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DISCOVERING....

Devon's Historic Churches



Parish Church of
St Michael, Axmouth

June 2023

St Michael's Church, Axmouth



Axmouth was one of the earliest Saxon settlements in Devon, and this coincided with the missionary activity of St. Augustine. There is strong evidence of the existence of a Saxon Church in 1049. The original dedication of the church is unknown, only becoming St Michael's in the nineteenth century.

Before entering the church we noticed two striking **hunky punks** on the corners of the tower, but the most obvious surviving feature of the Norman church is the beautifully carved north doorway, now located inside the porch. It is an original feature of the church which was built by Richard de Redvers Earl of Devon,



Figure 2: Hunky Punks on the tower



Figure 1: North door



Figure 3: Chevron with later quotation

probably sometime between 1086 and 1090, and thought to sit on the foundations of a previous Saxon church. The doorway, with its octagonal columns, capitals and lintel carved with the elaborate chevron pattern is typical of Norman work and due to the later addition of a porch, dating from around 1500, it has been well preserved. The Biblical quotation, on the stone tympanum, bears the date of 1698 and may have been placed there on the instructions of one of the early Halletts. Up until 1887 this outer entrance was blocked up and the porch could only be accessed from inside the Church where it served as a vestry.

Entering through the north door, to the right we saw the **font** and alongside it a **stone quern**. The font was made by a local craftsman and placed in its current position as part of the 1889 restoration.

A quern is a word of Middle English origin defined in some dictionaries as a primitive hand mill for grinding grain. This particular ancient stone vessel is said, to have come originally from a farmhouse on the approach to Hawkesdown Hill. Antiquaries have been consulted, but have failed to agree upon its precise function though some believe that it was used for the grinding of corn. For some years it stood outside in the churchyard, until it was brought inside the church for protection.



Figure 1: Font



Figure 2: Stone quern

Above the door is a statue and on the wall beside the font is an alabaster plaque, listing the names of the local people killed in the 1st World War, with a smaller one below listing those who died in WW2. Outside is a granite memorial in the form of a Celtic cross. The memorials were erected in 1920 and dedicated in April of that year.

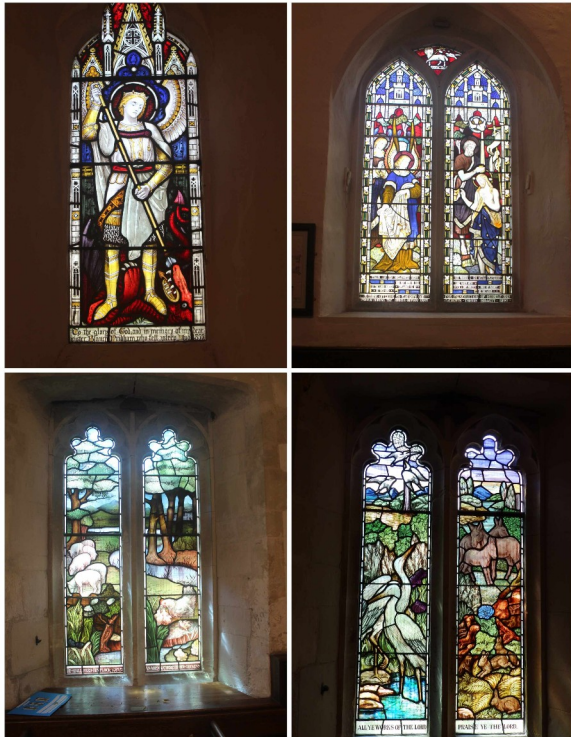


Henry Meade Swifte became vicar of Axmouth in 1928. He had served as a Regular officer in the Great War. In the conflict of 1939-1945, he became Officer in command of the Axmouth Platoon of the Home Guard. This is probably why Axmouth is one of the few places to hold specific memorials to members of the Home Guard who lost their lives in the 2nd World War.



The Church also has some remarkable **stained glass windows** of two different eras, including the Hallett memorial window to the left of the war memorial. This

window was donated in 1890 by Col. Clements Thomas Hallett as a thank offering for the safe deliverance of himself and his family during the Indian mutiny of 1857. The more modern windows date from 1922 and are a memorial to W. Knatchbull



*Top left: Pridham memorial window
 Top right: Hallett memorial window
 Bottom left: In memory of W, Knatchbull
 Bottom right: 1922 design window*

Medieval Wall paintings

Covered in layers of whitewash, the paintings were discovered when work was carried out on the church in 1889.



On the wall of the south aisle a large ochre patch can be seen, with the barely discernible outline of a figure. Restoration undertaken in 2015 suggests that the painting represents the martyrdom of St Erasmus. There appears to be a wheel and winch over the saint who was disembowelled by having his bowels wound out by a windlass. The painting dates to c.1480-1500. St Erasmus was

the patron saint of sailors and cloth-workers, so was relevant to the trade of Axmouth.



Paintings of a similar date are on two of the pillars in the south aisle, one represents Christ, the second figure is not clearly identifiable, St Michael, St Peter, St Margaret and the Virgin Mary have all been suggested.



The paintings were discovered beneath a lime wash when the church underwent major restoration work in 1889. They are thought to date somewhere between 1300 and 1500.

Graffiti isn't new! On one of the nave piers can be seen two very faint concentric circles. From a review undertaken by the Devon historic graffiti survey (<https://devonhistoricgraffiti.org.uk/news/>), it seems that more are to be found on the same pier, of a much more complex design, in particular a petalled motif known as a daisy wheel or hexafoil. These are generally described as protection marks, the devil being trapped in the circle and unable to get out.



The **organ** casing bears a small brass plaque commemorating its presentation to the church on the death of the owner and builder, Lord of the Manor John Hothershall Hallett, a great great nephew of the Richard Hallett, who had first purchased the Stedcombe Estate. John Hothershall Hallett had for many years lived at Haven Cliff, overlooking the ancient harbour of



Axmouth and is particularly remembered for his passion for the restoration of the harbour; he was instrumental in obtaining Parliamentary authority for substantial restoration works to be undertaken in the 1830s and 1840s thus allowing sea-going vessels to enter the harbour to load and discharge their cargoes once more. It was the coming of the railway to nearby Seaton, in 1868, and irreparable damage by severe storms, in 1869, that ensured and hastened the demise of the port.

The **Bindon chapel** was built c1240 as a **chantry** south of the chancel. A chantry was an endowment for the singing of masses for the soul of the founder but was also applied to a chapel or altar endowed for this purpose

A unique feature of St. Michael's church is the **Hagioscope** or "**Squint**". In pre-Reformation days this opening, which pierces the massive pillar separating the nave from the Bindon Chapel allowed the congregation to observe the priest celebrating the Mass at the holy table, with its associated medieval **piscina** (rediscovered in 1889), set into the adjacent wall, beneath the east Bindon window. It has no function in modern worship but forms an unusual and decorative portion of the church fabric here The Bindon chapel was originally furnished with pews but under the recent rearrangement it was changed to form a meeting room and subsequently a children's area



The angle of the hagioscope clearly indicates the location of the altar which in pre-Reformation times would have been situated under the east window.



On the south wall of the chapel is the stone commemorating Anne **Erle**, wife of Sir **Walter Erle**, who died 26 January 1653/4 and their only son Thomas, died 1 June 1650. According to the epitaph on the monument Anne was renowned for her piety and her son for his wisdom and abilities. Walter Erle had been knighted in 1616 but later lost favour when he fought for the Parliamentary side in the Civil War. The family were given Axmouth

by King Edward VI. Thomas sold the manor of Axmouth in 1679 to Sir Walter Yonge, who in turn sold it to **Richard Hallett**, in 1691.



Above the hagioscope there is a memorial to several members of the **Hallett** family, including Richard Hallett esq., his son John and Meliora, nee Hothersall, of Gidea, Essex his wife.

The Hallett family owned most of the parish of Axmouth for almost 200 years and their association with Axmouth began in 1691 when Richard Hallett, who, together with his brother John, owned sugar plantations and slaves in Barbados and made a fortune trading between Barbados and Lyme Regis, bought the Stedcombe Estate, Axmouth, where he rebuilt the manor house. As he had no children of his own Richard Hallett bequeathed his estate to his nephews. One of the nephews, also named Richard

Hallett, left instructions in his will for the erection of this imposing monument, saying that "a plain monument be erected near my vault". The burial register comments, in 1747, that he was "universally lamented." Within a few months, due to the untimely death of John, Richard's son, the Estate was inherited by a grandson who was Richard Hothersall Hallett; he later became Vicar of Axmouth as well as squire and held both offices until his death in 1814. In fact several members of the Hallett family served as vicar at St Michael's; Richard Hothersall Hallett 1764-1814 was followed by his youngest son Richard Southcott Hallett, 1814-1858.

Another unusual item is the **liturgical calendar** which hangs on the front of the pulpit. A liturgical calendar is a system used to mark the stages of the life of Christ beginning in November with the season of Advent

In 1979 Dora M Griffiths published a book entitled "Through a Vicarage Window". In 1946 her husband



Hugh Peregrine Griffiths was appointed Vicar at Axmouth church. The book describes their time as missionaries in Argentina running a home for destitute children, before transferring to Cornwall and later being offered the living of Axmouth. They retired in 1970 and are buried in Axmouth churchyard. The book gives a fascinating insight into the life and work of a vicar's wife. The copy I bought from the internet is signed by Dora herself!

Photographs were taken by Greg Arnold, Val Frood, Stuart Jones, and Lynda Pidgeon



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