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DISCOVERING....

# Devon's Historic Churches



St Michael & all Angels  
Honiton

February 2024

## St Michael and all Angels, Honiton

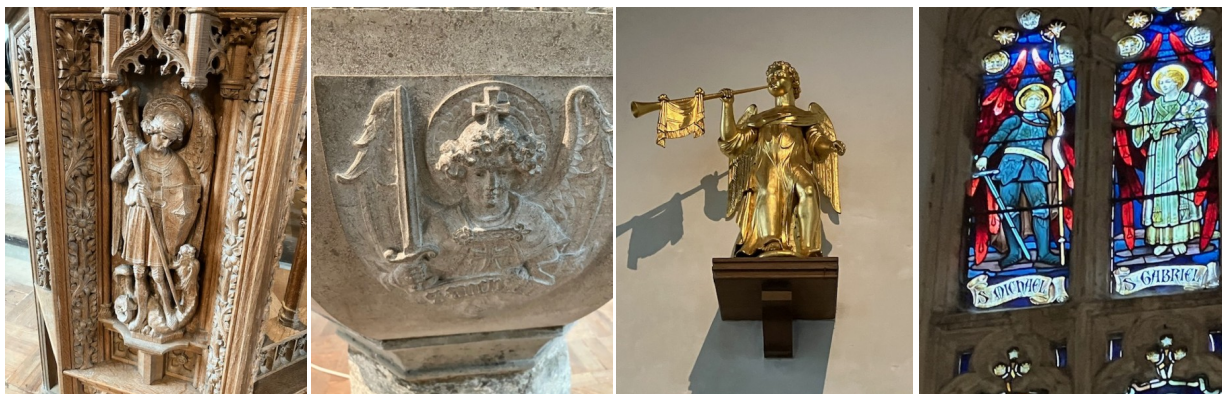


The first records of St Michaels date back to 1406 when it is listed as a small chapel. The walls of the present Church were built around 1484 by Bishop Peter Courtney of Powderham castle, The foundations of an earlier church were discovered when excavating to form a heating chamber in 1894. It's recorded that the first religious building was a small chapel in the 12th and 13th centuries. A human skeleton, lying north-south, was built into the foundations of the east running wall

Legend has it that the original location planned for the Church was the site of the old Honiton Hospital but that as fast as the stones were laid there, by the next morning they had moved to the present site at the top of the hill! This was supposed to be the result of work by the devil so rather than risk a curse being placed on them they decided to build the Church at the top of the hill where the devil located it!

Many churches dedicated to St Michael are on hills.

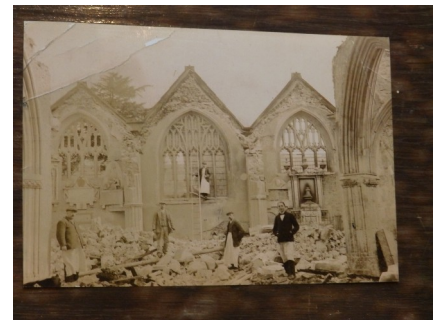
No one seems to know whether St Michael's was built on a hill because of its dedication or if it was dedicated to St Michael because it was already on a hill. It seems logical for an archangel to appear from on high and records of such churches go back to AD 490. Honiton church is supposed to have been dedicated to St Michael since at least 1406. The hilltop position reminds us of the Book of Revelation where the Archangel fights the devil. There are stories of St Michael appearing in visions on hilltops, eg Mount Gargano in Italy, St Michael's Mount in Cornwall and of course Glastonbury Tor. In Devon St Michael de Rupe sits on top of Brent Tor. Here the four archangels are shown on the window and Michael appears in metal, wood, stone and glass around the church.



Moreover pilgrims and herdsman often preferred to keep to higher ground and the church would be a convenient stopping place for them. prior to the present church. Terry Allan Durrant in *"Honiton, a glimpse back"* suggests it may have been a roadside chapel built by mendicant monks for travellers. Apparently the Great West Road kept to higher ground before it was decided to descend to the valley and use the old Roman Road. It was even termed "small" in John Chapman's will in 1406. Probably the lords of the manor wanted to build something bigger and more fashionable in the 15th century. In any case there was another church in town at Allhallows. A chapel to St Thomas has also been mentioned as well as St Margaret's chapel on the Western edge of town for the leper colony. The large yew tree was planted by William Baker in 1770 on the grave of Anne his daughter. Then in 1793 an avenue of "eight fine spiral yews" were planted. The graveyard has long been the burial site for residents of Honiton and the surrounding areas. The graveyard was originally quite small but over time the lords of the manor added Churchyard Field and Downton's Field making up the area it is today. In addition there are a number of graves dedicated to the memory of soldiers who were killed in the 1914-1918 war or who died in the flu epidemic which followed it. The graves in this area have been listed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission though they have not officially adopted the site..



The Church was very badly damaged by fire on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1911. The fire was discovered by the Sexton at about 9.30a.m. Margaret Lewis, Curator of the Honiton Museum, records in an article in the *Midweek Herald*, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2021 that *The*



*Rector telegraphed Exeter Fire Brigade for help. Fifteen men, four horses, and the Exeter fire engine were put on a special train that had a clear run to Honiton at express speed. They arrived at the Church by 11.30am. The fire engine was driven to the mill stream beyond the timber yard. Nineteen hundred feet of hose was used to pump water into a canvas tank erected on the church path and the Honiton engine soon had two jets of water aimed at the roof. The Fire Brigade committee reported that their expenses were £17 five shillings and that rockets would be kept at the Fire Captain's house and the Police Station to summon members of the Fire Brigade in the future.*

*The damage in 1911 was severe with only the tower being left untouched but the Church was very quickly rebuilt at a cost of £2,900 and was re-dedicated on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1912.*



*The Sexton's wife Anna with the help of Messrs. Tratt, Stewart, Lemon, Radford, and Cotton rescued the communion plate, the altar ornaments, crosses, the pulpit desk, candlesticks, and brass oil lamps. This lead cross*



*which is now stored in Honiton Museum, is mounted on an alabaster base and was made from the debris after the fire which destroyed everything but the outside walls and tower. The lead on the*

roof and the windows melted and flowed onto the wooden block floor forming crosses at the joints. 15 months after the fire, St Michael's was rededicated by the Bishop of Exeter.



Further damage resulting from a fire can be seen in the charred remains of the replacement **rood screen**, part of which is now located at the rear of the nave. The original screen was destroyed in the fire of 1911 and its replacement, dating from 1911/12 was moved about 45 years ago to the back of the church to hide the 'untidy' part. Part of the screen shows further signs of scorching as not long after it was moved, a man with a grudge set fire not only to St Michael's but also to the churches in Dunkeswell, Sheldon and Hemyock. He built a pyre of the plastic chairs which when alight gave off toxic fumes and thick black smoke.



Dog walkers passing by called the fire brigade. Fortunately the cost of cleaning the church was covered by insurance. But sadly the fumes killed all the bats living in the church.

Likewise the original wooden barrel ceiling was destroyed and replaced with the one we see today. Complete with carved bosses.



In June 1912 an interesting letter was read to the Honiton Board of Guardians from the Rector of Honiton, the Rev. The Hon. F. L. Courtenay, in reference to a **font** in the Workhouse chapel. The letter explained that the font in question had been condemned and removed from St Michael's when the church was restored a few years before (he was probably referring to the restorations that took place between 1881 and 1898). Reverend Courtenay couldn't say who had authorised the removal of the font, however after the destruction of the church by fire in March 1911 those connected with the church

were anxious to preserve anything that was a link with the past. The letter stated that Mr Ponting (probably the architect involved in the rebuilding of St Michael's) had inspected the font in the Workhouse chapel and concluded that the base dated back to the 13th century but the bowl was a later 18th century addition. Mr Courtenay's letter suggested that, when St Michael's had been rebuilt, the base should be returned to the church and, at no cost to

the Guardians, Mr Ponting would design and produce a base to correspond with the bowl that should remain in the Workhouse chapel. The Guardians decided to consent to the proposal provided they saw a copy of the design of the new base before it was placed in the chapel.

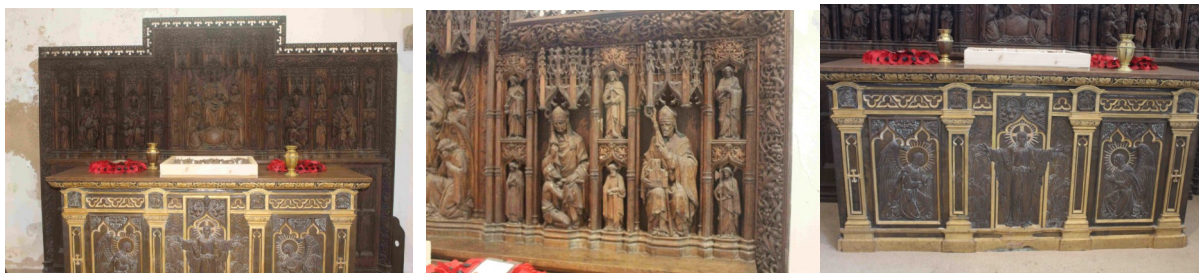
“*The Western Times*”, on September 4 1896, wrote about the re-opening of St. Michael’s Church and gave a very detailed description of the restoration works, including a description of the new font dedicated to the memory of **Edmund Archibald Stamp**, prominent resident of Honiton, local solicitor, Town Alderman, churchwarden and great supporter of the renovation of St Michael’s.

Part of the inscription on the bowl of the font that stands in St Michael’s today tells us that it was restored in 1912 (i.e. after the fire) the stone base or pedestal, on which the bowl stands, appears to be from a different era.



One other unusual artefact in the Church is the old **bier** which was used to transport bodies up the hill to the graveyard. One of the original pins which held the coffin in place can still be seen in situ at the rear. The front wheels were smaller than those at the rear so that they would go under the body and allow the bier to be taken round corners

More recently in September 2000 furnishings from the Allhallows Chapel at Rousden were moved to St. Michael’s to create the All Hallows War Memorial Chapel in the



aisle to the right of the main altar, In addition to the number of memorials in this chapel there are a number of war graves in part of the Churchyard although these have been listed by the War Graves Commission they have not been formally adopted by them and a number of the graves relate to sex-servicemen who died in the 1919 influenza epidemic.

Over the centuries there have been a number of notable people associated with St. Michael’s, most of whom still have memorials in the Church



**Peter Courtney** was born about 1440 and died 1492. His father was Sir Phillip Courtney of Powderham. He is credited with building the tower, nave and lower part of the St Michael’s Church in the late perpendicular gothic style in 1480 He had a varied career beginning as a civil law graduate at Oxford and Cologne then Padua. On leaving Padua in 1462 he served King Edward IV who made him Duke of Milan. However in 1470 he

and his elder brother joined forces with the Duke of Clarence opposing the King, serving Henry VI as a Lancastrian. Later he left the Duke of Clarence and again rejoined Edward IV who had retaken the throne. On Edward's death he supported Richard III. At the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 he again changed sides and supported Henry VII in whose first parliament he was granted the office of Bishop of Winchester and he is buried in Winchester Cathedral. Other appointments include Archdeacon of Exeter and Wiltshire, Dean of Exeter than Bishop of Exeter in 1478.

**Thomas Marwood** was born **about 1524 in Honiton**, where he died in in 1617 aged 93. He was the son of William and father to Thomas and John.

He studied medicine at Padua where his name is on the wall of the lecture theatre. According to his will, Thomas Marwood practised his profession as Surgeon ( then called *Chirurgion* ) from the last 4 years of Henry VIII's reign until the 15th year of King James' reign. That works out as from 1544 until his death in 1617, ie a total of 73 years, which he describes as *almost four score* in his Will.

This also fits with him reputedly going to Padua to study Medicine in 1540.



Thomas's house is still situated in Honiton at the top of the High Street on the left at the mini roundabout. His monument in the Church is inscribed:

*Here lieth the body of Thomas Marwood Gent who practised physick and chirurgery above seventy five years, and being zealous of good works gave certain houses and bequeathed by his will to the poor of Honiton ten pounds, and being aged above one hundred and five years, departed in the Catholick Faith September 18th. Anno Domini 1617. Here also lieth Temperance the Wife*

*of the above said Thomas Marwood Who dyed the 9th of October Anno Dni 1644.*

On a tombstone outside the church is a slate replica of a plaque to **James Rodge**. The original is now in the Allhallows Museum for safekeeping as attempts were made to vandalise and even remove it. It is possibly the first written evidence of the lace making industry in Devon. It reads

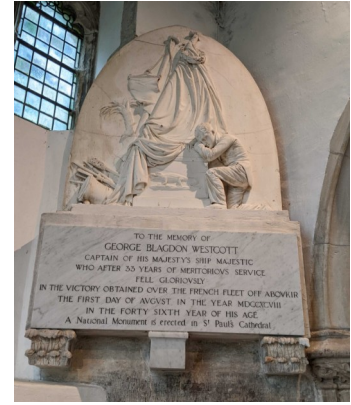
*Here lyeth ye body of James Rodge of Honinton in ye county of Devonshire, ( Bonelace siller hath given unto the poore of Honinton p'ishe the benyfit of 100L for ever.) who deceased ye 27 of July 1617 Remember the poore.*



An article in the *Sidmouth Herald* of 9th January 2022 tells us that in his will he ensured that his wife Alice was well provided for. He left her £200 plus his dwelling house and its contents. He bequeathed £200 in trust to each of his sister's four children and his best cloak to his friend William Taylor, who lived in Fleet Street, London. Assuming that James conducted his business for around 30 years before he died, it suggests that his lace making trade in the Honiton area was well established, profitable and flourishing during Queen Elizabeth's reign. A survey taken during 1698 revealed that a quarter of the population in East Devon were lace makers. 1,341 of them lived in Honiton. At that time, Honiton lace was valued at up to £6 a yard compared to Buckingham lace, which only cost £1.50 a yard.



**George Blagdon Westcott** was the son of a baker in Honiton. He was born 1753 in Honiton. He joined the Royal Navy as a cabin boy and rose to the rank of Captain during both the American and the French revolutionary wars. As captain he became one of Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson's band of Brothers" He fought in the battle of the Nile where he was killed.in Abuqir Bay, Egypt in August 1798 and was buried at sea,



There is a memorial to him in St Paul's Cathedral as well as this one in St Michaels. In January 1801, Nelson was passing through Honiton, on his way to take up a new command at Plymouth. Nelson invited his nearest surviving family to breakfast, and presented Mrs. Westcott with his own Nile medal, saying, "*You will not v rom the bounty of government and Lloyd's, in very low circumstances. The brother is a tailor, but had they been chimney-sweepers it was my duty to show them respect.*"



**Edmund Archibald Stamp** was born in Honiton in 1843. He will always be remembered as his memorial is carved round the sides of the font. He was known for



his work as a surveyor and civil engineer. He contributed to various projects related to land surveying, infrastructure development, and construction. He played a pivotal role in a groundbreaking project. Known as *The Great War: Britain's Efforts and Ideals*, this ambitious undertaking aimed to create a portfolio of lithographic prints. These prints were commissioned by the British Government's propaganda department and published by The Avenue Press. In November 1851, Edmund Stamp, then the Mayor of Honiton, spearheaded a public meeting. Attended by prominent residents, this meeting called for the construction of a railway through the town. Stamp's advocacy led to a delegation meeting with the directors of what would later become the London and South Western Railway Company. He had died from typhoid fever on 4th June 1886 at the age of 46 and had been junior partner at the firm of Messrs. Stamp and Son in Honiton. He died leaving his wife £4,374/10/4d!

Contributions of photographs and text from Greg Arnold, Pat Arnold, Chris Fuller, Stuart Jones, Marilyn Medforth, Jackie Moran, Lynda Pidgeon, Wendy Randle, Gill Thomas and Peter Williams



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