

St Michael's Church, Shebbear

2008

The Church of St Michael's is believed to be of Saxon origin. However the dedication and the ritual of the stone suggests a site of pre-Christian activity and, therefore, every likelihood of an early foundation. Together with the 'chapel of ease' at Sheepwash, the church was given by King John to Torre Abbey but it was not until 1338 that the high altar was dedicated by the Bishop of Waterford and St Michael's achieved the status of a separate parish. The oldest part still visible is the south doorway. This is one of the most splendid Norman doorways in the county, with its three orders of voussoirs, the two outer of which are zig-zag and the innermost beakheads. Two other door heads, almost identical, can be seen at nearby Buckland Brewer and at West Woolfardisworthy (Woolsery), while two others very similar are at Kilkhampton and Morwenstow, just over the border in Cornwall. There is the possibility that they were all carved by the same mason.

The first church probably consisted simply of a nave. The remains of a piscina in the easternmost pier of the south arcade shows that an altar once stood close by. The chancel was added later, as its fifteenth century columns demonstrate.

The south aisle is believed to have been added in the late fourteenth century. In the process, the Norman doorway must have been moved and it may well have been then that it was altered to accommodate a gothic arched door. The arcading of the south aisle is most unusual, the piers being square, with chamfered arches without capitals. It has been suggested that it may have been formed by simply carving through the original south exterior wall, when the new aisle was added.

From the outside it is apparent that the nave ridge has been lowered at some time, as there is clear indication of a higher roof on the east wall of the tower. It could once have been thatched.

The tower itself is of two stages, with only the lower buttressed. It has four rather low pinnacles and no west door and is presumed to be fifteenth century. There are six bells. Four were cast in 1792, incorporating metal from the original three medieval bells, and two new ones were added in 1863.

A principal feature of the interior is the oak pulpit, which is Elizabethan or Jacobean. The carving is crude but lively and it is one of the most attractive furnishings of the church. Another Elizabethan detail is to be found in the lectern - which was plainly put together, from some oddly assorted elements. The side caryatids, with their fantastical Mannerist anatomy look more typical of the decoration of a bedstead and that may well have been their origin. There is more old carved oak, reworked, in the priest's stall.

There is no old glass in the windows as they were renewed in the 19th century. The east window is in memory of the Balkwill family, members of which feature in the parish records for well over three hundred years, and that in the south wall commemorates Lieut. Prior Ponsford, who was killed in the First World War.

Both inside and out, St Michael's has some interesting and beautiful monuments. In a low niche, near the centre of the south wall, lies the recumbent life-size effigy of a woman supposed to be Lady Prendergast of Ladford, the reputed donor of the south aisle. This is a calm and noble piece of sculpture. At her feet is a greyhound, sitting with his back to the church and his front feet extended before him but, alas, now lacking a head. The only activity in this piece is in the dynamic poses of the angels supporting the pillow at her head, which are of masterly composition.

When Shebbear's lovely effigy was placed in her present position is not known but probably during a late nineteenth century reorganisation. Certainly she was originally seen on an altar tomb and perhaps topped by a canopy. Some fragments of smaller scale sculpture have been found and these may well have come from such a canopy. Under the whitewash, the nature of the stone is not clear. One author refers to it as sandstone and another as alabaster. Once she was no doubt fully painted and a very splendid adornment to the church. In an agreement drawn up in 1634, listing repairs to be made to the church, "beautifying the tomb between the chancel and the south aisle" is mentioned.

The remainder of the older monuments are of slate. There are three very elaborate and fine examples of the slate cutter's art, in the tablets to local seventeenth century gentry and yeomen. That to Susanna, wife of William Martin, is set onto the outside of the porch. Those of Browne Badcock and of William Rigsby are in what is now the choir vestry. On the north wall of the chancel are two memorials to the families of William and Jonathan Battishill who were, between them, consecutive vicars for ninety three years, from 1620 to 1713. One records the fates of most of their sadly short-lived children.

On the wall of the Lady chapel is a large memorial to James Fortescue and his even more short-lived children. The Fortescues of Wooton owned land bordering the churchyard.

Among the memorials in the churchyard, perhaps the most poignant - and certainly the most dramatic - is that to the luckless postboy of 1810. "William, son of Hugh & Mary Crocker, suddenly launched into eternity by the over turning of a cart returning from Holsworthy as a postboy. 11 years."

The 20th century saw a few more additions.

In 1911, the Bishop of Crediton dedicated the east end of the south aisle as a Lady chapel and in 1938 the two-manual organ, which had stood in this chapel, was removed to a new loft at the west end of the nave, the gift of the then lady of the manor, Mrs Foulkes Kingdon. The present carved oak screen was a gift to the church from Rev. T. E. Fox in 1926 to mark his silver jubilee as priest. In 1939 the lych gate to the churchyard was given "In memory of Paul Augustine Kingdon and Elizabeth Fortescue his wife, from their affectionate sons and daughters". Carved bricks in the altar steps commemorate John & Ann Nethercott, for many years sextons and members of another family of long association with the parish; and a clock was placed in the tower in 1973 in memory of William Ackland, who was sexton from 1920 to 1972.

Floodlighting of the tower was installed to mark the recent Millennium - a reminder to all that this celebrated event was in reality the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

An invitation to visitors:

We welcome you to our church and invite you to stay a while. For nearly a thousand years the prayers, joys and sorrows of the local population have been brought to St Michael's and this church remains an outward sign of God's steadfast love towards us.

Men and women have expressed their love for God in various ways - many have used their artistic ability and craftsmanship to create works of great beauty. Today we thank God for his love for us and for our beautiful church.

We hope that before you go you will spend a few quiet moments in prayer and that God will give you a sense of his peace and assurance.