



THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, MERE

The first mention of a church at Mere occurs in a document of 1091, and a further reference in 1190 tells us it was dedicated, as today, to St. Michael. The parish church was probably the first substantial building in Mere. There remains evidence of a Saxon church and indications that the original dimensions were 14ft. across, 25½ ft. high to the top of the walls, with a total height of 37½ ft. to the apex of the roof. There is further evidence of a pre-Norman building in the stonework surrounding the tower arch at the west end of the nave.

William the Conqueror granted his nephew Bishop Osmund, Count of Seez, the revenues of the church in Mere. The Bishop applied half of them to the building of the Cathedral at Old Sarum of which he was the founder. The Dean and Chapter are still in a corporate sense Rector of Mere, and responsible for the repair of the chancel. The major or rectorial tithes were due to the Dean, and he visited the town annually.

At some date before 1220 there was a disastrous fire, and when William Wanda, Dean of Salisbury, visited Mere at that time his inventory found an incomplete building, with three altars, a tower and bells, but with no roof on the chancel; evidently a church in the course of reconstruction after the devastating fire. Some of the stones in the east wall show signs of burning though not in situ, and were probably re-used from the earlier building.

In the fourteenth century two chapels were built north and south and added to the nave. The addition of the chapels were so that prayers could be said for the souls of the departed, who had left money for that purpose. These chapels were altered and widened at various times until the building was out of proportion and it became necessary to remodel the centre of the church. This took place between 1449 and 1463 when Gilbert Kymer was Dean of Salisbury and Rector of Mere; his arms can be seen

carved on a bench end in the chancel. It was known as the Grand Restoration and left the church substantially as it is today, although there have been minor alterations and additions.

The history of the church is closely bound with the history of the parish. Sir John Betteshorne, Lord of Chadenwych, and founder of the south chapel, was buried there in 1398 and a fine brass covers his tomb. There is also a brass of his son-in-law Sir John Berkeley which dates to about 1430. The Betteshorne lands extended through Wiltshire, Dorset and Hampshire, and names such as Bitterne and Bisterne are variants of Betteshorne.

There are many interesting features in the church; the fifteenth century Parclose Screen which encloses the chancel, with its fine seating and misericords; the Jacobean pews carved by Walter the joiner of Maiden Bradley, at a cost of £86. 11s. 10d.; the hagioscope in the mullion of the screen; the marble and stone tomb of a fifteenth century Lord Stourton, and an alabaster tablet of the Adoration of the Magi found in a garden below Castle Hill. Within the finely vaulted porch and over the entrance door to the church is a headless figure of the Virgin Mary. Blackbirds regularly build their nest where the head and shoulders should be.

During the 1970's more than £7000 over a period of 8 years had been spent on repair and restoration, though much remained to be done. In 1974 one of the tower pinnacles was shattered by lightning and underwent restoration. Baker records that in 1703 "a pinnacle of the Church at Mere was blown down in the great tempest".

The church is often visited by archaeological societies, and in a publication brought out under the guidance of the Historic Churches Trust it is spoken of as perhaps the finest in the county, exhibiting every aspect of the 14th and 15th century High Gothic of the parish church at its best.

Moving outside to the churchyard you can see a tombstone of a young man who died as the result of the practice of variolation. The inscription reads:- In Memory of Edmund Dolling who Died of ye Small Pox which he designedly took Sept 6 1737 Aged 21 years. Stop Passenger my Fate deplore Take warning by my Toomb And not like me tempt ye Lord lest thou shouldst have my Doom.

The practice of variolation as protection against smallpox was introduced into England from Constantinople in 1717 by Lady Mary Montague, wife of British Ambassador to Turkey. A small incision was made in the arm and a thread soaked in fluid from a smallpox pustule was drawn through it. If lucky the recipient had a very mild localised attack of smallpox, but if not a fatal attack resulted, as in the case of Edward Dolling. A rather hit and miss practice which would undoubtedly favour the physically stronger participants.

It was tried on six condemned prisoners, and when this was successful several members of the Royal Family were inoculated, which increased the popularity of the procedure.

A successful practitioner was Thomas Dinsdale, A Quaker physician, 1712-1800, who inoculated the Empress Catherine of Russia at St. Petersburg. He was paid £10,000 and received a pension of £500 with the rank of Baron.

The practice continued until Dr. Edward Jenner in 1796 discovered that inoculation with cowpox gave immunity to smallpox, leading to the disease virtually wiped out on British soil.