

THE NAVE

In his notes on Somerset churches, Collinson/Rack stated that St. Michael's Church was 134 feet long (40.8432m) and 36 feet wide (10.9728m). By far the largest structural part of this is the nave. Yet, surprisingly, it has only one extended wall surface. On three sides it is, respectively, open to the chancel, arcaded to the north aisle and screened from the base of the tower. Even on the south side there is a large slice missing, comprising the doorway and decorated surround of the entrance to the vestry.

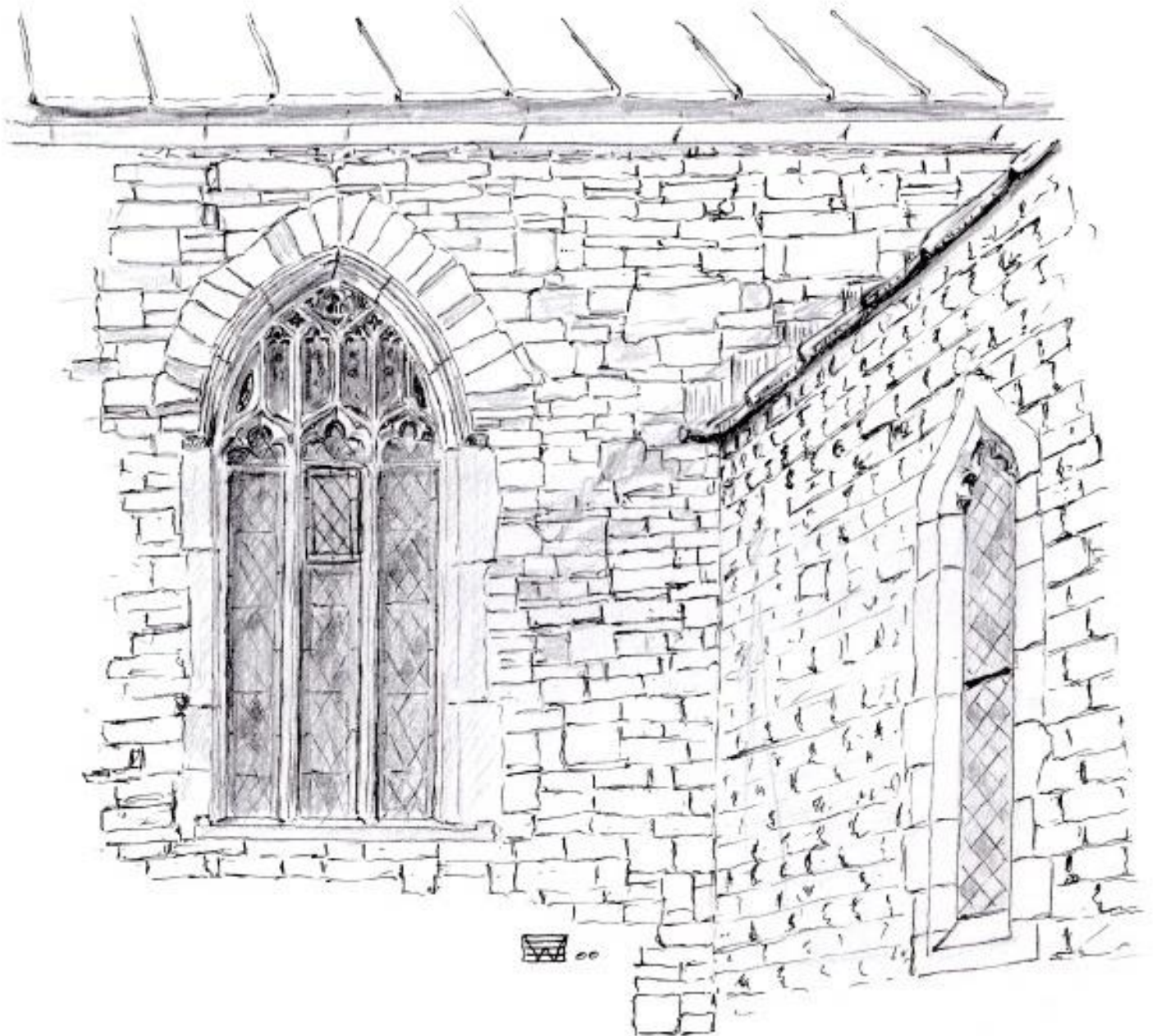
The remaining area on that side, however, is a wall which can be conveniently divided into two major halves. Viewed from the exterior, on the path leading to the south door, there is an area between the porch and the tower, with a single window, which I shall refer to as the west sector. On the opposite side of the porch another area, referred to as the east sector, also has just one window. Both windows are from the Perpendicular period with trefoil cusps. Glynne reports them as being "*fewer and further between*" than those in the north aisle, though they also are "*of good Perpendicular character and of 3 lights.*"

From our viewpoint, on the path leading up to the porch, look closely at the east and west sectors of the nave wall. Note the shape and style of the stonework involved in their construction. To the west most of it is aligned in fairly well-defined coursing. To the east the opposite is true; it is very uneven, with no attempt to find equal sized stones, or to cut them to shape. This coarse stonework is known as rubble. Now, if they were building the whole of the nave at the same time, you would reasonably expect to find consistency in the construction method used. The fact that this is not consistent would suggest that the walls are not coeval. This probably means that the east sector re-uses a formerly existing wall, whilst the west sector is a later extension or a complete rebuild.

Both sides, however, have places where the stones are of a differing colour and type. This makes it obvious, for instance, that the two layers of these walls were re-built when the roof was re-leaded in the nineteenth century. Note, however, that this topping up was not continued all the way across the porch, where, on both the east and the west sides, a straight-line vertical joint in the masonry shows the perimeter of the alterations. The reason for this is discussed in the chapter on the South Porch. Additionally, though less obviously of differing texture, the stonework by the tower clearly demonstrates that it was modified in the vertical plane

when the tower itself was built. Probably this was to ensure that the new structure was keyed firmly into the existing nave.

The stone used in St. Michael's is all limestone of various types. Recent investigation of the stonework by Doug Robinson, past Professor of Geology at Bristol University, has identified Blue Lias and Doulling as the prime types. The nearest quarry producing Blue Lias appears to be near Street. Although this source is not verified, it does appear likely, as the Abbot of Glastonbury built a canal in the tenth century to link his abbey with the River Brue, probably to transport building stone for the abbey. It is known to have been in use in the fourteenth century, but may also have been there as late as the mid-sixteenth century. It would certainly have been useful for transporting stone in this direction as well.

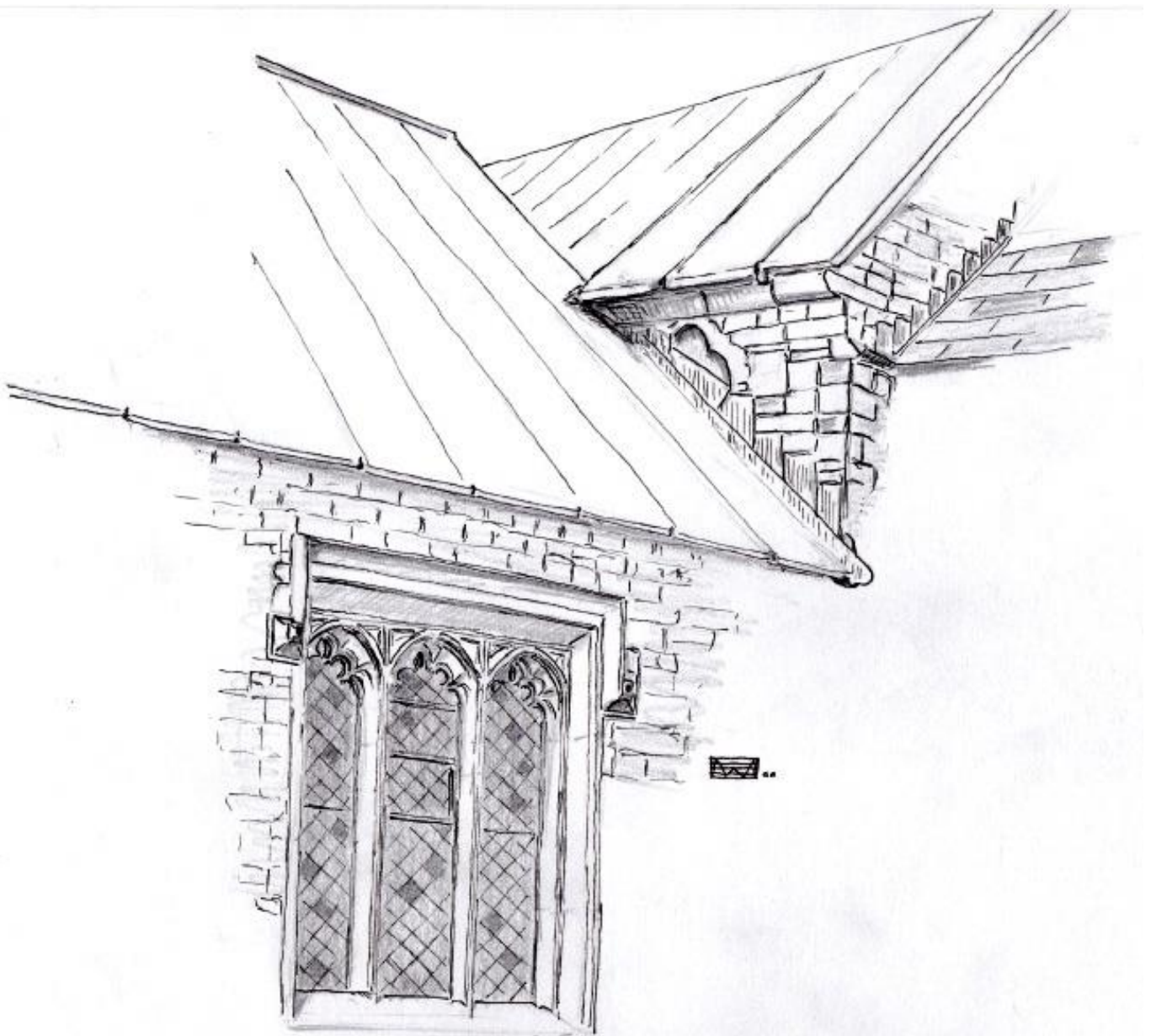


Observe the east sector window. It is notably higher in the wall than the corresponding west sector window, though both windows have identical internal dimensions. Even though the ground slopes downwards from east to west (as does the floor inside), the east window measures around 40cms higher from ground to sill (over 50cms higher from floor to sill inside) than the west window. Presumably there must be a reason for this.

Beneath the east sector window are three bands of narrow elongated masonry, with in-fill between the rows. On both the right side and the left side there is a line which is roughly vertical. This strongly indicates that some infill has been inserted, raising the level of this window from its original position.

There is another notable difference between these two windows internally. The east one is built into a recess, which continues down to floor level. The west sector window is also recessed, but here terminates in a shelf, roughly at head height. Curiously the wall on the east side of this bay has a slight lip of about four or five centimetres, to correct its alignment, whilst that to the west side is flat. Does this signify that the masons, extending the wall when they built the tower, made a slight alignment error? Or has it to do with the fact that the original door to the parvise (discussed in the chapter relating to the Porch) was possibly built into the outside corner at the eastern side of this window?

Clearly the east sector window has been raised at some time to permit something to stand beneath it. Any evidence on the inside has, long ago, been obscured by coats of paint, but the fact that the interior recess is fairly narrow suggests it may have been a statue of some description (the likely alternative, that it was a monument, would, perhaps, require more space). Whatever it was, it must have been of some importance to warrant the extra cost involved.



Support for the nave walls is mainly provided by extensions of one sort or another, so few buttresses are needed. There are two in the west sector and another occupies the north east corner, next to where the stair

turret for the former rood screen was squeezed between it and the north aisle. All are typical of the Perpendicular period. With two stages and sloped offsets at both stages.

Outside a curious fragment of blind window appears to be blocked by the vestry roof at its north east end. Initially it appears to be a light for the former rood screen, comprising a piece of sawn-off trefoil-cusp tracery, obscured by the lead flashing. It is just noticeable on a photograph taken around 1870 by Robert Gilo (see front cover), but is not there on a drawing by Buckler dated 1831 (see frontispiece). As Buckler was an architect, his drawings were normally considered very accurate and what he does show is something much more substantial. His nave wall rises to form an oriole containing a complete window, similar, though smaller, too that which can still be seen in the east wall of the vestry. Is the current window fragment intended to be a reminder of the former rood screen window? Or is it a remnant from a window existing prior to the Tudor period? All indications certainly point to a major reconstruction around the front of the chancel in the early Tudor period. Buckler's picture shows a typical window of this period, contemporary with the reworked chancel arch and the rood stair. Was a new screen inserted immediately prior to the Reformation? A new window and a new stair do seem to indicate so.

Regarding the roof of the nave, Glynne commented that, "*the south side is plainer [than the non-show north side] and without parapet.*" This probably reflects the later date of the north aisle and, possibly, the greater wealth of its patron. He also noted that, "*the nave has a lead roof,*" as it still does today.



Above the nave is a wagon roof. "*It's boarding,*" Wickham stated in 1949, "*is recent.*" On the third of November 1877 the Weston-super-Mare Gazette announced that, "*The restoration of the nave roof of the parish church is now completed,*



and presents a pleasing and effective appearance. The old plaster panels have been removed and substituted for oak. The roof timbers, which were in a very defective state have been thoroughly strengthened, and the old lead recast and re-laid. Mr. E. Christian, of London, was the architect, and the work has been entrusted to Messrs. Merrick and Son, of Glastonbury. It is a fact most credible to the Vicar and to his parishioners that all the money required for the execution of the work, between £500 and £600, has been raised in the parish."

On the south side the roof is supported by a fine set of fourteen corbels, though the building of the arcade presumably necessitated the removal of those formerly on the north side. Notably, there is a detached corbel,

found in the church, which is most likely to be from those which were removed when the Arcade was built as none of the south aisle corbels are missing. Another head, however, is rather smaller than any of the extant corbels and has a different base setting, which suggests that it was decorative, rather than a roof support. Originally all of the corbels would have been colourfully decorated, but now they are a very plain white and, consequently, difficult to appreciate properly. They are, however, worth a closer look, representing, as they do, a fine set of late medieval characters. Kings, bishops, nuns and abbots gaze down, intermingled with wealthy merchants and what I take to be their wives or daughters. The merchants and their families may well comprise the local gentry. Some figures have beards. Some have hats, some are partially veiled and some display hairstyles fashionable at the time.

One of the most endearing figures is the penultimate one at the western end. A king with a forked beard has two hands rising from the back of his neck to grasp the crown which is upon his head. Are they his hands? If so, he appears rather insecure, maybe fearing he will lose it. Or could it be someone else attempting to steal his crown? Normally a king of this period with a forked beard is assumed to be Richard II, as forked beards became fashionable during his reign following his adoption of the style. He certainly did have his crown stolen.



If this is indeed Richard II, could the other king shown (the eighth corbel from the east end), sporting a much more prominent crown, be Henry IV? This would place the carving of the corbels to the very last year of the fourteenth century (1399); a date which ties in well with the visible styles of hair-dressing and head-dresses shown.

Another feature appearing alongside them is often overlooked. It is a wall plate embellished with a row of square-shaped flowers, with alternate plates painted red. The cornice is embattled.

Observing the bosses which adorn the central roof is even more difficult. They are square and mainly foliate-designed wood carvings, stained to the same colour as the roof behind them. A few have geometric tracery or, even more rare, human and animal heads. One appears to be a fairly traditional type of Green Man. He has the usual foliage emanating from his mouth, but the greenery continues in a serpentine fashion, intertwining around the surface of the boss. Either side of him there are other faces peering from structures that look rather like a tree trunk. On the southern side is another variation of the same Green Man theme, this time with the foliage arising as a continuation of his beard. The northern side Green Man has a discontinuity between his head and the foliage, as that arises from the trunk above his head through which he is peering. The nearest example I have seen to these two are some “*Column Figures*” described in “*Grotesques and Gargoyles*” by Sheridan and Ross. Faces “*peer mask-like out through the spirals of the column, like a face from the folds of a shroud,*” they comment. They suggest that the figures resemble those from a Celto-Ligurain sanctuary in third century France. Another suggestion is that they are adaptations of Jack o’ the Green, or something similar, with Celtic designs woven in.

Another unusual boss depicts an animal displaying a rather vicious mouthful of teeth. Exactly what that is intended to represent is unclear currently, as depictions of devils and such like would not normally be seen within the sanctified space. All the bosses, however, appear to be well carved. Wickham obviously agreed,

but stated that “*some of the finely carved bosses were renewed later.*” Collinson/Rack mentions an interesting point when he states, “*The Nave roof is 32 feet high and decorated with gilded ornaments.*” This gilding would greatly enhance the bosses but appears to have been lost under layers of varnish sometime within the last couple of hundred years, probably by the Victorians. This is a great shame as, with suitable restoration, they could possibly vie with the panels in the north aisle as superb examples of medieval carpentry.

Collinson/Rack also commented that, “*In the Center (sic) of the Nave is a handsome brass Chandelier.*” Originally the church would have been lit by candles and/or oil lamps. Gas was introduced in the nineteenth century and electricity towards the start of the twentieth century. That handsome brass chandelier has probably gone the same way as the candles and oil lamps, but remnants of the gas lighting can still be seen on the backs of some of the pews and benches. A circular hole in the shelf is surmounted by clear signs of bracket attachments used to secure the gas standard. At least two can be seen in the front half of the central benches (one is on the front bench) and there is another at the rear. Pews on the south side of the nave have one at the front and one at the rear, but only one remains in the north aisle, due to changes made when the Baptistry was created.

An old postcard of the interior of St. Michael’s shows there were three lamp standards amongst the front benches and two within the front portion of the southern pews. A further standard graced the rear section. Each has a four-way branch at the top, where gas mantles would have diffused their light.

Gas was introduced in 1907, when a meeting of the Churchwardens proposed, “*Church to be lit with Acetylene Gas as per estimate by Mr. Bryan, Agent to the Rosco Co., on Mr. Bryan’s promising to allow 5% for cash in 3 months, provided that the Vicar receive satisfactory recommendations as to the lighting at N. Petherton.*” It lasted for only twenty years or so, as it was superseded by electricity in 1928/9.

The benchends, one of the best loved features of this church, are not discussed here as they are important enough to have two exclusive chapters of their own. Most are discussed in the first of these chapters (see the “Benchends” section), but the Fox and Geese trilogy of benchends are of sufficient interest to have a specific chapter devoted to them, along with an additional benchend whose relationship to this trilogy is, I believe, significant, but which has been previously overlooked (see the “The Fox and Geese Benchends” section). Similarly, a list of rectors of the parish, currently pinned to a pillar of the arcade, at the northern end of the cross passage, is transcribed in “Vicars of St. Michael’s.”

Collinson/Rack also mention a “*Black frame on the south wall.*” As that has now been moved to the Tower, it will be referenced in the chapter on that topic; however, the outline of its original position can still be seen through the paint which covers the wall between the south door and the window at the west end.

Above the entrance to the vestry there is a framed Royal Coat of Arms, which dates from the restoration of Charles II. He ordered the Royal Coat of Arms to be placed in every church in the country to demonstrate the end of the Commonwealth, which had removed all vestiges of the royal presence from their own coat of arms, retaining only the cross of St. George (for England) and the harp (for Ireland) initially, but later adding the cross of St. Andrew (for Scotland). Charles II re-introduced the arms used by James I and his father, Charles I, which had eliminated the Dragon of Wales, used as a supporter by the Tudors, and replaced it with the Unicorn of Scotland as shown here and as is still in use today. Whilst James II and Queen Anne also used the same version of the coat of arms as that used by Charles II, this particular coat of arms is almost certainly that ordered by Charles II at his restoration.

Although it is of a standard pattern, the pulpit is dated to 1637 and was described by Nikolas Pevsner as “*Quite richly carved, with the familiar short blank arches in two tiers. Fluted Ionic angle pilasters.*” The lectern, however, appears to be relatively modern, having apparently been replaced at fairly frequent intervals. There is no mention of one in Collinson/Rack and the first reference I have found is as late as 1889, when Kelly’s Directories referred to, “*a modern lectern of wood panelled.*” By 1902, in the same source, it became, “*a modern brass lectern,*” and that was replaced by a wooden lectern once more, dedicated to F. A. Chubb, Lay

Reader 1921 – 1947. It was presented in 1949, as attested at one end, with the final nine of the date encapsulating the four. At the other end the initials D. G. are displayed. The current lectern was purchased from a bequest, given in 2014, by David Bolland, a former tea plantation manager from Malabar in India, who was brought up in Brent Knoll and retired back to the village. It was purchased in 2016, along with a portable altar, also financed from the same bequest, and is a more substantial structure with some shelf space on its interior and an inset microphone facility.

Like most churches there are numerous memorials displayed in the church, in addition to the lectern. The most conspicuous is that of John Somerset, which covers a large area of the nave wall to the eastern side of the south door. However, this may not have been its original position, as Collinson/Rack states that it was “*On the north side of the aisle* (sic),” though, due to its significance, this is another item which has a chapter to itself later in this book (See “Somerset Monument”).

Amongst the other memorials, one of the most prominent is at the west end of the south wall. It comprises a tablet commemorating the Revd. Joseph Ditcher, “*for thirty-four years the loved and revered Vicar of this Parish.*” It is, perhaps, the misfortune of the Revd. Joseph Ditcher to be remembered principally for a single unfortunate incident in his life. Even the obituaries of his successor, who was vicar for twenty-one years, refer back to the Revd. Ditcher as “*best known as the antagonist of the late Archdeacon of Taunton in the great suit of Ditcher vs Denison.*”

Archdeacon Denison was vicar of East Brent and Archdeacon of Taunton. His father was an M.P. and various other members of his family were peers, baronets and, in the case of his eldest brother, Speaker of the House of Commons. Whereas South Brent never paid more than £690 to the Revd. Ditcher in any one year, East Brent was a living worth £1,000 p.a. Its incumbent had been at Oxford with the leaders of the Oxford Movement, so he knew Keble, Pusey and Newman, as well as Gladstone and Lord John Russell. He was a prodigious letter writer and for most of his time at East Brent he was at the centre of one controversy after another. First it was government support for schooling, which he believed should be without strings and exclusively under the control of the Anglican Church. Then it was the introduction of surplices, services and other High Church rituals and practices. Sometimes it was a little more prosaic, as when he extolled the virtues of local produced Cheddar Cheese, as opposed to that imported from the USA. But it was his preaching of sermons at Wells, promoting the doctrine of the Real Presence, which triggered the national confrontation with Ditcher. His position was considered Papist and, consequently, against the principals of the Church of England.

The action brought against George Anthony Denison by Joseph Ditcher could have cost Denison his job, had it succeeded. As it was the process of ecclesiastical law ground so slow that the case was eventually dismissed, as it had overrun the time allocated for actions of its kind. The fact that Denison was not actually acquitted proved unimportant to his parishioners, who escorted him home in triumph from Highbridge railway station. What followed is rarely mentioned, unfortunately, as it casts a rather different light on the supposed vendetta. In fact, it speaks highly of the attitudes of both the antagonists.

On reaching home Denison sent his servant to Ditcher, asking whether he would be willing to resume their old friendly relationship. “*I received a kind answer of full accord, but adding that it was right I should be told that a history of proceedings in the case would shortly be in the publisher’s hands.*” This would not have worried Denison for he was a prolific publisher of his own views and escapades in so many controversies and was normally quick to publish. Maybe Ditcher felt he should try to get in first in this case. Anyway, the response of Denison was, “*Upon this I said to my wife, ‘We will go to-day; perhaps, if we wait, it might not be quite so easy.’ We went and were kindly received.*” Subsequently, when Denison became ill, Ditcher was most concerned and attentive and, when Ditcher died, Denison was asked by his widow to preach the sermon on the Sunday after his funeral. Denison, it appears, did not really blame Ditcher for the action he took, believing it was his patron, the Archdeacon of Wells, who had forced Ditcher to instigate proceedings. Unfortunately, it is too often the dispute between them that is remembered and rarely the magnanimity shown

by both on the resumption of their friendship following the end of the acrimony. At the time both were highly regarded within their respective parishes (as demonstrated by the memorial to Ditcher) and this story certainly demonstrates why.

A picture of the interior of St. Michael's, in the National Monument Record, clearly shows Ditcher's memorial, with a curtain hanging beneath it, not where it resides today, but at the east end of the North Aisle, just around the corner from his wife's memorial, which still remains in that place today. Why the vicar's memorial was moved from that position I have so far been unable to discover, but it is only one of many such apparently arbitrary interior re-alignments.

On the south wall a multiple family memorial records the following:

*In memory of **MARY ANNE**, wife of James Warren Esquire, of London, who died March 31st 1820. And of Susannah, his second wife, who died June 30th 1842. Also of **WILLIAM JAMES**, son of the above James Warren and Mary Anne, his wife, who died Jan^{ry} 10th 1845. And of **HAMILTON CHARLES**, son of the above James Warren and Susannah, his wife, who died Feb^{ry} 18th 1847. AND ALSO OF THE ABOVE NAMED **JAMES WARREN**, who died Sept^r 9th 1883 in his 92nd YEAR.*

Above this is an urn draped with cloth and below is a wreath, with a scroll to both sides, relating on the Left "*THY WILL*" and to the right "*BE DONE.*" Little is currently known about this family other than the likely fact that both wives possibly died in child birth. James Warren is listed in the 1841 census as living in Clifton, Bristol, with his second wife, Susannah, who, it states, was born in 1805. As the 1841 census had a tendency to attribute a person's age to a rounded figure, that may not be entirely accurate, but does suggest that she was only around thirty-seven years old when she died and that Hamilton was around ten years old at the time. James birth year is given as 1796, which does not quite accord with his claim to be ninety-two years old when he died in 1883. Unfortunately, there is no indication in that census of his occupation.

There are also a number of gravestones set in the floor of the north and south aisles. Rack mentions some which are now less easy to distinguish:

"In an old stone in the Middle Passage is inscribed: Here lyeth the body of Walter Alrod. Who was buried the 5th January 1633. This gentleman gave a crimson velvet Pulpit Cloth with Gold fringes & Tassels to this church"

"In the North Ayle: Tho^s Simmons Gent of South Brent. Died the 9 & was buried the 18 of Dec 1773"

"Underneath this stone lyeth the body of Robt Champion of this Parish Yeoman, who died Dec 12 1748 Aged 35 years."

"My loving wife & children dear

I bid you all adieu

Deaths Vanoleum Messenger

Hath called me Hence from you

J Dyer &c

Immodius brevis Aelas Etrasi Senectus" (Old age was too short)

Currently there are a number of memorial stones embedded in the floor of the nave, though most are unreadable, However, at the top of the central aisle is one which is legible. It contains the following information:

"HERE lieth the body of Henry Hody Junr who died June 7th 1713 aged 97 years

Also here lieth the body of John Hody who died August 17th 1738 aged 40 years

And the body of Elisabeth Wife of y^e under [named/mentioned?] Thomas Busby who died Nov. 1st 1766

At the Head of this Memorial Stone was buried Jan^y

y^e 20th 1749

THOMAS BUSBY

Presbyter of the Established Church Aged 66 years

Also here lieth the Body of Mary the Daughter of Isaac and Ebe Phelps who died July y^e 15th 1761 aged 14 months

And also of Thomas their Son who died January y^e 6th 1763 aged 6 months

And Mary their Daughter who died October ?th 1766 Aged 5 months”

At the south end of the cross passage a low screen is mounted on the top of the last pew, presumably as a protection against draughts from the adjacent door. In 1897 the Churchwardens Accounts show an entry which orders that a “*Curtain one foot high be erected at the back pew by the door.*” More recently a screen was added and there is a small memorial to its dedicatee, which reads: “*This screen was given in Memory of Margaret Proctor 1877 – 1962. Requiescat in pace.*”