 cms (4 inches) square. The eastern side hole extends about 148 cms (58.25 inches – nearly 5 feet) into the wall. As it has not been touched for some time, the hole does have some accumulated dirt within it, but its internal sides are smooth, which indicates that it was almost certainly intentionally built into the wall when it was originally built, rather than being hewn out later.

The width of the door opening at this point is approx. 145 cms (57 inches), so it is plain that the hole was used to hold a thick wooden bar, which could be extended across the rear of the closed door and into the recess, effectively securing the door against quite considerable force. There is only a small difference between the length of the opening and the width of the door, but the bar would have had to extend some way out from the wall in order to provide sufficient grip to pull it out. As the current door extends almost to the wall, on both sides, this suggests that a previous door was rather narrower than the current one. It must also have been rather thinner, for the bar could not stretch into the recess across the current thickness of the door.

Churches in the Middle Ages had a 'Right of Sanctuary.' Lawbreakers, including murderers, could seek sanctuary within the church and its precincts. A sanctuary knocker was often provided for a fugitive's benefit, though these rarely remain in existence today. By seeking sanctuary, offenders did not escape retribution entirely, for they were given a limited period in which to confess, before being banished from the country. On the other hand, those who ignored the right of sanctuary, and pursued the offender to within the church, would be excommunicated for sacrilege. One can understand that feelings may well have reached fever pitch on occasion, when the pursuers were so frustratingly thwarted by their prey.

Barring potential lynch mobs required a higher level of security than ancient locks could provide. Hence the bar. However, churches could also be used as a different kind of sanctuary in times of war, riot, banditry and even pestilence. The local church was normally the most substantially built stone edifice in the surrounding district, assuming there was no castle nearby. It alone had the potential to withstand a fairly major onslaught and, for most people, had the additional protection of being a sanctified site. Of course, there could be other little local differences which required some form of protection. The relationship between tithe gathering clergy and the local parishioners was not always friendly!

The current door has a cross hatched interior and panelled exterior, with some vertical wooden panels repaired in places. It is studded with metal hinges supporting it at the level of the springings in the arch (i.e. where the curvature of the arch commences) and close to the base. These hinges are curled at their ends to rest on thick metal pins attached to the arch. The panels have a wooden frame and four internal vertical wooden supports. There is a plaited circular metal handle leading through to an elegant tapered latch. Metal nails, with large diamond shaped heads, fix the interior hatching and the outer surface has square-headed, or irregular, shaped heads.

It is probable that the current door has been repaired in the recent past. Some of it is probably of fairly great antiquity, perhaps using some of the old vertical panels, Robinson said, "*The door under the Norman arch is a fine example of a massive oak church door, showing unmistakable signs of old age.*" The moulding used to frame the exterior of the door, and to create four vertical bars across its face, have been added more recently so, as we saw above concerning the sanctuary bar, the door is thicker today than it would have originally been.

Above the doorway, on the exterior side, is a sizeable niche, now empty, which presumably once held a statue or other adornment (possibly St. Michael?) Around this is a relieving arch. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that there is another relieving arch above the external entrance to the porch. It is rather faint but appears redundant. Could there have been a reason for it at some earlier time? Was the wall originally higher at this point? Is the relieving arch a hint that there was a room over the porch at one time? Discussing this with Warwick Rodwell, we agreed that that may be the answer, but I could find no record of there ever having been one.

Then, looking in Kelly's Directory of 1889, under Brent Knoll, there was a note saying that, "*there had formerly been a parvis in the porch.*" A parvis (or parvise), in this context, means a room over a porch, often used for a chantry priest or a schoolroom. Presumably it could well have been used originally for the former (as discussed under Vestry), but become the latter sometime after the Reformation. Whether the pupils would have appreciated the fact that the word is derived from "Paradise" is a moot point!

Looking again at the archaeology of the wall of the nave, it soon became apparent that some old stone rises to roof level above the porch area. On either side of this, a fairly straight-line joint highlights the fact that only the stones formerly protected by the walls of the parvis have been retained. Just above the line of the porch roof it connects to original stone at a lower level on the main wall. Otherwise the top of the nave wall has been rebuilt, presumably when the Victorian re-roofing took place. Later still, I found a comment by Robinson. He says, "*The porch had formerly a parvise over it, and the door by which it was reached is still to be seen on the west side.*" No trace of such a door is now visible, so extensive rebuilding must have taken place just here during the twentieth century.

The entrance to the porch has a, "*triple-chamfered porch doorway with one order of shafts,*" as reported by Pevsner, who observed that this implied an early fourteenth century date. It also has indentations in its mouldings suggesting it once had a gate. Proof of this comes from Glynne. "*The outer door of the porch is on shafts; the porch itself is large,*" he noted. This last observation suggests it was formerly much used and, indeed, along both walls are stone benches.

The roof is leaded, sporting an inscription stating that this was done in 1877. Above both sides of the porch and on the nave roof, between porch and tower, are imprints stating, "A O F G VICAR 1877 MERRICK RESTORER. A O F G was Augustus Otway FitzGerald, Vicar at Brent Knoll from 1876 to 1897 (the nave roof was re-leaded in 2011, but the imprint was retained and restored to its original position). FitzGerald had been made Archdeacon of Wells in 1863, by Lord Auckland, then Bishop of Bath and Wells. As Archdeacon, Brent Knoll came within his patronage and he appointed himself vicar when the Revd. Ditcher died. At the time of his death, one obituary noted that the benefice was worth a gross annual value of £527, whilst others recorded that his income as Archdeacon, in the largest Archdeaconry in Somerset, was £200 p.a. It is noteworthy that Kelly's Directory, which had an edition dated 1897, stated his income to be a gross yearly value of £690, with residence. The Archdeacon's obituary stated that he was genial, humorous, charitable, scholarly and thoroughly practical. He secured a third-class honours degree in classics at Balliol in 1831. Another notice says that he delivered many admirable charges to his parishioners!

It is interesting to see how South Brent vicar's income fluctuated during the time when figures are easily available. We can trace any vicar's income from the mid-nineteenth century through to 1939 from Kelly's Directories. In 1840 the local vicar, the Revd. Johnson, received £548, though this was not his total income, as he was also vicar in three other parishes, including Berrow, and did not live within this parish. The local population at that time was rising; it is recorded in the 1831 census as 890 and in the 1841 census as 1072 (though this was distorted somewhat by railway workers in the parish). This was the year in which the Revd. Johnson was succeeded by the Revd. Ditcher. From 1841 onwards there is a decline in the local population, largely due to the rapid rise of some local seaside towns such as Burnham and Weston-super-Mare. It had fallen to 937 in 1851, 863 in 1871 and 688 by 1901. It rose a little in 1911 to 803, but fell again to 750 in 1921 and 733 in 1931. After the war it continued to rise, although it did not reach the 1831 figure again until 1971 and only exceeded the 1841 figure as late as 1981.

However, the falling population did not, at first, affect the vicar's income. From the figure of £548 in 1840 it rose to £680 by 1871 and £690 four years later. This may well be due to the fact that the commutation of tithes meant that, instead of taking one tenth of everything produced, a set cash figure was agreed based upon the price of wheat. So, if that price rose, so did the vicar's income, but equally if the price fell the vicar received less. Other factors could also affect his income, such as the loss of land to other parishes, changing use of land and the level of inflation. The late nineteenth century agricultural depression would almost certainly have had an effect upon income of the farmers as well as the vicar. By 1889 the new vicar, the Revd. FitzGerald, only received £579 and that had fallen further to £524 in 1889 but, by the time of his death in 1897, it had risen again to the same level as it had been in 1871, that is to £690.

Then came a really dramatic change in fortune. Between 1897 and 1906 there were three new vicars and the net value of the living had shrunk to £216, though it recovered somewhat in 1910, after a fourth vicar had been inducted, to become £356, where it remained until it rose back to £675 in 1923 when the Revd. Schofield came to Brent Knoll. During his incumbency it fell slightly again to £625, but remained at that figure until the Second World War.

A final note regarding the south porch. On the inside wall are two plaques. One is made of brass and is on the east wall. It reads, "*In memory of The Rev. Harold Eric Roscoe Everett M Sc Vicar of this Parish 1964-1965.*" The other is plastic on wood, attached to the west wall and recalls the fact that, "*The church clock was restored by the residents of Brent Knoll to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of H. M. Queen Elizabeth II 1977.*"