

being reopened for worship on Easter Day. Since 1888 it had been virtually disused, being used only for burials. The finely-carved finials on the eastern ends of the choir stalls – one depicting St Michael slaying the serpent (cover), two angels and a tall poppy-head – are probably also ancient but were partly recut by John Wood, rector 1812–70.

The font is of the 12th century. The decoration includes interlacing arches at the top, bands of diapering in the middle, and below an interwoven chevron pattern. Pevsner describes the pattern as ‘undisciplined’ but its irregular shape has a definite charm.

The Roman altar, referred to above, has been partly cut back to form a stoup or receptacle for holy water. Its base was found amongst a heap of rubbish by the rector, the Revd John Webb, and the upper part in a cottage in the village, where it was being used by a doctor to prepare herbal medicines. The two halves were reunited and replaced in the church in 1908. When used as a stoup, it would probably have been located in the south porch or by the south door. By the west wall is part of a 14th-century coffin lid, with an enriched circular head and two rosettes flanking the stem. The most striking relic of earlier times is the partially effaced wall painting. This was discovered during the repairs in 1909: on the east and south walls it is 13th-century work, including masonry lines and borders with

chevron design, consecration crosses beside the altar and foliar motifs. On the north wall the early work has been painted over in the 16th or 17th century in ‘black letter’ with ‘profitable texts’ including the Commandments. Much retouching has doubtless been necessary but the original message still impresses.

In the churchyard one prominent feature apart from the pond is the railed enclosure containing tombs of the Fisher family, who lived at Michaelchurch Court, just down the valley, from the mid-18th to the 20th centuries.

A declining population and the need for extensive and costly repairs led to St Michael’s being declared redundant and vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in 1973. Since then the Trust has carried out a continuing programme of repairs under the direction of Mr PM Bartosch, ARIBA, of Cheltenham.

The registers of Tretire with Michaelchurch date from 1586 and are deposited in the Diocesan Record Office in Hereford.

Bibliography

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Church of St Michael the Archangel

Michaelchurch,
Herefordshire



Church of St Michael the Archangel

by Colin Flood Page

Even before the modern spate of amalgamations Michaelchurch was never a parish on its own, but from the earliest records has been united with Tretire, a mile (1.6 km) to the south. Today it seems a little forlorn, tucked almost out of sight in the tiny valley of the Garren Brook, but it is unlikely it was always thus. It is probably only in the last 400 years, since the Reformation, that Tretire has been more important and Michaelchurch merely a subsidiary chapel. In the first place there is the matter of names. Tretire is simply geographical and comes from two Welsh words meaning 'long ford', while Michaelchurch is emphatically ecclesiastical. The awkward sloping site, the man-made pond in the churchyard, together



with the known habits of Celtic saints, invite speculation that there may have been a religious centre of some note here long before the 11th century. Accordingly when Bishop Herwald of Llandaff dedicated his new church to St Michael (reputedly in 1056) he was anxious to take advantage of local tradition – perhaps also to supplant with his episcopal authority the still living traces of old Celtic rites which Rome might yet frown on. As time passed and the earlier associations were forgotten, the disadvantages of the site and the sparse population may have tipped the balance towards Tretire and led to the comparative neglect of Michaelchurch.

The parish is situated in that part of Herefordshire formerly known as Archenfeld or Archenfield, an area where the Welsh language and customs lingered on stubbornly until the early years of the 20th century. The local people would have called the place Llanvihangel; in 1150 it was called Lann Michacgel cil luch ('cil luch' is Welsh and means 'retreat by the pool', perhaps referring to the pond in the churchyard). Finally there is the evidence of the Roman altar still occupying the blocked doorway on the north side of the nave. The inscription reads 'DEO TRI [VII] BECCICUS DONAVIT ARA [M]'. This means that Beccicus dedicated the altar to the god of the crossroads or, to interpret the words more generally, 'to the

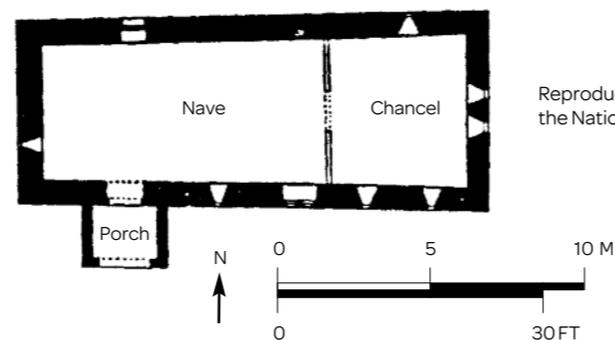
Left below: Exterior from the north-west

god of a well-used public place'. There is no trace of an important crossroads near the site, so the latter version may be more accurate. Beccicus is not a classical Roman name but presumably a latinised form of a British one. The evidence is flimsy but points towards the notion of a sacred place of great antiquity. Some visitors may even feel that something redolent of that ancient spirit remains today.

Tretire church was entirely rebuilt in 1856 but Michaelchurch was spared a similar fate, and so retains several older features that add to its attraction. The church, which consists of a continuous chancel and nave, is built of the local rough 'Devonian' sandstone – not first-class building material but easily available. The roof, which was apparently reconstructed about 1720, is covered with heavy local stone slates; these

were replaced with machine-made tiles in the 1950s but reinstated in 1976. The side walls are not perpendicular inside but are canted outward more than a foot (0.3 m) between the floor and eaves. This is fairly certainly part of the original design, as the roof fits the greater width at the top of the walls. There has been concern in the past about bulging and cracking, but on the whole the structure has stood up well.

The north and west walls date from the period of the Norman construction in the late 11th or early 12th century, but a major rebuilding was carried out in the 13th century and intermittent alteration and minor reconstruction has gone on ever since. Most of the windows date from the 13th century, except for three: the eastern one on the south side of the nave which is late 14th century; the one behind the Roman altar,



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Interior looking west

which was probably given its present form during repairs in 1909 though it incorporates part of a 12th-century decorated tympanum; and the narrow loop-light high up in the west wall. This last may well be the only surviving example of the original Norman windows. The south doorway and door are 14th century, while the porch dates from the 17th century. The bell turret over the west gable is said to have been built or rebuilt about 1720; it contains two bells: neither is inscribed, but their shapes suggest that the smaller one is 15th century and the larger one 17th. They are hung for chiming.

Much of the woodwork is difficult to date with any precision. Some may be medieval and some 17th century, but no one object from these times has survived intact. Much has been incorporated in later work, for example in the screen and pulpit which both include 16th- and 17th-century woodwork. The panelling in the chancel is also probably 17th century. The boarded tie beam above the screen appears to be an early feature and has faint traces of painting in a conventional foliage pattern. The pews probably date from the last major refurbishment which took place at a cost of £150 in 1909, the church

