

St. Michael's Church Brent Knoll



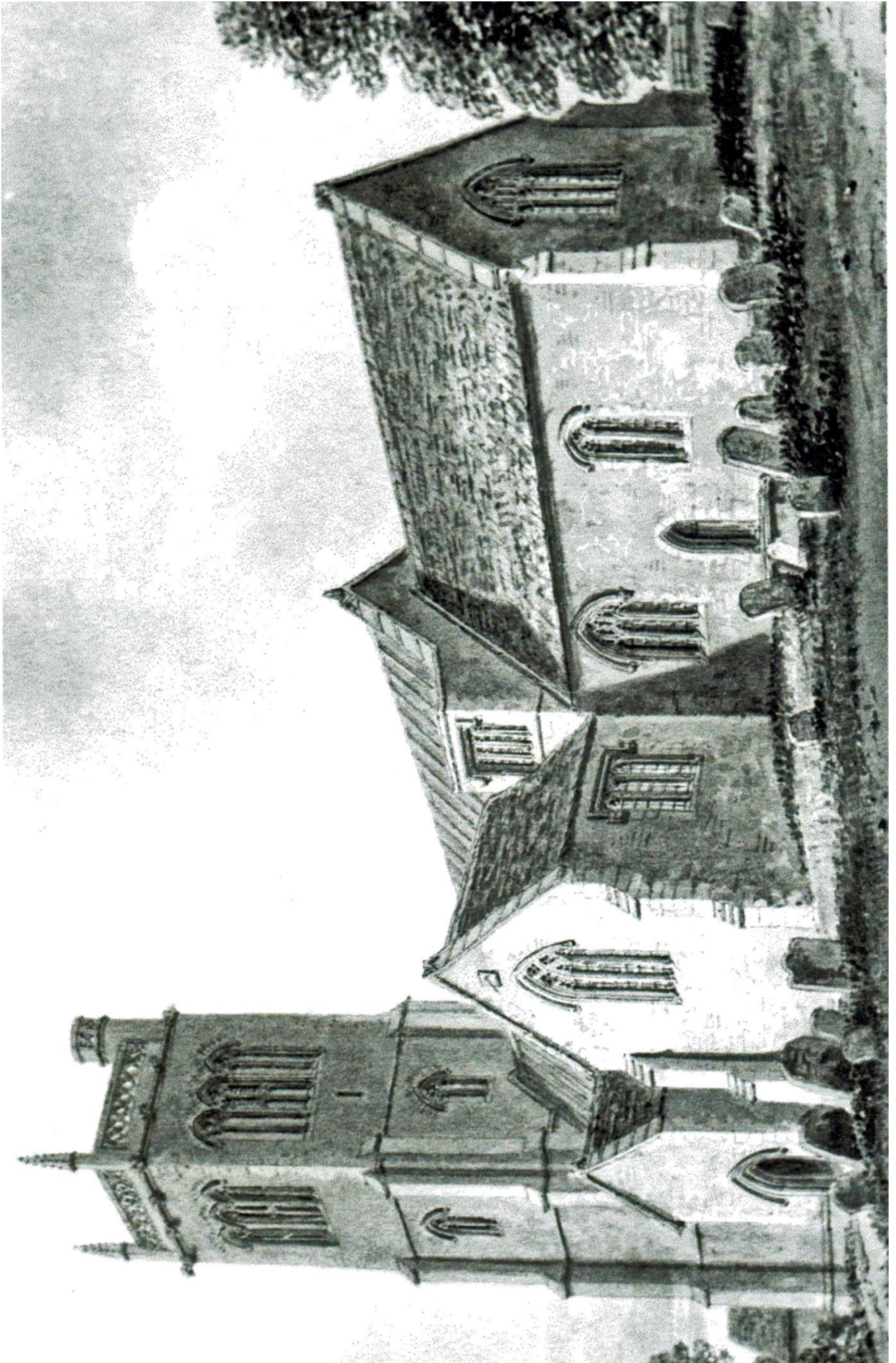
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Cover photograph: St. Michael's church, South Brent (Brent Knoll) by Robert Gillo (c1870)
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Facing picture: St. Michael's church, South Brent (Brent Knoll) drawn by J. Buckler (1831)
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INTRODUCTION

This is a detective story; though not, I hasten to add, a detective story about crimes and criminals. This is a detective story about a community and its church. It is an attempt to piece together the architectural and documentary history of St. Michael's Church, Brent Knoll. That is not a simple thing to do for a number of reasons. In the first place, the Churchwardens records do not go back far enough to be very useful concerning the origins of most aspects of the buildings. Also, it is unfortunate that a large majority of another valued source, Somerset probate records earlier than 1528, have been lost. Consequently, there is very poor documentation during the critical period, from roughly 1350 to 1550, when most of the surviving church was erected. Earlier than 1350 it would, of course, be most unusual to have adequate village documentation. So, we are mainly dependent on architectural and decorative clues until the late eighteenth, or early nineteenth, century. Occasionally, however, these may be supplemented by a careful and balanced assessment of some folkloric traditions, though the origins of such tales can be obscure and their substance considerably distorted.

In his book of the same name, Warwick Rodwell describes what he refers to as "Church Archaeology." The term 'archaeology' conjures images of excavations for the buried remains of bygone eras. So, is such a discipline really relevant to the exploration of evidence concerning standing buildings? In fact, it can be very powerful. Using many of the techniques employed in archaeology can lead us to investigate the way in which differing layers of a building highlight modifications over time.

Digging down into the ground normally means digging down through time. Similar rules hold true for standing buildings, in that lower levels can normally be considered to have been in existence before higher levels. Where changes in style can be seen in these levels it is possible to deduce that former structures are being re-used, or that alterations have been made at a later date, or that building construction has been extended over a considerable period of time. Sometimes changes can also be seen in the horizontal plane. Perhaps a building has been extended, or part has been demolished to make way for new features, or repairs have become necessary. Churches which have existed for any period of time were rarely built as a single entity. When rebuilt, churches were not necessarily recommenced from scratch. Often, therefore, a building contains aspects from many differing periods of architecture, whose stylistic content can help to piece together their history. Continuity was always a major concern, ensuring that the sanctity of the building endured across the centuries.

So, even when a major reconstruction took place it is often possible to find that some aspects of the original fabric have become embedded within the new.

Finding the evidence can often be the difficulty. A coat of limewash or paint can hide clues, or they may be obscured by new construction. As St. Michael's is still in use as a place of worship, it is not possible to employ destructive techniques to verify hypotheses about its origin. However, it is possible to carefully read what does exist and is exposed today and draw some interesting conclusions. That is why my investigations at St. Michael's have given me a lot of pleasure.

Sometimes I may have made errors due to my ignorance of ecclesiastical history. My interpretations may be wrong, or I may have misread some of the clues. Research from documentary evidence is but an interpretation and some of the facts still lie unearthed. There are many reasons why this book may not be a definitive history of St. Michael's church. Unlike a detective novel, there is often no single 'answer' to the history of a church. Like a real-life detective story, it is normal for there to be continuing doubt about the results and new evidence may still cast doubt on my conclusions. Still, I do hope this book will provide some additional material evidence and some reasonable deductions and can add a little something of value to future historians, enabling them to build on what I have discovered.

In this second edition some errors have been corrected and, where additional evidence has been forthcoming, some discussion has been extended, updated or modified.

There are a number of sources which I have used extensively. They offer both expertise and a point-in-time record which can elucidate certain changes which have been made subsequently. The principal sources are as follows, starting with the identification I have used for each throughout my text:

Collinson/Rack – The Rev. Collinson published his "History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset" in 1789. Originally it was intended as a collaboration with Edmund Rack, but, on Rack's death prior to publication, Collinson edited Rack's contributions, sometimes rather dramatically. This has been ascertained recently due to the rediscovery of Rack's notes, which have now been edited and published by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (SANHS) (ISBN 978 0 902152 22 9, dated MMXI). It was edited by Mark McDermott and Sue Berry and I am grateful to the former who originally brought the notes to my attention prior to their publication. This volume is undoubtedly a major event for Somerset historians as it contains valuable information excluded by Collinson. The quotations shown here are normally taken from Rack's notes, even though, in some cases, they are identical to Collinson's published work. When Collinson's alterations are used, they are explicitly noted.

Glynne – The Somerset Record Society's book, "Church Notes for Somerset," gathers together that part of Sir Stephen Glynne's records which is pertinent to the county. He spent a lifetime recording churches throughout the length and breadth of the country. His opening remarks on St. Michael's are that it is "*a handsome church in a pretty situation.*" Although numerous changes have occurred in more than a century and a half since he wrote those words (21st May 1855), the essence of what he said undoubtedly still holds true and, hopefully, will continue to do so for a long time to come.

Robinson – W. J. Robinson published a collection of pieces on "West Country Churches" in 1914. They were re-printed from a series which he ran in a Bristol-based newspaper. Volume 1 contains an article on Brent Knoll.

Wickham – In 1949 A. K. Wickham produced "St. Michael's Church South Brent – An account of the Parish Church of Brent Knoll, Somerset." He had previously produced a book entitled "Churches of Somerset," looking at various aspects of church history, monuments and brasses throughout his beloved Somerset. Though he became a teacher at Eton College (where he founded the Eton College Archaeological Society), he was reared in Martock and East Brent, in both of which his father had been the vicar. So, the area around Brent Knoll was one he knew intimately.

Pevsner – One of the classic works on British architecture is the monumental series by Nikolaus Pevsner on “The Buildings of England.” This should need little introduction from me, but I have discovered recently that many people do not know the work. Brent Knoll appears in the volume formerly entitled “South and West Somerset,” which has recently been revised and considerably expanded by Julian Orbach and is now known as “Somerset: South and West.”

In all other cases where quotations or references have been used the name of the author and the title of the work involved are mentioned in full. Both these and the aforementioned authors works are listed in more detail in the Bibliography at the rear of this book.

Two major general reference works have proven invaluable. **Stephen Friar**’s “A Companion to the English Parish Church” contains a wealth of useful information and “Inside Churches – A Guide to Church Furnishings” published by the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS), now known as The Arts Society, is full of detail compiled from the experience of others who have done similar research.

Much of the work that I have done also owes a great deal to various people. **David Bolland** started me on the quest and kindly gave me all the material he had gathered. **Warwick Rodwell** was very generous with his lunchtime at a SANHS Symposium in 1999 and his books have proven most valuable. **John H. Harvey**’s splendid works on the Somerset Perpendicular have been invaluable. More recently I have had the opportunity to listen to, and discuss with, **Jerry Sampson** regarding many features of early churches. His knowledge of the subject is encyclopaedic. **David Bromwich**, then at the Somerset Studies Library, has, as always, been most helpful in offering suggestions, information and additional source material. The staff at the **Somerset Heritage Centre** (previously known as the **Somerset Record Office**) are always kind and helpful, whatever the request. Many local people have provided important clues and have listened with admirable patience as I hold forth on my latest discovery. Finally, I must say a very big thank-you to **Bruce Wingate**, who produced such a wonderful set of pictures to accompany my text.

What Glynne omitted to say, probably because he only spent a fairly short time here, is that St. Michael’s Church in Brent Knoll is not only aesthetically pleasing, but can also be intellectually stimulating. It has many fascinating tales to unfurl, though they do not always reveal their derivation very easily. It has been a lot of fun putting these ideas together and I do hope that you will be able to get some small pleasure from them as well. Even more importantly, I hope you will go and look with, perhaps, fresh eyes at the treasures which exist in this building, which has played such a major role in the history of Brent Knoll village.