

The Parish Church
of
St. Michael
Melksham.



Historical Guide

by

B. Watkins, Ph. D.

(Being principally a Re-edited & Revised edition of
"The Parish Church of Melksham," by the Rev. Canon Wylde).

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1. EARLIEST REMAINS OF ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH.

During the West Saxon era Melksham was a place of considerable note; and the Domesday Book states that it had several farms, eight mills, and "Rumoldus the priest has the church of this manor (Melchesham), with 1 hide, which is worth 40 shillings." The manor was the property of the Crown, having formerly belonged to the King of Wessex, and was later on given by Henry III to the Prioress of Amesbury, and the ecclesiastical revenues to the Bishop and Chapter of Salisbury. William the Conqueror came here, and the details of a local law suit which he settled have been preserved. Henry II was at Melksham on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul in 1183, John paid several visits, and it was also a favourite hunting place of Edward I.

The Church of St. Michael is a spacious edifice of freestone, which dates from the Norman period, but is now chiefly in the Perpendicular style; and consists of a Norman chancel, nave of five bays, aisles, north porch, and an embattled tower.

The earliest remains still to be seen of the old Norman Church were erected about the year 1130; but it is practically certain that an earlier and Saxon Church stood on the same spot prior to this date. The lower part of the outside wall of the Chancel, to the springing of the arches of the east window, is of early Norman origin; and the old string course, which has been cut through for the insertion of the windows, is clearly visible. The old flat buttresses, five in number—two at each angle and one in the centre, are also of the same period.

In the interior, all the lower part of the east wall is the original Norman masonry, also all the wall on the south, and on the north up to the vestry door. Here in the north-east corner the remains of a pillar and arch show there was a row of sedilia with an arcading over them, the top of which can still be traced; and the same on the south side, it can be seen that this was cut through, when the present windows were inserted. At the west end of the chancel there would have been a low Norman arch, and a Norman tower; whether the tower that stood here till 1845 was a part of it is uncertain.

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Most likely there were also transepts on the north and south, and probably the present transept on the north is built on the foundations of the old. All that remains of the original Norman nave is the small piece of wall on the west between the tower and the south aisle, and from the outside can be seen the old Norman string course over the stairs leading down to the furnace. This shows that the old nave was exactly the same length as the present, and that the Norman wall on the south was on the same foundation as the present pillars; but on the north it was probably inside the present pillars, which accounts for the present chancel arch not being in the centre of the nave.

II. RENOVATIONS OF THE XIV AND XV CENTURIES.

The old Norman nave was re-built about the year 1300, probably because more room was required. Looking down the nave, it will be observed that the pillars on the north are not quite the same as those on the south, though they are about the same date, built during the time of the transition from the Early English to the Decorated style. The arches were of course built at the same time, but not the clerestory windows above them, and the old Norman wall at the west end being left. Both the north and south aisles were also erected, but with low lean-to roofs; and the two beautiful lancet windows at the west end are the original windows of these aisles.

About the middle of the fifteenth century the old Norman windows were taken out of the chancel, and the present larger windows inserted. This necessitated the almost complete destruction of the sedilia and the beautiful arcading, already mentioned. The walls were raised to allow for the more lofty windows; and it can be clearly traced, both outside and inside, where the new work commenced—just where the spring of the arch in the east window begins. The string course was also cut through to allow for the insertion of the north and south windows; and the corner buttresses on the east wall were also built. At the same time the clerestory with the windows above the arches was added to the nave, and it was this additional weight which was placed upon the old arches, that necessitated the iron ties now holding together the north and south walls of the clerestory. The north transept appears also to have been re-built about 1440, and it is supposed there was a corresponding transept

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on the south side, which was destroyed soon after to make room for the Lady Chapel. The small Chapel on the south was also erected, but the south wall of this was almost entirely re-built in 1846. Some considerable alteration was also made to the aisles; some traces of earlier work are left, but the greater part of the walls seem to have been re-built early in the fifteenth century. The niche which may be observed in the north transept is of earlier date, belonging to the fourteenth century, and was either removed from some other part of the Church, or, perhaps, belonged to an earlier transept which stood on the site of the present one.

III. THE LADY CHAPEL AND THE PORCH.

The Chapel on the south-east is a beautiful specimen of Perpendicular work of the middle fifteenth century; and it will be perceived from the outside, that it is a distinct building and of a different character to the rest of the Church. It was presumably built for the use of the Prioress and Nuns of Amesbury, who held the manor. It was almost entirely shut off from the Church, but there was probably a connecting archway on the west. There was a wooden vaulted roof, and it is clearly visible where the stone was cut away to admit this ceiling, which was supported by pillars, the remains of which may be seen in the north-east and south-west corners. In order to draw attention to this, and to show why the painting has not been continued round this wall, the outline of the vaulting has been traced out in the same way as the outline of the old arcading in the chancel—traces of this vaulting were also discovered in the south wall.

After the destruction of the Monasteries, the property here belonging to Amesbury came into the hands of the Bronker family. Possibly they exercised some rights of proprietorship in the Chapel, but it seems to have been little used. There is a ground plan of the Church about 1845 which shows that there was one seat in the Chapel, owned by Mr. Long, with a staircase up to it, and there was a door from the Chapel leading to the belfry staircase.

In 1909 the Lady Chapel was restored and fitted up for week-day services, at a cost of £500,

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chiefly contributed by Mr. George Lopes. The altar and its surroundings are in early English style, the idea being to have dignity, simplicity and solidity, without too much decoration.

The Porch, with its vaulted ceiling, is characteristic of the middle fifteenth century period, and was erected about the year 1460. Over the porch there is a room called a Parvise, probably intended for the use of some Church official, perhaps the sacristan, and also for the accommodation of visiting priests; it is approached by a narrow winding staircase from the north aisle; and there is an aperture called a squint looking into the Church and slanting in an easterly direction. Both the inner and outer doorways belong to the same period. The door is remarkable, and has very fine hinges with *fleur-de-lis* foliations. The lock and bolt are worthy of notice for their great dimensions. There is a very old key now kept in the Parvise. Here, too, are kept in a safe a number of records and deeds concerning the Church, some of the old registers, the old churchwardens' book going back to 1540; also a large book which contains the account of the Forest Common and other enclosures, and the tithe map.

The niche outside the porch, which at some time or other had been deprived of the figure originally placed there, is now again filled with the figure of St. Michael. This was placed there to commemorate the commencement of the new century, and was provided by offerings given on the first of January, 1901. The large stone coffin inside the porch was found just below the floor in the north transept when the new floor was laid in 1891, but it had been previously disturbed and the lid broken in.

The magnificent old yew tree near the porch, with its immense spread-out branches, must be from 600 to 700 years old, judging by its girth.

IV. THE TOWER, BELLS AND CLOCK.

Until the year 1845 the Tower was in the centre of the Church, and the place where it stood is easily discernible when standing in front of the chancel arch. There are also drawings of the outside in existence, and a ground plan of the Church just before it was taken down. There were open arches

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in the east, west, and north, but on the south, between it and the Lady Chapel, there was a solid block of masonry, and the staircase to the belfry was from the Lady Chapel. This tower was larger than the present one and not square, being 24 feet by 16 feet 10 inches, and was probably erected between 1540 and 1550; for a Richard Erle left by will the sum of £16 13s. 4d. for building the tower at Melksham, to be added to 40s. already given. From the architecture of the Church, however, it would appear certain that there must have been a tower before this—probably a Norman structure. This may have been destroyed by accident or fallen into decay, and so a new Perpendicular was built. The present tower at the west end, though built of the same stones and preserving some of the features of its predecessor, was practically a new one; and some correspondence took place at the time, it being considered an unjustifiable act to destroy the old tower without re-building it stone by stone. The curious arches supporting the north-east and south-east buttresses, are owing to the fact that the tower was built on to an existing wall.

There were six bells in the old tower, which were removed to the new building. They were all cast in 1703, by Abraham Rudhall. The fourth bell was recast in 1768 by Thomas Rudhall, of Gloucester, and the fifth bell was recast in 1808 by James Wells, of Aldbourne. The inscriptions on them are as follows:—

1. AR cast us all 1703 Henry Long.
2. Prosperity to this place AR 1703.
3. God save Queen Anne. Peace and good neighbourhood AR 1703.
4. George Moor, John Bull Churchwardens T.R 1768.
5. Josh Smith Vicar Thomas Bruges esq.—James Bull gent, Churchwardens, James Wells Albourne fecit 1808.
6. Bohun Fox Vicar Isaac Selfe esq.—Jacob Self gent. Churchwardens 1703—Jeremiah Awdry Clothier Thomas Flower gent. Chwardens 1702.

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The bells were re-hung and quarter-turned in 1896, when the second bell was recast and two new ones were added. The inscription on the new bells, which were cast by Mears, of London, are:—

1. Sanctus Sanctus Sanctus.
2. Laus Tibi Domine.

There was a clock in very early times, as the Churchwardens' accounts mention in 1646 of "mending the clock," and again in 1652, George Newton setting up the "chyme" and repairing the clock, £6 13s. 4d. and £3 6s. 8d.; but in 1756 it was worn out. New making the clock and setting it up cost £10 10s., and at the same time iron work about the tower £20, which may have had something to do with the clock or bells, and in 1775 new chimes and a quarter jack cost £74 4s. But the 1756 clock appears only to have lasted till 1811, for in that year Messrs. Edgcumbe and Nichalls were paid for "the time-piece" £26 5s.

In 1808 George Gay was paid £2 10s. "for a new sundial and placing it against the Church." It is now to be seen over the door of the Chapel.

V. THE CHANCEL, REREDOS, ETC.

The beautiful marble floor in the Chancel and Sanctuary were given by the Honourable Mrs. Lopes in 1910, as a memorial to her husband, George Lopes, Esq., of Sandridge Park; and the marble altar rails to the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Flocks by members of their family. The Bishop's chair in the Sacramentum was purchased at Mr. Walton's, of Mere, in 1904. The handsome processional cross was given by 125 members of the congregation in 1903.

The Reredos was restored in 1894 by the trustees of Sir John Awdry. The designs are by C. E. Ponting, Esq., F.S.A., whose idea was the completion and amplification of the existing work, and not the substitution of a new for an old memorial. The Old Reredos, erected about the year 1850 by the late Sir John Awdry, consisted of nine canopied panels, all similar in design and height, surmounted by a cornice with vine pattern and scrolls bearing an inscription. The five central panels

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behind the altar have been replaced by three tablets in the upper portion. This part of the work was entrusted to Messrs. Harry Hems and Sons, of Exeter, who executed the beautiful chancel screen. The main fabric is composed of stone from the Painswick Quarries. This part, which forms the reredos proper, is flanked by delicately traceried, buttressed and pinnaced shafts, surmounted by sculptured angels in attitudes of devotion. A massive carved re-table of polished variegated English alabaster, wherein cunningly carved cherubim have been introduced, support the whole. Rising from this are the traceried supports of the canopies, which take an ogee line, and are crocketed, whilst from the mouldings spring terminals of carved cusps. The niches contain sculptured panels representing the Nativity of our Lord, the Adoration of the Shepherds on the right, and The Magi on the left, carved in white alabaster. Above the canopies is a forest of pierced and intricate cresting, terminating in a mass of wonderfully manipulated foliage. Above this are gracefully carved pinnacles.

The remaining panels on either side have been filled with Mosaic work, the design of which had its origin in the paintings placed there temporarily by Miss E. Warre. This part of the work was carried out by Mr. Edward Frampton, of London. The Mosaic work consists of four angels standing upon clouds with their wings extended. Two of the figures have scrolls with the words "Holy, Holy, Holy," upon them; the other two hold discs, with the Alpha and Omega in gold upon blue. The outer robes of the figures are richly coloured respectively, purple-brown, ruby, blue, and green, the tunics being white. The backgrounds are worked in rich gold Mosaic. The figures stand upon conventional Gothic clouds. The small pieces of tracery which occur behind the crockets and the finials of the stone canopy work contain a foliated treatment of ornament, Perpendicular in character, upon gold background. The cornice is retained and remains as originally placed, except where cut through to admit the shafts.

The painting over the Chancel arch, representing the Transfiguration, was presented by Mrs. Swanborough in 1921, in memory of her husband.

In 1922, C. F. Rumboll, Esq., M.D., placed a Rood, with attendant figures, upon the Chancel Screen; which latter he presented to the Church in 1892.

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VI. PULPIT, ORGAN, FONT, ETC.

The beautiful oak Pulpit, designed by Canon Bouveric, of Pewsey, and carved by Mr. Hems, of Exeter, was given to the Church in 1909 by a generous benefactor who did not wish his name to be known.

The finely designed eagle Lectern by Singer, of Frome, was presented by Dr. Rumbold in 1892.

The Organ was restored in 1903 by the original builders, Connacher, Huddersfield; and by moving the organ forward, space was made for a choir vestry.

The Font, a beautiful piece of Derbyshire alabaster, was erected in 1906, being for the most part subscribed for by those who had been baptized in the old font, and which was removed to Beanacre Church.

In 1891 the block floor, oak in the aisles, and deal under the seats were laid down, new oak seats provided, and the plaster ceiling removed.

The heating apparatus of the Church was renovated in 1904, and electric lighting installed.

VII. THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS.

The East Window and the north and south windows in the Sacarium (by Ward and Hughes) were put in by Mr. and Mrs. Lopes, of Sandridge Park, in memory of their parents. The subjects are : The Ascension, The Adoration of the Shepherds, and The Angel appearing to the Women after the Resurrection.

The east window in the Chapel is to the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Heathcote, of Shaw Hill. The subject is Our Lord in Glory holding the Orb, surmounted by the Cross, on either side the apostles St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, and St. James, the other apostles with their distinctive emblems being in the upper part of the window.

The next window on the south is by Kempe, given by Mrs. Stewart. The figures are of St. Stephen, St. Peter, and St. Bartholomew. The little window over the Chapel door is by Powell, and represents St. Paul and his friends, St. Timothy, St. Luke, and St. Silas. The third window in

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the Chapel was given by Mr. Lopes in memory of his son Henry. The subjects are: "The Little Children coming to Christ, and The Raising of the Widow's Son."

The window in the little old Chapel is in memory of Rev. E. L. Barnwell, of Melksham House. It is by Powell, and is noticeable for the closeness of the leading—copying ancient windows. The subjects are: Our Lord in the centre, with illustrations of His works of mercy; The Feeding of the Multitude; Restoring Sight to the Blind; Cleansing the Lepers; and Raising the Dead.

The next window on the south is by Burlison and Grills. The four large figures are the four Evangelists, and the four subjects below: The Annunciation, The Visit of Mary to Elizabeth, The Nativity, and The Presentation in the Temple.

The beautiful little lancet window showing The Good Shepherd, is by Powell.

The west window, also by Powell, illustrates: The Presentation in the Temple and the Baptism of Our Lord. Below are prayers from the Baptismal Service.

The other lancet window on the north side of the west end is in memory of William Wood and his wife.

The beautiful window in the wall, built by Wyatt, between the north transept and the porch, is in memory of the soldiers who died in the South African War. The figures are of four Old Testament warriors: David, Jonathan, Caleb, and Joshua, and above are the arms of the Wiltshire Regiment.

The window in the north transept shews the figures of St. George, St. Michael, and St. Alban, and are noticeable for the beauty of the faces.

The glass in the clerestory windows, was presented in 1910 by Mr. George White, of Whitley. There are eighteen figures in all, selected to represent the progress of the Church in Britain from the earliest ages, and specially tracing the history of this diocese. The figures on the north side, commencing at the west end, represent the ancient British Church, the conversion of the Heptarchy and its consolidation into one body. On the south side the conversion of Wessex and its sub-division into dioceses. A marked feature is the explanation beneath the lights on tablets filling up the old spaces

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where the roofs of the aisles prevented the insertion of glass.

The subjects, in the order above-mentioned, are as follows :—

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. St. Joseph, St. Alban, Restitutus. | 4. Cynegils, Birinus, Oswald. |
| 2. Aidan, Chad, Felix. | 5. Dunstan, Alfred, Aldhelm. |
| 3. Augustine, Wilfrid, Theodore. | 6. Herman, Osmund, Poore. |

VIII. BRASSES AND MURAL MONUMENTS.

Within the Sacarium is a monument to Rev. Bohun Fox, 53 years Vicar of the Parish, who died in 1750. On the north side of the Chancel is a tablet to the memory of John Awdry, Vicar, who died in 1639; and below is a brass to the memory of Ambrose Dantesey.

On the south side of the chancel is a monument to John Awdry, who died in 1698; also his sons John and Ambrose and his widow Judith. Below, is another to John Awdry, of Notton, who died in 1802; his first wife, Priscilla, who died in 1760; his second wife, Mary Magdalene, who died in 1771, and his daughter Elizabeth.

In the Chapel, on the north side, is a handsome monument to Anna Maria Jenkyns and her father, with the following curious inscription :—

"The vault below contains all that was mortal
of Anna Maria Jenkyns

the beloved only daughter of Rd. and Anne Jenkyns

having lived XIV years and upwards, the delight of all and the constant source of inexpressible happiness to her fond parents.

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And a strength of genius and understanding
Which yielded the most promising hopes
Be the object of rational sorrow
Let the tear drop
And hence take the unfinished design of female excellence."

On the west of the Chapel is a very old monument to Isaac Selfe, 1656; and below is a brass to Samuel Heathcote of Shaw Hill, 1820, and other members of the family. On the north wall is a monument to Mrs. Elizabeth Smith, her father Daniel Webb, several children and her husband Thomas Smith of Shaw, who is accredited with many virtues as a citizen and Churchman, concluding with:—"So long then as an hearty zeale for the best religion and form of government, and unblemished uprightness and pious integrity, a pious and prudent economy, shall continue to be esteemed and admired. So long must remain precious the memory of Mr. Smith."

Over the arch, between the chancel and chapel, is a handsome monument, "sacred to those whose virtues adorn the Christian system. This marble perpetuates the memory of many true believers who now rest in full assurance of a Blessed Resurrection at the last day." Then follows the names—Thomas Selfe, of Bromham, his wife and other relatives; and the following inscription: "Annie, second daughter, married to Rev. Richard Jenkyns, who died March, 1748, at the age of 43; and she, wearied of this life, cheerfully received her call to a better on the 7th of June following. One of her daughters, Mary, after an exemplary life of sweetness, innocence and well-doing (having never made one foe), died a virgin—an ill spared victim to inoculation—1757. Margaretta, third daughter, married James Yorke of Wells. The shock she received at the death of her justly beloved niece hastened her own. As a Christian she nobly struggled with grief, but it was too mighty for her. She made a good end of a well spent life. 1759."

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IX. THE CHURCH PLATE, REGISTERS, ETC.

The Church Plate, all of silver, was purchased and given to the Church by Canon Warre and the Rev. E. L. Barnwell. They are old vessels purchased in Frome and London:—

1. Paten, bearing Exeter mark, 1729. This was given in memory of Dr. Wilkinson.
2. Elizabethan Chalice. Hall mark for 1571.
3. Paten in plain silver panel gilt.
4. Elizabethan Chalice. Hall mark, 1576.
5. Chalice with foreign mark, probably old Italian, presented to Forest Church by the Rev. E. Barnwell.
6. Medieval Paten with head of our Lord roughly engraved, probable date 1500, presented to Forest Church by Canon Warre.

The Registers date from the year 1560; and there are three old Churchwardens' Books, 1574 to 1672, 1740 to 1798, and 1799 to 1896.

X. VICARS OF MELKSHAM.

| | | | |
|-------|---|-------|------------------------------------|
| 10— | Rumoldus. | 1250. | Robert the Chaplain. |
| 12— | John de Trowbridge. | — | Thomas de Berton. |
| 1322. | Thomas de Mershton. | 1354. | Johannes de Sloghtre or Sloughtre. |
| 1348. | Johannes Clyre. | 1361. | Johannes de Bradewell. |
| 1399. | Petrus Cheyne. Archdeacon and Minor Canon of Salisbury. | | |
| 1423. | Robertus Wodeford. | 1423. | Johannes Cranefield, alias Clerk. |
| 1450. | Johannes Bompas or Bonepace. | 1455. | Thomas Newton or Newenton. |

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13, SPA ROAD, MELKSHAM.

- | | | | |
|--------|--|--------|-------------------|
| 1459. | Johannes Baker. | *1486. | Johannes Bostoke. |
| — | Johannes Curtayse. | 1491. | David Knollis. |
| 1504. | Gulielmus Horseley. | 1504. | Johannes Bryme. |
| 1526. | Edwardus Powell. | 1534. | Edwardus Carn. |
| 1536. | Johannes Walsh. Deprived by Queen Mary for Marriage. | | |
| 1555. | Gulielmus Payne. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| 1576. | Robertus Moore. Married at Melksham. | | |
| 1601. | Johannes Awdry, s.d. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| 1639. | Edwardus Carpenter, d.d. Resigned the living. | | |
| 1659. | J. Harding. A Presbyterian who refused to conform. | | |
| *1662. | Thomas Wyatt, d.d. Resigned the living. | | |
| *1668. | Petrus Priaulx. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| *1686. | Franciscus Horton. Resigned the living. | | |
| *1697. | Bohun Fox. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| 1750. | Philip Pyle. Resigned the living. | | |
| 1755. | Robert Gilbert. | | |
| — | John Newton. | | |
| *1791. | Robert Price. Chaplain to King George IV. | | |
| *1802. | Joseph Smith. | | |
| 1825. | George Hume. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| *1875. | Matthew Wilkinson, d.d. Buried at Melksham. | | |
| *1876. | Francis Warre. | | |
| *1890. | Edwin George Wyld. | | |
| 1919. | Basil Aston, d.s.o., M.A. | | |

*Canons of Salisbury Cathedral.

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