

A history of



St. Michael's Church

Creech St. Michael



St. Michael's Church in Creech St. Michael

The ancient church of St. Michael stands above the flood plain of the River Tone, in the village of Creech St. Michael near Taunton in Somerset. The church has been standing on this site since at least the 13th century, not only experiencing, but also reflecting, the changes of over 700 years.

In 2013 the village of Creech St. Michael is growing fast with on-going new development. It sits just 2 miles from junction 25 of the M5 and 3 miles east from the county town of Taunton. It boasts a number of local industries and a range of facilities. As it stands now the church building presents perhaps an unpretentious and unassuming vista on the edge of the village. In the 14th century it would have dominated the area and played a central role in village life.

The early history of the village of Creech St. Michael is uncertain. It is likely that the name comes from the Old English "Muchel Critch" meaning "large creek" (differentiating this village from Little Creech near West Hatch). This seems to be partially confirmed by the fact that the church was dedicated to "All Saints" until at least 1532. It is thought that the title of "St. Michael" is possibly a later corruption of "Muchel", from the Saxon word for "great" or "large" (this had happened by 1742). What is certain is that Creech St. Michael was a thriving village under the name of Critch or Muchel Critch in the 11th century when William 1 (the Conqueror) commissioned the Domesday Book. The village continued to grow and thrive so that in the 13th and 14th century the village was very wealthy. In 1327 the taxes returned from Creech were almost equal to those of the town of Taunton and in 1334 it was one of the most highly taxed places in the county.

The earliest parts of the present church building date from around the year 1250 and are likely to have been erected on ground already used for religious practice. In 682 a Saxon king granted land at Creech St. Michael and West Monkton to the Abbot of Glastonbury and in the 9th century St. Neot is said to have visited Critch. St. Neot was a relative of Alfred the Great and a Sacristan monk from Glastonbury. It is possible that he was travelling to Cornwall, where he lived out his life as a hermit. It would therefore not seem out of the question that Christian worship was here in Creech St. Michael at a very early date.

Following the defeat of King Harold II, when William I (the Conqueror) became King of England, he took ownership of many large estates in England, including Creech St. Michael. King William gave the manor of "Criche" to his step-brother, whose grandson (to demonstrate his piety) gave it (including any

existing Church) to Montacute Priory in 1102. The Cluniac monks from the monastery at Montacute were Benedictine monks of an order from Cluny Abbey in Saone-et-Loire, France. Between 1535 and 1538 the rental of Creech St. Michael was over £70 higher than any other of the Priory's estates and provided 15% of the priory's income!

The Priory (as patron of the rectory) was granted the license to appoint the vicar at Creech St. Michael by the King in 1336 and by the Pope in 1344, but this could only happen when the "Church became vacant". Therefore in 1353 the Earl of Salisbury was presented as rector. The Earl may have been acting as patron of the Priory whilst England was at war with France (the 100 years war). In 1362 the Priory was able to gain full control of the church and this continued until the dissolution of the monasteries. The position of vicar at St. Michael's was established in 1362 (a vicar providing for the spiritual needs of the community vicariously on behalf of the Priory) taking 2/3 corn tithe and 7 acres of arable land.

In 1539, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the manor (and therefore the church and what would now be the rectory) was leased to John Cuff. His grandson Robert was able to purchase the manor by about 1636. The rights of the rectory therefore descended with the manor until 1816.

The private house next to the church on the south side (formerly the Riverside Inn) is thought to have been built at around the same time as the church. Although extensively rebuilt much of the original stonework can still be seen near to ground level. In 1582 half of what was then called "The Church House" was let by Henry Shattock to Robert Cuffe with a proviso that the churchwardens might sell bread, beer and victuals in the house and use it for the church ale. It is probable that by 1620 it had become an inn.

The South Porch

The South Door is probably 15th century and of solid oak, fastened by wrought iron nails as was typical of that time. The carpenter's tool marks are clear but the scratched designs on the second board from the right at eye level (outside) are possibly the marks of pilgrims or records of business transactions agreed in the church porch.

The church porch had both religious and secular importance in medieval England. The porch was a meeting place for business transactions, discussions and the education of children. The marriage ceremony began in the porch, as did infant baptism and the churching of women following childbirth. In the west wall of the porch can be seen the traces of an arch at ground level. Its origins are uncertain but it may well have been at one time the entrance to a vault, as interment in a church porch was often favoured by persons of eminent piety and was allowed at an earlier date than interment inside a church.

The inner porch doorway is of the 13th century though partly modernised. In the east wall of the porch is a stoup recess which is thought to have been restored in the 19th century. In medieval times it would have contained holy water enabling those entering the church to make the sign of the cross as a way of affirming their baptism. During the reformation many holy water stoups were either destroyed or filled in.

A board in the church porch, dated 1886, informs villagers of the generosity of local benefactors and of those charitable foundations available to parishioners in need. It is extraordinary that the income from the United and Cresswell charities continues in operation today.

The mention of Creech St. Michael in the Domesday Book is celebrated by a plaque in the porch.

The Nave

The church and church services of the 14th century were very different to those of today. They were of course Roman Catholic in theology, with a liturgy in Latin. There would have been no books or hymns available to the people.

The chief interest of the nave of St. Michael's lies in the biblical texts which were discovered under the paint on the walls. At a time when few could read and books were simply not available, church walls were painted with vivid



murals depicting the gospels or other biblical stories. Wall paintings such as these were covered during the reformation and were painted over in Jacobean times with biblical texts. The scroll above the gallery bears a bible text from the book of Colossians.

Just inside the south door of the church is a list of the church incumbents, completed from 1318 until the present day. It paints a picture of continuous ministry in the church and its community for over 700 years. That picture is however much more colourful than is depicted on the board.

One incumbent of note was Henry Cresswell, vicar from 1813-1851. He was an eccentric who engaged in cudgel playing (combat using stout sticks), he wrote a play which was performed in Taunton and was then suspended for bankruptcy and violent behaviour in 1844. During his incumbency, services were held twice on Sundays and communion was celebrated 3 times a year. In 1851 attendance on the census survey was 175 on Sunday morning and 201 on Sunday afternoon with 76 Sunday school children attending each service. We are left guessing whether the high attendance was due to the charisma of Henry Cresswell whilst he was there or the relief of the church when he left!

The present pews are thought to be 19th century. Having read a 1781 church survey (quoted below) it is not difficult to understand why they were replaced.

Edmond Rack wrote “the pews there are scarcely two alike either in size, form or materials, being most made up of new and old stuff mixd so that they form a motley appearance”.

Early churches did not have seating, the nave would have been an open space in which people wandered around and chatted freely. It is not clear exactly how the introduction of the church pew happened but it seems that gradually those families who had contributed to the funding of the church began to claim particular areas of the church for themselves and their staff. Hence, the North Chapel became known as the Cuff or Court Barton Chapel. As Protestantism developed, with the use of English and the introduction of sermons to church services, wealthy families paid for seating to be built in the church for their own exclusive use. The availability of public seating gradually developed later.

The catalyst for change within the church as a whole was the Reformation. In the years between Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy in 1534 and his death in 1547, he had closed monasteries and redistributed their wealth. He had also commissioned Thomas Cranmer to produce an English translation of the Bible. Just 7 copies of his “Great Bible” were published in 1539 but they represented a very significant shift of power within the church. Henry VIII however did not manage to complete the Reformation. When he died he left some religious

confusion and many churches to their own devices. Confusion and uncertainty continued until the reign of Elizabeth I. Her long reign brought protestant security and stability, enabling the newly separated Anglican Church to establish some formal structure. In 1611, King James produced a version of the Bible in English which was chained to every church pulpit in the country. The pulpit in St. Michael's Church is 17th century and may therefore have been made at around this time or soon afterwards.

Entering the church and standing in the centre of the nave, the arches and most of the windows are of the **perpendicular** style. This was the dominant style in England between about 1350 and 1550 and not found on the continent. There are five arches which separate the north chapel and aisle from the nave. The two at the west end appear to be a pair but all the others are different in shape. Looking upwards the nave and chancel have beautiful 15th century wagon roofs. In the chancel the bosses are beautifully painted and in the nave there is a deep wall-plate with a large foliage trail. The coloured glass in the stained glass windows of the nave is 19th century.



There are many **niches** in the nave, all of which would have contained statues of saints but are all now sadly empty – these statues would have been thought by Puritans to represent the idol worship they deplored and would have been destroyed during Cromwell's Protectorate. Taunton and the surrounding villages, including Creech St. Michael, were very strongly Puritan and Parliamentarian. In the 18th century Daniel Defoe noted that in his opinion and in spite of the repression, in 1688 William of Orange could have raised a whole army of those willing to take up arms against King James II in Taunton. The siege of Taunton is said to have played a significant part in determining the outcome of the English Civil War.

On your left as you enter the church is a 17th century gallery, with the coat of arms of Queen Anne on the front. Church records show that this gallery was only sited in its present location in 1826 and that “Mr Beadon Newton's pew was disturbed by the construction”. Edmond Rack's Survey of Somerset (1781) states:

“The chancel is separated from the nave by a plain open screen over which is the singers' gallery, the front whereof is of panneld wainscot painted, and in the centre is a fine carving of the royal arms, gilt and colourd.....”



Tom Mayberry suggested that early in the 19th century it was decided that the gallery would be more useful at the back of the church than at the front, so it was moved. Steps started from the present vestry area and led to a galleried rood screen which stood at the entrance to the chancel. The gallery was accessed by the opening high in the chancel wall.

The Queen Anne coat of arms is present in gratitude of "Queen Anne's bounty". During her reign (1702-1714) she gave to poorer churches /clergy a fund which was raised from the tithes which Henry VIII had taken for his own use.

The Chancel

The chancel of St. Michael's is a generous size. Historically the chancel was the most sacred part of a church as it contains the altar and was the place where all the activity of sacramental worship took place. A screen (called a rood screen) separated the parishioners from the activity of the priest.

Photographs taken here in the early 20th century, show the presence of an elaborate wooden screen which was removed many years ago. Such screens reflect a particular style of worship and can still be seen in some parish churches. In St. Michael's Church today services are based on the concept that parishioners and priest worship together without symbolic or physical barriers.

High in the north wall is a small doorway shaped opening. Steps down from this opening inside the wall are now blocked off. As mentioned previously it is thought that this gave access to the gallery (now at the back of the church) which was fitted over the top of a rood screen and perhaps used by singers. To the left of the altar in the north wall is an aumbry which was restored in the 19th century. This recess was designed to store communion vessels and the reserved sacrament but has long since become redundant.

Behind the altar against the wall is an elaborate screen called a reredos, providing an attractive backdrop to the altar. This is a 19th century replacement but there would have been something similar in place previously. To the right of the altar in the south wall is a 13th century piscina. This is a recess in the wall with a drain which was historically used for cleaning communion vessels and pouring away the water used. Although not used in the same way now this recess continues to be used in the serving of communion today. Next to the piscina is a sedilia or seat in the south wall of the chancel for officiating clergy. Beside this is the priest's door, through which the priest would enter and leave the church. A reminder of the days when the chancel was exclusively the domain and responsibility of the priest, the parishioners being responsible for the nave.



Some of the bench (pew) ends now in the chancel of the Church are beautiful and thought to be 15th century. They are constructed in a square shape typical to the West Country. These may well have been among the original ones made for the church and obviously considered worth saving when the new pews were fitted in the nave.

The reading desk in the chancel dated 1634 is not the one which is described in the 1781 survey. It seems to have been constructed by recycling bench ends which were considered too valuable to lose. When and where it was put together does not really matter with such beautiful carving worked some 400 years ago.

The pulpit is 17th century but strangely does not seem to be the one described by Edmund Rack in his survey of the church at around 1781.



Facing the altar the major lean of the right hand (south) side wall of the main arch can easily be seen. This structural problem was prevented from worsening in the 1980s in an ongoing restoration programme.

The church silver, which cannot be displayed, is of interest. The paten (plate) is Georgian silver and the silver chalice (or communion cup) dates from the reign of Elizabeth I. It is believed to be a gift from the Bishop of Bath and Wells at that time. He also made a similar gift to several churches in Somerset. Although the church now possesses new vessels, the Elizabethan silverware was in regular use until recently, and even now is used occasionally.

Several monuments recall former incumbents, their families and former lords of the manor. These include a very poignant memorial to a young man who died at the age of 14 years, when "his horse fell with him". There are many tombs to be found in the church especially in the area below the altar.

The North Chapel

The nave is the oldest part of the Church with the south porch and door. Later in the 13th century a tower and the north chapel were added. The tower was single storey at first but in the 15th century the north aisle was built and the tower was increased to its present height. At this time archways were built, cutting into the tower from the nave and also into its west and east sides to join the north aisle and the north chapel giving the church a very unusual layout.



On entering the north chapel the medieval altar, now capped with a modern stone altar slab, can still be seen at the east end. High up in the east window is a tiny face which was probably painted in the 13th Century. This little piece of ancient glass with its little face, has gazed down on more than 700 years of congregations all worshipping God in the manner of their own time.

The north window is probably 14th century and hence a later addition to the chapel. The window traceries again contain very old painted glass.



The Cuff tomb dominates the north wall of the north chapel. The Cuff family held the manor at Court Barton for many generations and were generous benefactors of the church particularly in the 16th century. The Robert Cuff tomb bears the date 1593 and shows the Cuff arms. The modern arms on the tomb were presented by the present day Cuff family who visit the church from time to time. During the restoration of the chapel in 1990 it was discovered that the actual Cuff vault probably lies under the large slab immediately in front of the tomb.

The tiny door in the north wall was originally an entrance to the tower but is now blocked off – access to the tower being by an external door in the north wall. Gazing upwards in the north chapel evidence can just be seen of two blocked up doorways high up in the west wall. These, and other evidence of alterations and flooring supports, lead us to believe that this chapel was originally of two storeys, or that a gallery of some sort ran around the inside at some time in the past. The flooring, cross and altar top are all new additions installed during the 1990 restoration.

North Aisle

Behind the organ in the north aisle is a 15th century flat-topped window and a picture with the coat of arms of Charles 1. This large picture somehow survived the Civil War and Cromwell's Commonwealth. Remarkably someone, presumably a Royalist sympathiser, hid the picture at the time of Charles I trial and kept it from harm.



The organ came to the church from Rockwell Green Baptist Church, Wellington, and is of particular interest. It was built in 1860 by George Holdich who also built the Lichfield Cathedral organ. It is a

very fine instrument and is the only known example of his work in the West Country. It was restored to its former 19th century specification by Deane Organs of Taunton after the move and is now one of the finest small instruments in the area. It has two manuals and pedals and seventeen stops and replaces a much smaller instrument that had stood in the north chapel since the 1940s. This instrument has now been sited at Herodsfoot, Cornwall.



There is an octagonal font with quatrefoiled panels around the basin and foliage carving beneath it. It probably dates from the 15th century but has a Victorian font cover.

The South Chapel

The south chapel is also known as the Charlton Chapel and for many years was maintained by the Pococke and Cely families of Charlton Manor. The coat of arms on the west wall is that of the Cely family. This chapel was subjected to extensive restoration in 1985 as the south wall required structural attention. A piscina in the south wall reveals the former presence of an altar. There are a number of very early Charlton Manor family tombs on the floor.

During the restoration of this chapel the tiled roof was found to conceal an original roof thatched with rushes.



The Tower

The tower bells are all rung regularly in practice, in celebration and to call villagers to worship. The bell tower holds six bells, the earliest dated 1590 and the most recent 1909.

One of the bells, cast in the 19th century, unusually has the alphabet printed around it. The two bells cast in the 17th century were by George Purdue whose foundry was at Closworth, near Yeovil. It is hard to imagine how in 1614 he managed to transport a 14cwt tenor bell from Closworth to Creech St. Michael, perhaps 25 miles. The probable answer is that bell founders such as George Purdue were sometimes itinerant. Many of the parish churches locally have bells which were cast by the Purdue foundry. It is most likely that a team of workers travelled from church to church and cast the bells on site. This would be an incredible undertaking, even today. One can imagine that, as word spread that they were in the area, more work would be forthcoming.

Bell founders are known to have made other metal items which people might request such as farm tools or cooking items. Archaeological excavations of churchyards in Britain have revealed furnaces which suggest that bells were cast in a pit dug in the grounds of the church. The “Great Tom” of Lincoln Cathedral, for example, was cast in the Minster yard.

The tower clock was built by John Smith & Sons of Derby in 1897. The clock still has its original pendulum and was wound manually twice a week by raising the weights by hand cranking. In 2001 an automatic winding mechanism was installed by the original builders.

Church Restoration

Over the past 80 years St. Michael's Church has undergone extensive restoration. In 1937 the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society described the church as probably being in a worse condition than any other church in the county. Now in 2013 (although there is always more work to do) the church has worked to improve its facilities. Along with electricity and running water it now has a central heating system. Almost all steps have been removed to facilitate easier access throughout the church and there is a disabled toilet. There is also an induction loop and sound system, all unheard of in 1937.

Outside the church



Outside the porch on the left of the adjacent window sill can be seen a scratch dial. This is believed to be a medieval sundial which with a post in the middle, would have indicated the times of the mass. Today we live by exact minutes and seconds and it is difficult to imagine how people lived before clocks were invented.

Proceeding to the west front there are several humorous mask-corbels and gargoyles, those on the tower being well preserved. Perhaps they are the faces of the masons or their supervisors or local people! High above the west door in a niche is a figure said to be carved by a royal court mason and, although badly mutilated, its inaccessibility seems to have protected it from total destruction by reformers.

The niches on either side of the west door are supported by beautifully carved heads. The one on the left depicts the Green Man so frequently found in parish churches as well as on secular buildings. The Green Man was seen as a symbol of rebirth or “renaissance”, representing the cycle of growth each spring.



Along the church path is a large hollow yew tree considered to be at least 1000 years old - probably older than the church and thought to be one of the oldest in Somerset. Most parish churches have at least one yew tree in the churchyard. This could be for several reasons but the most likely suggestion is that yew timber was very useful to the community being heavy but hard and very elastic. These attributes made it invaluable not only for long bows and arrows but also for much more mundane and even culinary uses. Posts made from yew are said to last longer in the ground than iron. Although the leaves and berries are poisonous it was the custom for many centuries to carry yew



branches into church on Palm Sunday and at funerals. One thought is that the graveyard was the one place that cows did not go and therefore they would be protected from the effects of consuming either the leaves or the berries. Further along the path nearer the church there is a young yew tree which was planted to mark the millennium.

Beside the yew are the parish stocks. The stocks were used by those in authority in villages to administer swift justice. Offenders had their feet locked in the stocks which would have been located in a very public place. As the purpose of this was to ridicule and scorn the individual, people were encouraged to throw rotten vegetables etc. at them. The punishment did not take into consideration the weather and it was not uncommon for people to die from heat exhaustion or hypothermia. Although offenders received a diet of bread and water, friends or family were allowed bring them extra food or drink if they wished. The stocks at Creech St. Michael are unusual in having space for seven feet instead of three or four pairs. Why this is so is unknown.

Further down the path is the parish war memorial which was moved from its original site in Sycamore Walk.



The best view of the tower is to be had from the north side of the church. Somerset is noted for its magnificent church towers and although not elaborate this is nevertheless a good example. The vestry and storeroom underneath are later additions.



Finally, look along the recently restored north and east churchyard walls and attempt to discover as many as you can of the small stone tablets simply engraved with initials. Originally there were 111 “wall works” and those that remain are quite rare. Stemming from the enclosure acts of 1752 and 1814 they were set as evidence of the owners’ right to use an amount of common land proportionate to the extent of church wall they undertook to maintain.

Modern Times

It is important to remember that St. Michael's Church not only has historic but also a present day life. The social norms of each age have left their mark as an inheritance for future generations and the 20th and 21st centuries are no different.

One of the changes to church life at St. Michael's in the 20th century was the emergence of women as leaders. Women were members of a congregation with a male church council. Women taught in the Sunday School with a male superintendent. During the 1950s a branch of the Mothers' Union was formed at St. Michael's. It was led by women for women.

The Mothers' Union had been formed in 1876 by Mary Elizabeth Summer to support women in their role as mothers. By the turn of the century there were 170,000 members with branches overseas. Their shared belief was that marriage, parenting and prayer were key to the future of families. Particularly after the 2nd World War, with an ever increasing membership, they began to lobby government departments on marriage, divorce, abortion, employment and religious education. By the time the women of St. Michael's became involved, the Mothers' Union had started to fund large projects both at home and overseas.

Local women remember the Mothers' Union at St. Michael's with fondness and pride. They recall that in the 1960s and 1970s the branch raised money for “away from it all” holidays, for families who would never otherwise have that opportunity. They also recall fundraising for bicycles overseas, which were essential for employment or education. Parading their banner at village and Mothers' Union events they demonstrated their Christian faith and their belief in the importance of the family. Although the Mothers' Union at St. Michael's

closed early in the 1990s many local women continue their work with the society through other local branches.

In 2008, under the ministry of the Rev. Ian Aldersley, St. Michael's Church joined St. George's Church, Ruishton and Holy Cross Church, Thornfalcon in a United Benefice. The existing rectory at Creech St. Michael was demolished and part of that land was used to build a new rectory for the Benefice. The remaining land was used to build two privately owned cottages. The United Benefice was the beginning of a new phase in the life of St. Michael's and when, in 2011, the Rev. Rebecca Harris was inducted as Rector, she became its first female incumbent .

The words **“Thynke and Thanke God of All”** carved in the church tower so many centuries ago speak to parishioners of today as they spoke to people then. The church-goers of St. Michael's today continue to worship and witness in the village with the same core beliefs and values that brought the church into being.

Bibliography and Acknowledgments

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