

The Parish Church of St Michael and All Angels,

Great Torrington

A brief guide

The earliest record of a parish church here is of 1259, but there was probably one much earlier. The oldest surviving parts of the present building are 14th century. The big event in the history of this church was the explosion of 1645, during the Battle of Torrington. This was the biggest battle ever fought in Devon,



when Fairfax and Cromwell defeated the Royalist army under Lord Hopton and gained command of the South West. The Royalists who held the town had stored 80 barrels of gunpowder in the Church. The Roundheads as they captured the town shut their prisoners in the Church. Somehow the powder was detonated, with great loss of life. The blast is believed to have come from the south transept (the old tower) in a north-westerly direction destroying several pillars and the fire that followed destroyed old furnishings and monuments, including (to the joy of the Puritans) the Prayer Books, but the Bible survived as did the small Tudor Room at the east end of the south aisle. Experts differ over how much of the Church was actually destroyed in the blast and now experience of blitzed churches suggests that reports of the damage were probably exaggerated.

Interior:

This guide will take you around the church in a clockwise direction, starting at the main door, and will highlight points of interest. Enjoy!

The fine ROOF is of the 'wagon-shaped' pattern typical of this part of England. All WINDOW tracery to the nave, aisles and chancel is Geometric, by William White c. 1861, replacing plain 17th or 18th century mullions.

The PORCH, also by White, is in the Early English style.

To your left, the staircase and WEST GALLERY were completed in 2008. The gallery opens into the first floor RINGING CHAMBER.

The tower houses eight BELLS, six were cast by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester in 1716, and later added to and rehung in 1884 and 1934 and they are one of the best peals in Devon. The weights of the bells and their inscriptions are recorded on a board on the west wall of the church. The 17th century clock bell from the old tower hangs in the spire.



The GALLERY Offers a splendid view of the church and the opportunity to look at the west window from close at hand. underneath on the ground floor, is the west door entrance and our kitchen on either side concealed behind oak panels, passing the carved octagonal red-veined marble FONT, 1914, with its richly carved quatrefoil panels, is a SEAL in an oak cabinet on the pillar at the west end of the north arcade, this is an original wax impression of the Great Seal Of England Of the reign of James I, It was probably once attached to the charter granted to the borough in this reign, It was restored in 1929 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The stained glass canopy over the WAR MEMORIAL contains fragments of glass from Westminster Chapter House salvaged after bomb damage. The Large Tapestry of THE THREE KINGS nearby was made by Bridget Davies.

Around the Church are a beautiful set of fourteen STATIONS OF THE CROSS. They originally belonged in a convent chapel and were acquired for our church by an anonymous donor.

On the north wall are two MONUMENTS, one to Mrs Penelope Johnson and another to Mrs Palmer (Partly behind the organ) both relations to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Joshua occasionally visited them, on one occasion with the great Dr Johnson. Another, in the

Sanctuary, commemorates Sara Gooding, who was born by caesarian section in 1671. (*Infans si misère discerptae ventre Parentis*). The Willis Organ, one of the finest organs in the west country, and the twin of the one in Truro cathedral, is fully described in a separate leaflet.

The PULPIT with its carved cherubs, wreaths and gilding is typical 17th century work, During the restoration of 1869-64 (when the old galleries and box pews were removed) the pulpit was moved and the matching SOUNDING-BOARD thrown out. The latter was rescued from a builder's yard and given to the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London. There it remained until 1950, when it was restored to the church 'on loan'.



The CRUCIFIX on the pillar behind the pulpit was carved at Oberammergau in 1934 by Willy Bierling, who was St John the Evangelist in the Passion Play that year.

Under the chancel arch hangs a ROOD installed in 2002, formerly in St Oswald's Small Heath, Birmingham, It was given to St Oswald's in 1920 as a war memorial. It was originally designed to stand on a beam, this proved impractical in St Michael's, so it was hung from the roof. Before re-installation the figures were restored by Philip Dixon.

The REREDOS of stone and marble is dated to 1878, and is carved with a relief of the Last Supper by sculptor Harry Hems. The wooden figure of OUR LADY to the right of the altar steps was carved by French nuns, and was given in memory of Phyllis Hearn.

The bronze figure of ST MICHAEL to the right of the chancel steps is by Mother Concordia of St Mildreds Abbey, Thanet and given in memory of James Bastin, Churchwarden.

At the east end of the South Aisle, is a small Tudor room, now the VESTRY, which survived the 1645 blast. It is possible it is the Tudor library mentioned in records, the books from which have long disappeared. To the right of the vestry door is the AUMBRY that houses the holy oils: oil of the sick, oil of catechumens and Sacred Chrism.

The CHAPEL OF ST JAMES in the south Transept is named after the demolished chapel of Torrington Castle, and was furnished as a memorial to Frank Emlyn Jones, Vicar 1894-1934 and latterly Archdeacon of Barnstaple. This is where the original tower stood before the rebuilding of the early 19th century. The altar is the 17th century LORD'S TABLE. In the REREDOS (from left to right) are the figures of St Michael (for Great Torrington), St Giles (for Little Torrington), St Mary the Virgin, St James, St Mary Magdalen (for Taddipport) and St Gabriel (for St Gabriel's Mission Church in the town, which no longer exists). The OIL PAINTING above the altar is a copy of Caravaggio's 'Ecce Homo' made by Catherine Doe, who was born in Torrington in 1818 and studied in London. The ICON to the left of the altar is a version of our Lady of Czestochowa, the original being in Poland. The Mother of God, holds the Christ Child, who right hand is raised in blessing, whilst in his left hand is the Gospel. It hangs here as a result of a court case which made legal history. The Chancellor of the Diocese, David Calcutt, refused permission for its installation but in 1984 the parish appealed to the Court of Ecclesiastical Causes Reserved, which had never sat before, and the Chancellor's decision was reversed. The WINDOW is a memorial to Thomas Fowler the apothecary and inventor who died in 1843. The border shows two of his inventions; the thermosiphon (the founder of central heating systems) and a calculating machine, a forerunner of the computer,

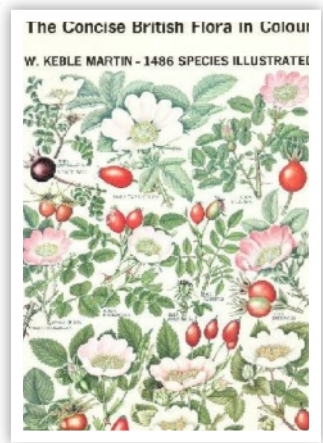


which was admired by Charles Babbage his contemporary, who had himself invented a calculator on a different principle. The CHANDELIER is by the Walter Mousley of Petrockstow, who also designed and made the ironwork on the choir stalls and the thurible stand.



In the Nave, hangs a list of RECTORS AND VICARS. The list includes Master Thomas Wolsey, afterwards Cardinal, Wolsey added the rectory and patronage to the income of his new foundation at Oxford, to be known as Cardinal College. When he fell from favour his project was taken over by Henry VIII and called Christ Church. Thereafter the parish priests were appointed by the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church and are known as 'Perpetual curates'. Except for a break during the commonwealth, when five Presbyterian ministers were intruded (one of whom, Hugh Peters, achieved the distinction of being executed after the Restoration for his part in the trial of Charles I) this system has continued ever since. Of the 19 incumbents since 1562, 17 have been members of 'the House' and seven also old boys of its near relation, Westminster School.

William Keble Martin (vicar 1934-1943) wrote and illustrated the Concise British Flora in Colour).



Exterior:

Some of the victims of the 1645 blast lie in a mass grave, under the cobbled mound opposite the main entrance

On the wall, to the right of the main entrance is a stone commemorating the disaster: "This Church was blown up with powder Febr 16th Anno 1645 and rebuilt AO 1651".

The TOWER and SPIRE date from 1813, about which time the old tower was taken down. The tower is the work of W.B. Cock, a local builder, who also designed the Pannier Market building, His initials are worked into the stones of the path Outside the SW door.



Look up and see decorated rainwater hoppers of the 17th century. The carved stone heads by the west door are 19th century and represent Henry VII's mother (Lady Margaret Beaufort) and Cardinal Wolsey. Lady Margaret was a benefactor to the Parish, bestowing her manor house on the parish priest. The present Vicarage of the 18th-19th occupies its site.

The CHURCHYARD has been closed for burials since 1850. The tomb of Charlotte Laimbeer near the East Wall bears this epitaph:

She was!
But words are wanting, to say what!
Think what a wife should be,
And she was that.

Another one, reported to exist, but there is no prize for finding it - perhaps it was inside the church and the restorers removed it in 1860 for excessive levity:

Here lies a man who was killed by lightning;
He died when his prospects seemed to be brightening.
He might have cut a flash in the world of trouble,
But the flash cut him, and he lies in the stubble.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to our beautiful Church.

Please sign our visitor's book and help maintain this historic Grade II building by leaving a donation in the wall safe.

We have a web site that is regularly updated with our news and events. Please take a look on www.stmichaelstorrington.org.uk