

THE TOWER

“The tower is a fine one with a parapet of pierced panelling and 4 crocketed pinnacles divided by 3 horizontal strings; the belfry windows, three in number of equal size, each of 2 lights. The west window of 5 lights and below it a labelled door with enriched spandrels, flanked by canopied niches and there is an octagonal turret on the side.

Sir Stephen Glynne

That is a good introduction to the tower of St. Michael's, which was built, like most Somerset towers, around the end of the fourteenth, or beginning of the fifteenth, century. Wickham offers a date for this particular style of around 1380 to 1440, with a preference for it being from the first half of the fifteenth century. He makes it clear that this is an opinion from, *“The greatest authority on the subject, the late Mr. Allen, [who] wisely refrained from giving a close date to the tower, but...indicates that it comes with the rest of the West Mendip group which includes Banwell, Cheddar and Axbridge, and is probably from the first half of the 15th century.”* He refers to it as *“a good tower of the second class.”* The internal tower arch, although tending to confirm the approximate date, possibly suggests a slightly earlier date, for as Pevsner noted, *“Tower arch on responds [half piers, set into the wall to carry one end of an arch] of a broadly treated four-hollows section, i.e. no later than c. 1400.”* Orbach has modified the final part of that sentence to read, *“the fat shafts suggesting a date c. 1400,”* which is, perhaps, a little more precise.

The tower is built of limestone, probably local, dressed and boldly coursed. Being of a different stone from that of the north aisle, it appears unlikely that they were built at exactly the same time, though it does have a lead roof and the pierced parapet, referenced by Glynne, contains quatrefoils in lozenges, similar to those on the north aisle roof. There are set back, two-level, capped buttresses and, on the plinth of the wall between these buttresses, at the south western corner, is what Wickham referred to as a mason's mark, though it is actually a bench mark.

Bench marks were used in conjunction with Ordnance Survey maps, where the horizontal line represents the exact level at which the map records the local information concerning height above sea level. Below this line is an arrowhead pointing to it. The foot of a church tower was commonly used for this purpose and, in this case, the level was recorded as 69.6 feet (21.214m) above sea level. There is another bench mark, which is

located on the Brent Knoll School, where the level is recorded as 24.9 feet (7.59m) above sea level and several others throughout the village.

An octagonal turret, in the north east corner of the tower, stands proud of the roof and contains a stair, giving access to a room for the bell-ringers, the belfry and finally to the roof. The present ground-level door to this stair turret is set into the north side of the tower and is of a 4-centred style typically found from early Tudor times. As the turret must surely be coeval with the tower, it seems likely that the door may be a later insertion, a supposition that is, perhaps, enhanced by the fact that the stones surrounding this door also appear to have been modified at a later date.

Perhaps a little speculation may be permitted at this point. When I started my research into St. Michael's a number of people informed me that the Norman doorway in the south porch had been acquired from some other church (North Petherton was explicitly mentioned by some). Elsewhere I have argued that it was original to South Brent, but I now wonder whether there was an importation, but that it was the turret door that was imported, not the south porch door.

Of course, another explanation may be that bell ringing was initially done from within the church, at the base of the tower, and, when this was changed to accommodate the bell-ringers within the tower room, a new door and stair were added. That would imply, however, that the entire turret was modified, which is not apparent.

In 1879 a house-to-house appeal was initiated to finance a restoration fund, due to the bad state of the tower and the bells. The success of this restoration was short lived as, by 1921, "*an ominous crack*" appeared in the tower, as reported in the Weston Mercury. It cost £467 to repair the tower and some unspecified part of the exterior plus a few extras. The cost of this was born by the vicar of the time, the Revd. R. T. Gardner, so that the parishioners efforts could be concentrated on the re-flooring of the nave, another feature causing extreme concern at the time. Was either of these restorations the occasion for the insertion of a new doorway?

Noticeably, the step on the current doorway has had a section inserted, presumably because it became very worn, and the exterior steps up to the door have had their treads rendered with cement. Both suggest that this was probably an original entrance. At the bottom of the stone door-frame, on the right-hand side, is a piece which has been shaped at its base (it appears to be inverted), and the door does not completely fill the recessed area. Halfway down this side one of the stones is of a different colour to the remainder, though, being of a similar colouring to the remainder of the wall, it may well have been an original feature. Certainly, it does appear that changes have been made, at some point, to this doorway.

There are three double-lancet windows at the belfry level on the west, south and east sides of the tower, as Glynne stated, but the north face has only two windows due to the positioning of the stair turret. These belfry windows are blind, in the traditional Somerset fashion, but have half louvres in the central lights. This arrangement provides a sufficient opening for the bells to be heard, whilst ensuring that they are not too loud. Each of these windows has reticulated cinquefoil tracery with inverted cusps. At the next level down there is a single window on each side, again with two lights and similar tracery, except for the west face where the main window is, as Pevsner claimed, a "*renewed five-light west window*," though it was the internal lights and tracery that were renewed, as the outer frame appears to be original. It has a two-centred style with alternate tracery, defined by Harvey as being of the "*Bristol School*," with a central transom and cinquefoil tracery, but none of its stained glass remains. All of the window heads and drip moulds, bar the east (nave) face of the tower, have small carvings of traditional design.

Today the main west door is rarely used. It has a two-centred equilateral arch and the frame includes a double-ogee moulding on its exterior, plus capitals and bases which can all be considered as typical mid- to late-Perpendicular period style. Around the outside of this doorframe is a square-headed drip mould, continuing as a string, with rather worn, figured corbels at each end. Each side of the drip mould encloses a trefoil mouchette, a blank shield and a quatrefoil in its spandrel. The shields are very similar to the blank shields displayed on one of the benchends inside the church and do not appear ever to have had any heraldic devices engraved upon them. Exterior to the drip mould, each side has a fairly large cinquefoil headed alcove, hollow chamfered with triangular indented spandrels. These almost certainly contained statues at one time.

Another interesting feature, which does not get mentioned in any of the references used in this book, or in most other discussion of the church I have seen, are the grotesques which adorn the top of the tower and a few other locations around the church. Maybe that has to do with their inaccessibility, or possibly their reputation. Whatever the reason, St Michael's church has a fascinating collection of grotesques, some of which are exceptional in their subject matter, so that they are dealt with elsewhere, in a separate chapter of their own.

Internally, there are some decorated panels set into the wall on the inside of the door. They are now partially blocked by various obtrusions, including the stair to the balcony, plus other features. "*The tower arch is fine and open, unencumbered by gallery and springing from tall shafts* (Harvey refers to "*shafts and hollows*"). *In the tower stands the organ, but the large west window is seen through the arch.*" So said Glynne in the mid nineteenth century, but things were about to change. A foretaste is provided in "*Articles of Enquiry to be answered in writing by the Churchwardens and Chapelwardens...at the Triennial Visitation*" for 1843 (Somerset Record Office). In the section entitled, "*Concerning the Church Fabric,*" an answer to the question, "*Is any erection, demolition, or alteration taking place, within or without the fabric, without leave of the Ordinary? Or has any such erection, demolition, or alteration taken place within your memory?*" briefly states, "*About to erect a gallery for singing.*" Presumably it was not implemented at that time, or Glynne would have mentioned it. In fact, he explicitly states that no gallery existed when he was writing. However, in 1882, Archdeacon FitzGerald produced a plan, at the annual vestry meeting, in which he proposed that a new gallery, or organ loft, should be built. This was welcomed by all, maybe helped by the fact that the Archdeacon offered to put it up "*free of cost to the Parish.*"

Presumably the new organ had moved here when the "*old organ, now disused,*" noted by Collinson/Rack in 1789, was eventually replaced. On April 13th, 1860 the vestry Meeting had considered a proposition "*that a Salary of Eight Pounds per Year be paid from the Church Rate to James Edward Waddon as Organist for the current year commencing at Easter 1860.*" Prior to this time, we must assume the post of organist to have been non-existent, or an amateur preserve. This proposition did not meet with universal approval immediately, as an amendment was proposed, reducing the salary to six pounds per year, "*with the understanding that if satisfaction be given the Salary be raised next year.*" They were obviously very pleased with the outcome, however, for, in the following year, the Salary was raised to £10; though they did add a stipulation: "*In case of illness Mr. Waddon to supply a substitute.*" Ten pounds was twice the Sexton's rate of pay and almost twice the Clerk's Salary.

In 1867 it is recorded that £1. 5s. 0d. (£1.25p) was paid as "*Organist Bill for Tuning Organ,*" and he also received 2s. 6d. (12.5p) as expenses for "*travelling to Bridgewater*" (sic). James Waddon eventually retired and was replaced as organist by Mabel Sarah FitzGerald, daughter of the incoming vicar. She continued in that job for almost thirty years. A note from Major General D. R. Horsfield (her nephew) given to me by David Bolland, stated that he and his wife had, "*a silver tea service with an inscription 'Presented to M. S. FitzGerald June 1907 by the Parishioners of Brent Knoll on her retirement from the office of organist after nearly 30 years' service.'*" Miss FitzGerald lived at Thorncote for many years, after her father had died. A year before she was due to retire the organ was cleaned and tuned at a "*cost not to exceed £10.*" Two years later it is recorded that an organ blower was hired. What had happened up until that time is not stated, but it seems unlikely that they did without organ blowers prior to that. An organ works by using compressed air and channelling it to the appropriate single pitch pipe through one of its manuals (keyboards). This gives an organ the option to sustain a note as long as the key is depressed, but it does mean that it has always been reliant on a sufficient supply of compressed air. Today that can be done automatically, but for the past it was the job of one or more organ blowers to work the bellows which provided the compressed air.

Close by the organ is a large board, which originally stood in the nave according to Collinson/Rack, who refers to it as "*a black frame on the South Wall.*" It remembers benefactors of the Parish as follows:

"Anno Dom 1719 Ed Symes Gent Gave to this Parish Fourty shillings; yearly for ever. To be distributed, between six poor men not receiving Alms. By y^e churchwardens, & Overseers, On St. Thomas day. Which is to be paid out of y^e lands under mentioned. 3 acres at Hewish, 1 at Rawcriest, 1 at Langland in this Parish, 5 late Crans lying in Edith-mead Burnham Parish. A House & Acre late Twogoods, in the Parish of Lympsham."

“Anno Dom 1727 Mrs Ann Dean of the Parish of Bleadon gave to this parish fou^r pound yearly for ever. To be paid out of the meadow call’d by the name Barkham lying in the Parish which is to be distributed by the Minister, Churchwardens & Overseers: on Easter-Monday, to such as do not receive Alms.”

“Mr Jacob Dean Gave to this Parish the Interest of Twenty Pound yearly for ever. To be equally distributed between three poor men, the Day after Christmas, To such as do not receive Alms. R. COX.”

As it is the only one not mentioned in his book, it is likely that Jacob Dean provided his benefaction after Collinson’s work was published. Notably all of the benefactions refer to the fact that they are for the benefit of those who do not receive alms. Basically, this meant that they were considered to be of the second poor. Those receiving alms were the first poor and were considered to be “on the parish,” i.e. they were being given poor relief by the parish, so they were not considered to be in need. The second poor were assisted to ensure that, where possible, they did not become liable to parish relief.

Wickham states that *“the tower contains two fine, 17th century chests, one iron bound, which holds the parish records, and above, the clock and the bells.”* The parish records have now been moved down to the County Record Office at Taunton, but one of the chests was either lost or stolen some time ago; the other iron bound one was, unfortunately, definitely stolen towards the end of the twentieth century.

There is still an active bell-ringing group at St. Michael’s. They utilise a peal of six bells. In 1875 the Revd. Henry Thomas Ellacombe described the peal which existed at that time in *“Church Bells of Somerset.”* Only five bells were listed at that time. The oldest bell has no specific date marked on it, but does have the legend, *“Sante Johannes Ora Pro Nobis,”* all *“crowned Small Caps,”* as Ellacombe records. It was thought to date from around 1400. In recent times it has acquired a crack which could be expensive to repair, so it is no longer used by the bell ringers, but is used to strike the hours by the modern clock. The second oldest bell is attributed to *“Thomas Rannoles Anno Domini 1628.”* This was followed, shortly after, by another seventeenth century bell dating from 1635, which was cast by Roger Purdue of Bristol. It is inscribed with the name of the donor, *John Somerset, Gentleman;* probably the same John Somerset whose monument is so conspicuous in the nave, though his father was also a John Somerset.” In the following century a bass bell, was donated by churchwardens. It names them as *“John Harden and James Harden Churchwardens.”* It has a small dedication inscribed:

*“I to the church the living call
And to the grave doth summons all”*

This bell was cast by *“William Bilbie Chewstoke Fecit 1777,”* perhaps one of the most famous Somerset bell founders of them all. Forty years later another bell came from churchwardens, this time stating that it was donated by *“Messieurs Coombes and Yeo Churchwardens”* and was *“Cast by John Kingston Bridgwater 1817,”* but, as will be shown below, was not installed until a few years after. Finally, the sixth bell, a treble, was added, as Wickham notes, in 1910, *“when a fine new frame was made for them all.”*

In 1882 a *“singular wedding”* took place on the *“morn of St. Valentine.”* This was *“the day selected for uniting in the holy bonds of wedlock an interesting couple.”* The Weston Mercury, reporting the event, described *“the gallant bridegroom being Charles Clapp, of Berrow, aged 82, and the fair bride, Elizabeth Williams, of South Brent, aged 78.”* Undoubtedly they were correct when they stated that, *“so singular a ceremony as the marriage of two persons whose united ages amount to 160 years is not of everyday occurrence.”* Apparently, these *“deluded souls,”* as the paper jocularly referred to them, were *“anxious to observe promptitude, for fear of the possibility of a ‘slip between cup and lip [and] presented themselves at the sacred edifice fully half-an-hour before the appointed time.”*

Luckily the vicar was up to handling the situation and *“the service over, the bride and bridegroom, who were not bothered with any cumbrous retinue, left the church amidst hearty good wishes for ‘long life and*

happiness' accompanied with showers of rice." What made this an even more auspicious occasion was the fact that *"this being the first wedding celebrated in the church since the new bells have been hung in the tower, the ringers rang forth merry peals during the day in honour of the event."* Unfortunately, the wedding appears to have lasted only three years, as Charles Clapp died in 1885, aged 85.

This was not the only occasion for a merry peal, or should I say a grand peal, as a number of certificates proudly testify. The earliest of these is dated Nov. 4, 1911, when a peal of Grandsire Doubles was rung (all these peals are of 5,040 changes, which equals every combination of six bells times seven). This was rung at the first attempt, the certificate proudly asserts. In 1912, a Grandsire and Bob Doubles peal was rung, on January 1st 1955 a Plain Bob Minor, a Minor on 6th February 1960, Wells Surprise Major on 29th August 1960, Stedman Doubles on 30th September 1967 and a Surprise Major in 1975. On the 10th September 1966 another particular occasion was celebrated when a Doubles was rung at the First Peal as a *"Compliment to Miss P. Wood and Mr. B. Rich (Captain of above tower) after their marriage."* Perhaps it was lucky the peal was rung after the marriage, otherwise one could envisage the trained ear of the bridegroom checking whether any mistakes were being made and not properly concentrating on some rather more important vows!

Since Ellacombe described the bells, major changes have taken place. The Treble was cast in 1910 by Mears and Stainbank, London (formerly The Whitechapel Foundry). It is described *"This bell was given by O. O. W.,"* it has the motto, *"The Greatest of these is charity,"* and mentions *"John Cary and Edward Body, Churchwardens."* The 1635 bell continues to this day, but the oldest bell has now had to be replaced as it developed a very poor tone. A new bell was cast and hung by John Taylor of Loughborough in 1999, to commemorate the millennium. This firm had also recast all the other bells in 1881, when William Lee and Oliver Frost were churchwardens. The Tenor has a motto, *"Come ye thankful people come,"* and the initials, AOFG, of the then *"Patron, Rector and Vicar of the church."*

The millennium year 2000 saw a complete re-tuning and re-hanging of the bells. New ringing fittings were added to the existing timber bell frame by Stokes of Woodbury and, we trust, they will continue to provide pleasure to the village for many years to come.

An old list gives the diameter, weight and note of each bell. These are shown together with the weight and date of the modern peal:

Diameter in inches	Weight			Note	Date	Weight		
	Cwt	Qtrs	Lbs			Cwt	Qtrs	Lbs
33¼"	6	3	17	C	1910	6	2	1
34"	7	1	0	B Flat	1635	6	2	18
36"	8	0	0	A Flat	1999	8	2	16
39"	11	0	0	G	1881	10	3	10
44½"	17	0	0	F	1881	15	1	18
49"	21	0	16	E Flat	1881	20	3	0

On the level where the bell-ringers gather there was a clock mechanism, which was gathering dust in a corner, but has now been placed in a rather more secure place. This is an original seventeenth century mechanism, now sadly unused. Originally it would have had an external dial, simply chiming the hours and probably the quarter hours. Old legends circulated in the village about this turret clock. Wickham fairly accurately reports that *"the works of the clock seem to descend, through many repairs and renewals, from Tudor or Stuart times, but little of the original parts are now left."* It was finally abandoned due to the fact that the weights used to

drive it required daily resetting. An electrically driven motor eventually replaced these works in the twentieth century, though the churchwarden's records have many entries of payments for the task of rewinding the weights up to that time. In 1776, for instance, we see "*pd Rich^d Hodges half a year's Sallery for the Church Clock... ..£10.10.6d.*"

Local legend has it that the clock is "*the work of Peter Lightfoot, the monk of Glastonbury, who was thought to have made the clock at Wells in the 14th century,*" but, as Wickham correctly states, this theory "*cannot be supported.*" It is, however, unfortunate that no serious attempt has been made to utilise modern technology to revitalise the old clock mechanism, such as that used to drive the clock at Wells Cathedral, where an electric motor is used to rewind the weights daily. Obviously that method minimises the effort of maintenance which, even in the past, was a fairly burdensome task. Sandy Saunders, who lived in Brent Knoll and had a lot of experience with old clocks, informed me that the clock most resembling the one in St. Michael's is probably that at Waddon Buck in Cambridge and is dated to 1673. Its weight would have been at the entrance to the tower and it would have been regulated by a pendulum. It is unlikely to have been made locally, he believed, and may possibly have been purchased from the Cambridge area. At that time blacksmiths were likely to be the ones making local turret clocks.

It appears that the current clock was installed in the twentieth century and was electrified in 1979 along with a re-gilding of the dial and hands. It may have been then when the backing from the clock face was removed, as it appears to be solid in some earlier pictures, though subsequently it was possible to see all the stonework through the clock face, making it more difficult to read the time. It has been suggested that this may have something to do with the bell-ringers being unable to peer through the window behind the clock to observe wedding and funeral parties arriving at the church door.

In 2021 a decision was made to provide a new backing for the clock face and to renew the gilding on the hands and dial. Removing and replacing the clock face was done in spectacular fashion as men from the company, The Cumbria Clock Company Ltd, from Penrith, abseiled down the tower from the roof, removed the pins holding the clock steady, and continued down to the ground ensuring the face did not scrape or bang against the stone wall. A few weeks later they repeated the exercise, but this time carefully hauling the restored face, with its new backing plate, back up the tower and securing it in position.

Finally, a small puzzle associated with the tower can be found on the external buttresses at the south west corner. A strange metal object protrudes from the wall. In appearance it is similar to hooks once used to hang the vestments of the clergy, yet they would have been retained inside the church and normally came in pairs, So, is this a vestment hook and, if so, why is it hanging in this unexpected spot?