

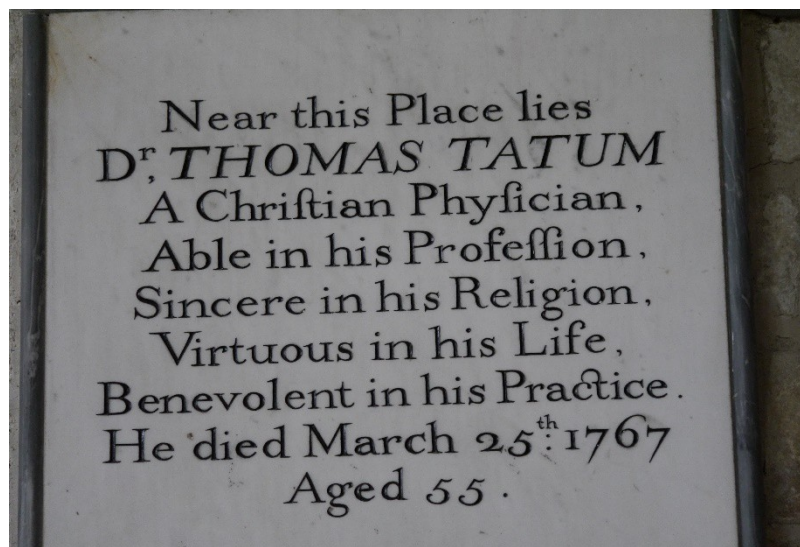
# Article written by Rev. Carol Green

St Michael's Mere: a jewel of a church nestled on the edge of the beautiful Wiltshire downs

In his book *England's Thousand Best Churches* Simon Jenkins describes how the church of St Michael the Archangel in Mere "splendidly marries the two great ages of English church architecture, the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup>" its interior is "a museum of delights". A local councillor George Jeans commends it as "the Notre Dame" of Mere.



Churches need to have this capacity to reflect comfortably their past and be relevant in the present. In the old artefacts we see the piety and devotion of past generations. I love the plaque in the Still chapel which talks about Dr Thomas Tatum.



In the town of Mere today we are still blessed with diligent and skilled doctors, nurses and care staff in the local practice and care homes . Thank you to them and all those who care for others.

Mere was quite prosperous in the medieval period and two chapels were built by wealthy local families: the Still and Bettisthorne (now renamed St Matthew) Chantry Chapels. Priests lived in the nearby Chantry and said daily prayers for the family and community. They were also the welfare services of the day caring for the hungry, sick and needy. It has always been part of a Christian's role to care for those in need as following Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. We tried to do our bit during the recent lockdown when the church was closed for services by using it as a store and distribution point for the Foodbank. Generous local people responded to requests for help with over £3000 in donations and hundreds of food items. Anne Rich has kindly taken on the bigger part of overseeing this – thanks to her, Penny Fennon, Richard Wilson, Mark and Lucy Dunham for all their work.



Looking at an old church today it can be easy to think it landed where it is fully formed. Nothing can be further from the truth. Each generation makes its mark on a building. God is a living being and God's house is a *living* place too. There's been a church in this place from the late 11<sup>th</sup> century and the rough masonry on the inner wall of the tower is probably from then. In 1220 the Dean of Salisbury, who then had overall responsibility, visited and found a building with three altars, a tower and bells but no roof after a particularly bad fire! He summoned the churchwardens and chastised them for not raising the money for repairs and ordered work to commence immediately.

In time the two chapels were linked under one roof and the high altar and chancel started to take shape. I say started because the chancel area is an amalgam of Tudor, Victorian and 20<sup>th</sup> century work. They have come together in the distinctive and beautiful way we now see. Simon Jenkins calls it a "continuous display of craftsmanship." The choir stalls include beautifully engraved 15<sup>th</sup> century misericords. These were the perching stools of their day for monks during long services. Moving into the nave and looking back to the altar there is a beautifully preserved 15<sup>th</sup> century carved oak parclose screen, the Victorians tastefully restored it and added a substantial loft, the crucifix and figures of St Mary and St John were added in 1914 as a memorial to a previous vicar Revd John Lloyd.

The oak pews were made by Walter the Joiner of Maiden Bradley in 1640 and cost £86. 11s. 6d. In the Victorian era they were reduced to under 3' in height but thoughtfully raised onto wooden platforms for warmth. In recent years we have improved comfort still further by covering them all with cushions and installing under pew heating. Looking up and craning your neck you can see the, the carved wooden angels in the ceiling dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, restored over the years. The angels are all performing different activities including playing the lute, the detail is superb and well worth craning your neck to see.

The tower contains some of the oldest parts of the church still standing it is 125ft high. Originally started in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but was part of the general rebuild in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It shows three distinct stages with a moulded plinth, two string courses and octagonal buttresses to support and an embattled parapet prominent pinnacles and four prominent pinnacles. The pinnacles have cruciform finials into which are inserted weather-vanes dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The clock

is 18C and together with the clarion (a kind of xylophone to play tunes on the bells) is lovingly cared for by Mike Durkee and Kit Stallard. The church is blessed with eight bells and the oldest was founded in 1460.

There is so much more I could say about the church the fine pipe organ and its modern digital cousin, the highly unusual King James II Coat of Arms recently renovated and restored to its original colour. The money was raised for this by the Friends of St Michael's church.



I have said that churches are living places which change over the years- sometimes in small ways sometimes in big ones. St Michael's is beginning some new works this autumn to make the building more comfortable and hospitable not solely for our worshippers but for all the community which uses this building for weddings, funerals, Christenings. We are putting in toilets, a small servery, making more space by removing 2 rows of pews, improving the main entrance at the north porch to make the church more open and accessible. The pinnacles I mentioned earlier are also having repair and refurbishment. There has been a long process of consents and consultation to go through and also the fundraising and we are making progress towards the total of around £220,000 . The group is led by Dr Bill Price whose uncle Rev Ben Elliott was vicar here 20+ years ago. We would like to thank various organisations for their grants including Wiltshire Historic Churches, Garfield Weston, Warminster's own Fudge Trust and Mere Town Council on top of this many generous citizens of Mere and nationwide..

Churches are living places, Christianity is a living faith. Jesus' message was for all time but it was also for me and you here and today. Jesus is an historical fact and his life was recorded rather like Winston Churchill or Florence Nightingale only a much longer time ago. His teaching has inspired generations of people and still encourages many people now. Our world is going through a time of much uncertainty from the self-questioning of our environmental policies to the angst of the Corona Virus. Christian teaching is to bring hope even in difficult situations. We were glad to host Mere's Covid snake in the churchyard made up of 100s of painted stones laid along a churchyard path. A symbol of the way our small community pulled together to help one another in many ways: Richard Jefferies helped co-ordinate many local helpers with businesses here doing all they could to serve their public.



This beautiful figure above the font is of “Our Lady great with child” by the sculptress Grete Berlin. Mary was visited by an angel, told she was to have a baby whose dad isn’t her husband to be, she needed to travel in the cold on a donkey to a place without accommodation where she would have her baby. That is all seriously worrying stuff. But here she is quite serene and hopeful holding her hand to her ear as if to listen for God voice of guidance. She is an inspiration for our times.



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