

**A SHORT HISTORY OF  
ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS  
CHURCH**

**STAWLEY, SOMERSET**

**January 2014**

Stawley Church is in a relatively isolated position, above a small valley leading down to the River Tone, close to the Devon/Somerset border and some 6 miles west of Wellington and 5 miles south of Wiveliscombe. In the middle of rolling picturesque hills and grassland, it is particularly pretty and has views of the Ashbrittle Church tower from the porch.

The Church is an early 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> Century stone building consisting of a nave, a slightly off-centre chancel and an embattled tower in which are now hung six bells. The three larger bells are of the pre-reformation period (1453-1600). The smallest bell was given by the Rev. John Hayne in 1872 and the second bell has a date of 1871. The newest bell was acquired in 2007 and completed the 1976 bell refurbishment programme. This bell, which came from Maperton Church, Somerset, became the treble bell and bells 2 and 3 were re-tuned to the old tenor bell in A flat by Taylors of Loughborough. The bell acquisition, retuning work, removal and re-hanging, plus new ropes and muffles, cost over £7,000 which was raised by the current bell ringers from grants and local fund raising. The new ring of six was dedicated and blessed by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the Right Reverend Peter Price at the Harvest Festival Service on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2007. Graham Henson is the Bell Captain and has served in this capacity for 33 years. The Church has a small, active group of bell-ringers and is regularly visited by other groups from the South West and beyond.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Century origins of the Church can be seen by sections of herring-bone walling on the outer north wall of the nave and traces of what looks like "long and short" work of a kind found in a Saxon building. However, the building is not mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) or in Pope Nicholas's Taxatio (1271), though it seems likely that the major part was built after the Norman Conquest, by local builders acquainted with Saxon building methods.

The Church is particularly noteworthy for its "un-restored" interior, although Kelly's directory of 1875 says it was restored in 1873 and minor alterations were made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the quinquennial review in 1986 recommended the exterior be roughcast instead of re-pointed, since the original stones used in its construction were considered small. However, this treatment was unsatisfactory and allowed damp to be trapped by the cement render. As a result, the roughcast was removed in 2004 when the walls were re-pointed in lime, following significant local fundraising.

The porch, on the south wall, is gabled and slated 14<sup>th</sup> century with a 13<sup>th</sup> century moulded door, which has elaborate iron hinges. There is a well-worn stoup (a small basin to contain holy water) to the right of the door. Worshippers used to dip a finger into this water and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads before entering. Now, it is used for little flower decorations to welcome visitors.

The nave once had a small dormer window over its south west end. It now has a trefoil-headed single light window on the west side of the porch, a two-light perpendicular

window, with cinquefoil-headed lights and two trefoil-headed traceries to the east of the porch and a plain two-light window to its east. It is believed that these south-facing windows were modernised in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The only window on the north side is large, square-headed and wooden, of a 17<sup>th</sup> century domestic pattern, in the style of William and Mary and was possibly brought from a local demolished house.

The chancel was built, or rebuilt, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century with a small priest's door (now fastened closed) and a two-light window on the south side. The east window is of 16<sup>th</sup> century design, with three lights and a heavy drip course - a style detested by Victorian restorers and thus a rare survival, like much else in the Church.

The tower is of three stages, mainly red sandstone, roughcast and once painted white. It was built in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century with a moulded plinth, angled buttress and embattled parapet. The buttresses are topped with small pinnacles lower than the level of the tower parapet, which is another rare feature of this small Church. The former belfry level has a simple three-light perpendicular window, while the west window is of three lights, but with cinquefoil two-panel tracery. Above the four-centred arched west door (now blocked) is a frieze of quatrefoil panels and, in the centre, a confusing inscription with some letters carved in reverse as though on a scroll. This reads: "Pray for the sowle of Henry Howe and Agnes his wyffe Anno dni MCCCCxxiii". The date of 1423 is clearly a mistake for 1523 since, by Howe's will of 1528, he was to be buried in the tower and 18 pence a year paid to burn a taper at the "Lady Chapel", long gone, in the north of the Church.

Inside the Church, the nave walls are plastered and painted light cream. The ceiled wagon roof with moulded beams and central bosses is early 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The eastern boss has the arms of Poulett, patron of the Church from 1401. The font is a 14<sup>th</sup> Century octagonal bowl on a similar-shaped shaft, set into a square base with flattened broaches. Seating is by a complete set of late 18<sup>th</sup> Century box pews, of the same date as the massive pulpit with its heavy ogee-capped tester (sounding board) which once had a double reading-desk in its base. There are wooded boards of 1826 with the Lord's Prayer and the Credo on the north wall. Royal Arms of 1795 (House of Hanover) are set above the chancel arch. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century Florentine "Penitent Magdalene" in its heavy gilt frame was given to the Church in 1936 by Captain Buxton, Royal Navy, who lived in Bennetts. The painting of the Church, on the south wall opposite Penitent Magdalene, was given by Bob Brierley the brother of our previous vicar, Rev. Ian Brierley, in 2006 and funds have since been raised by selling Christmas cards of this painting. The book rest on the altar table was given in 1985 by Mrs Sharman, in memory of her husband Earnest James: the chair in the priest's stall was donated in memory of Anthony Geoffrey Hopwood Gardner Brown CMG (1913 - 1978) (Churchwarden 1968-1971 and PCC Treasurer 1972-1978) and Eric Sansome BA (1900-1979) (PCC Secretary 1970-1979). The four wooden chandeliers were made in 1970 by Sid Pearce from Tracebridge from an old oak which fell across the river Tone at Stawley Mill and was presented to the Church in memory of John Bernard Rhodes from Stawley Mill (PCC Secretary 1962- 1970

and Treasurer 1962-1972.). The 800 year old Oak in the churchyard was blown down in a gale in March 1987 and salvaged by Graham Henson (Church Warden). Bought by Tim Enticott ( Landlord of the Globe), it was kiln dried and some wood was used by Charles Hollick ( of Kittisford Glebe ) to make the bookshelves, notice board and candle holders.. These were presented to the Church in memory of Bertha Enticott, Tim's mother. The fallen oak was replaced first by a turkey oak and later, in 2002, by a common oak.

The present altar frontal was designed by Graham Henson and made by Cilla Newsom, Julia Luard and others in 2005. Reference to it can be found on the chancel window sill. It was blessed by the Archdeacon of Taunton, the Venerable John Reed, during the Harvest Festival service that year.

The oak rail for the curtains that separate the bell ringers from the congregation was made by Tom Newsom and presented by Penny Hare in 2007, Penny also made and presented the curtains in 2011.

The electronic organ was installed in 2008 in memory of Julia Luard ( 1951 – 2007 ) ( Church Organist 2003 – 2007 ) and dedicated by the Bishop of Taunton, The Right Reverend Peter Maurice, during the Harvest Festival Service on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2008.

The gate light was made and erected by Graham Henson in 2006, with the help of Patrick Salter who made the curls on top. Graham Henson also maintains the churchyard and surrounding area.

The laths holding up the Chancel Ceiling panels were found to be damaged by Death Watch Beetle along with some of the roof timbers, these were replaced in 2012 and new panels put up and redecorated.

Associate Vicar: Rev. Martin Perry

Church Wardens: Graham Henson and Penny Hare

Organist: Penny Hare

Sidesman: Colin Haddrell

Services each month:

First Sunday: 09.30 Holy Communion

Second Sunday: 11.15 Morning Prayer

Third Sunday (summer only): 18.30 Evensong

There is an active, though small, congregation reflecting the size of the hamlet of Stawley and its adjacent villages. Times of services in the neighbouring Churches of Ashbrittle, Batheaton, Greenham and Kittisford can be found in the Parish News.

Visitors are very welcome!