

*North-west view of Thornton Church in 1801*



# THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

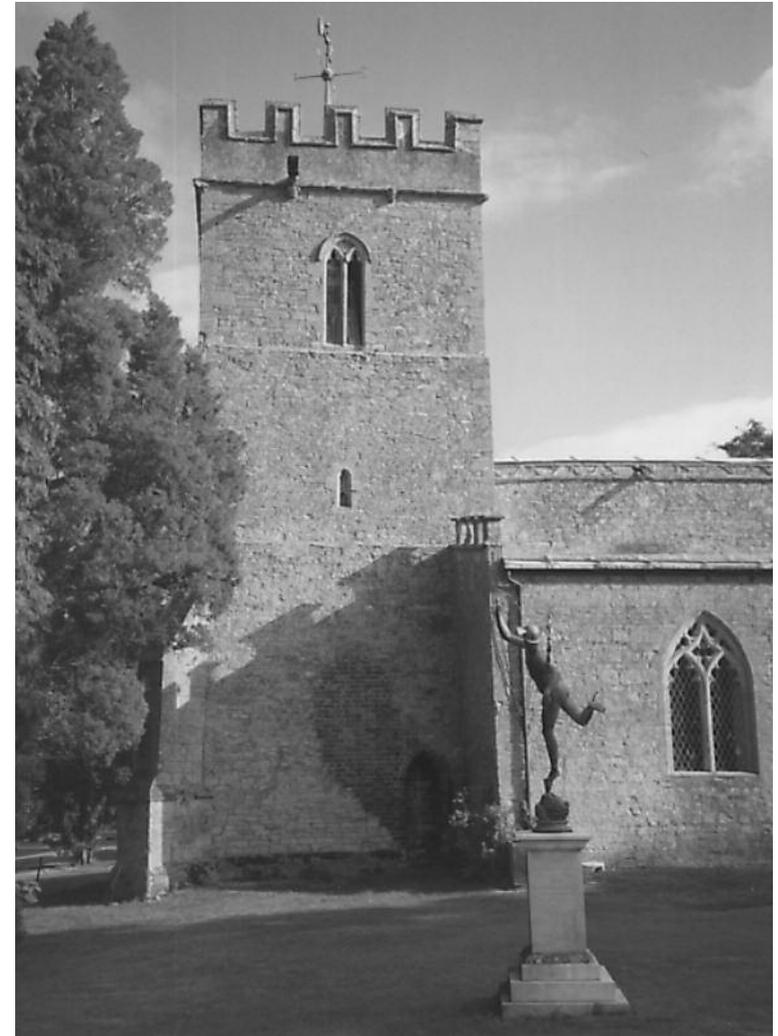
THORNTON  
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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THORNTON, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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## THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

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THORNTON, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

by ROY TRICKER

THE CHURCH OF St Michael and All Angels, Thornton, stands in a green and sequestered parkland setting. From its west doorway one can look down from a slight rise to the neo-Tudor walls of Thornton College (formerly Thornton Hall), the front door of which is some 50 yards away. The churchyard is surrounded on all sides by the park, with a shallow ditch and a few iron markers indicating its boundary. A short distance away is the River Ouse, where Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, and also the dioceses of Oxford and Peterborough, meet. Within about two miles are four other Anglican churches, including G. E. Street's (1862) church of All Saints at Nash, which is now the parish church for the few inhabitants of this tiny and scattered community. Thornton is 'the village where the thorn-bushes grew'; its parish was roughly in the shape of an equilateral triangle with its apex to the north, the church and manor house being situated at one end, near the north-west boundary.

Although no longer a parish church, St Michael's continues its ministry as a sacred and beautiful building, made holy by 700 years of prayer and care. It was considered to be of such value and interest that it was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in July 1993, to be preserved by and for the Church and the Nation. Since then a programme of repairs has been carried out (and some interesting discoveries have been made) under the direction of the appointed Architect, Mr Ian Stewart.

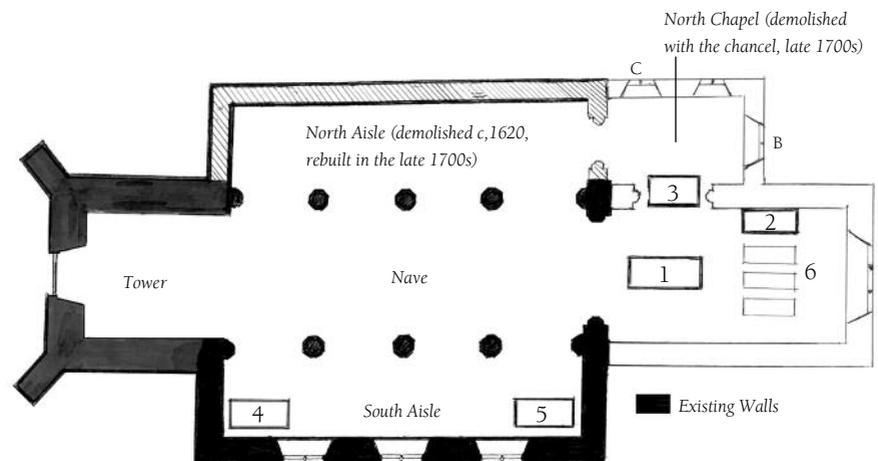
## HISTORY

The long history of this church has been shaped to a large extent by the occupants of Thornton House, next door, who have altered and re-ordered the building at different times, reflecting a variety of tastes and Christian traditions.

It is known that a church existed here in 1219, but the core of the present building dates from the first half of the 1300s – probably rebuilt by John de Chastillon (Lord of the Manor from 1332–1348) who founded a chantry here in 1344, providing a chantry chapel to the north of the chancel. This chapel was rebuilt by Robert Ingylton (Lord of the Manor from 1464–1472) in fulfilment of the will of his predecessor, John Barton, who died in 1434 and requested a chantry where Mass could be said for him and his parents. He also left provision for the parish priest to give ‘6d weekly to 6 poor people, to clothe 6 poore children annually’ and also for ‘the said priest to teach the children of the said town’.

The mediaeval church consisted of western tower, nave with north and south aisles, and chancel with north chapel. After the Reformation however (and again through the initiatives of the Lords of the Manor) this building was to alter greatly, both in its structure and in its furnishings.

The historian Browne Willis, writing in 1735 for his *History and Antiquities of the Town, Hundred and Deanery of Buckingham* (published in 1755) gives some idea of what the church looked like in his day. The chancel was still standing, as was its north chapel, beneath which was the vault of the Tyrells, containing the coffins of this family from 1570 onwards and including ‘no less than 6 Baronets’. The north aisle however had been demolished about 1620 (when the scholarly William Breedon was Rector and Sir Edward Tyrell held the Manor) and the north arcade had been crudely walled up. The positions of the monuments in 1735



### CONJECTURAL PLAN OF THE CHURCH WHEN COMPLETE

Positions of features noted by Browne Willis in 1735:

- 1 Tomb and brass of Robert Ingylton and his three wives
- 2 Tomb and brass of Jane Seynt John
- 3 Tomb with effigies of John and Isabella Barton
- 4 Effigy of John Chastillon
- 5 Effigy of Elias de Tingewick
- 6 Effigies and inscriptions in brass in the chancel floor to:  
William Clodd (1474) and his wife Agnes  
George Ingylton (1400) and his wife Isabella  
Agnes (née Ingylton) and her husband John Reynes. She died 1481.  
Also in the chancel floor were brass shields with the arms of: Ingylton/Dymock and Reynes and brass inscription to: Milo Ingylton (1480) and Thomas Allen, Rector (1710).

In the windows the following stained glass was noted:

- A The arms of the Earl of Cornwall and the Royal Arms of England at the time of King Edward I, in the east window.
- B The barton Arms, a praying angel with the inscription ‘Ave Maria...’ and defaced pictures of John and Isabella barton kneeling at desks, in the north chapel east window.
- C The figures of six saints, a bishop and the Blessed Virgin Mary, also an inscription to William barton, in one of the north windows.

may be seen on the plan, and also those of the stained glass windows which Browne Willis noted. These included windows with SS Michael, Catherine, Margaret, Mary Magdalene, a bishop, an apostle and Our Lady in glory.

It was Thomas Sheppard (son-in-law of the Revd Dr William Cotton and Lord of the Manor from 1779–1821) who drastically altered the character of the church in a building campaign which took place some time between 1780 and 1800. This was a time when convenience rather than conservation was popular in church re-ordering and, in line with current fashion, Sheppard succeeded in turning St Michael's into a rectangular preaching-box. The work was complete before 1801, when a correspondent wrote in praise of it to the *Gentleman's Magazine*; the letter (together with an engraving by J. Richards) appeared in the December 1801 issue.



*Church and Manor House*



*The blocked clerestory windows*

Sheppard's work opened out once more the north arcade and rebuilt the north aisle, but walled up the chancel arch and dismantled the mediaeval chancel and north chapel. A new ceiling was constructed beneath the level of the clerestory windows, which were blocked up. A west gallery was erected and the church was re-floored and re-seated. Subsequent discoveries have revealed how sweeping this transformation was. A carved stone corbel, sections of moulded timber from the roof and the 14th-century effigy of a priest have recently been discovered buried beneath the floorboards in the north aisle. Fragments of a painted Royal Arms over the chancel arch and carved woodwork in the roof still remain in place above the plaster ceiling. The magnificent carved sides of Robert Ingylton's tomb-chest, together with mediaeval floor-tiles and fragments of stained glass, were carted off to embellish a curious grotto which Sheppard constructed in his grounds, where they were discovered in 1947. The *Gentleman's Magazine* however applauded the alterations, describing the church as 'a

neat and commodious building and a pattern for all churches and chapels, for the purpose of true devotion’.

The work was probably in progress in 1784, when Thomas Sheppard had a vault sunk beneath the new north aisle. This was discovered in 1965, when a stone slab just outside the east wall was lifted. It was found to contain the coffins of ten adults and a three year old child. Their inscriptions dated from 1798–1872. In a section at the west end, earlier coffins of six adults and three children had been piled, also a heap of mouldering wood, metal coffin-fittings and bones. The only inscription – to Sir Charles Tyrell, who died in 1748 – suggests that these had been taken from the old Tyrell vault beneath the demolished north chapel, which the new vault was erected to replace.

In 1850, the Hon. Richard Cavendish commissioned the architect John Tarring (1806–1875) to draw up designs for the rebuilding of Thornton House, resulting in the present neo-Tudor mansion, which incorporates parts of the earlier building. At the same time Tarring was asked to supervise a thorough restoration of the church. The tracery in the two-light aisle windows, the east window, the font and other features were designed by him. He worked as a carpenter and plasterer in the West Country before going to London in 1828.

He restored Combermere Abbey, Cheshire (another great house) and designed several Congregational and Methodist churches in Kent and South London, also the Gothic Revival church (recently demolished) at Akeley, some three miles north-west of Thornton.

The Cavendish family held Thornton until 1894. Later the Harris family owned it and in 1917 the house and part of the estate were purchased by the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, to become Thornton College, one of several Roman Catholic schools which are run by this order.

In 1948, after 150 years of relegation in fragments to the garden grotto, Robert Ingylton’s tomb-chest was re-assembled and placed in the nave, to be joined in 1994 by the effigy of the 14th-century priest discovered beneath the floorboards in the north aisle.

## THE EXTERIOR

The setting of St Michael’s is worth pausing to enjoy. The lush parkland is studded with trees, including lines of cypresses which pass in front of the west door of the church. In the churchyard are some unusual memorials. On the south side, on a plinth, is a metal statue of the god Mercury – a copy of the original by Giambologna – in memory of Henry William Harris, who died in 1943 and of his son Francis, who lost his life at the Battle of Anzio, in Italy, in 1944. Nearby, a grand old yew tree has been encircled by a low iron palisade and gate, in memory of William Cavendish, who died in 1878. Beyond it is the area set apart as the burial ground for the Jesus and Mary Sisters. Another distinctive memorial to the north of the church is that to the artist and designer, Frederick Lonsdale Hands (died 1969) and to Susan Lonsdale Hands (died 1977), comprising two square blocks of stone on a stone plinth – the work of Mark Batten.

The church itself, with its walls of limestone rubble, blends attractively with the variety of greens in its surroundings. It is a neat and symmetrical building, the unusual feature being the lack of a structural chancel. The east wall stretches across nave and aisles, supported by buttresses which flank the low-set (1850) east window, which has net-like ‘reticulated’ tracery (originally fashionable c.1330) and is set within the blocked chancel arch. The east and west walls of the lean-to aisles have battlements of the late 1700s which once continued along the north and south walls also. The aisles are lit by two-light windows – their frames probably of the late 1700s and their attractive Decorated ‘flowing’ tracery added by Tarring c.1850, using stone of a more golden colour.

Between the two western windows in the south aisle is a sundial (probably provided in the late 18th century), but a careful look at the south-facing surfaces of the stones at the south-west corner of this aisle will reveal traces of much earlier timepieces. Two of the stones, about 5–6 feet up, have roughly carved mass dials and a third may be seen about 15 feet up on a stone which has obviously been reset in this position. These mediaeval dials were used to fix the times for the beginning of services long before the days of clocks.

Above the aisles rises the nave clerestory, its walls now plain, although the keen eye will detect evidence of the three blocked circular windows on each side. The nave has a low-pitched lead roof in the 15th-century style. The south nave wall is capped by a shallow 15th-century stone parapet, adorned with an attractive undulating traceried pattern of stone carving.

The tower is strengthened by western diagonal buttresses. Three late 18th-century circular stone steps rise to the west doorway, which is 400 years older and has a hood-mould resting upon decayed corbel heads. This is the only entrance to the body of the church. A simple doorway in the south wall leads to a staircase in the thickness of the wall (marked by the section of wall renewed in brick and made during Thomas Sheppard's re-ordering) to give access to the gallery and ringing-chamber. The small two-light west window is largely of 1850 but the belfry windows are mostly original 14th-century work. Carved mediaeval faces and creatures peer out from the string-course beneath the embattled parapet – one at each corner and two on each side.

The weather vane which crowns the tower is in the form of a key, the handle of which has been filled with glass to enable it to catch the wind more effectively.

## THE INTERIOR

The unusual arrangement of the furnishings in this truncated building, which retains its mediaeval core, the pre-Victorian scheme of gallery, plaster ceilings and box-pews, the Gothic Revival font and stained glass, together with as fine a collection of monuments as can be seen in any small church in the county – combine to create an interior of great character.

Graceful 14th-century four-bay arcades divide the aisles from the nave. The arches, which are framed by hood-moulds, rest upon octagonal piers, which differ very slightly from north to south. Of the 14th century also are the simple tower arch and the blocked chancel arch, which may still be seen in the east wall.

The floors date from Thomas Sheppard's late 1700s restoration, as do the plaster ceilings. Beneath the flat ceiling of the nave are cornices of simple pointed arcading. Hidden from view several feet above the ceiling is the timber nave roof, of which the two eastern trusses have their 15th-century carved central bosses in place; one of these is a fascinating 'Green Man', with leaves sprouting from his mouth. Also hidden, and now only visible by making the precarious journey along the void between the ceiling and the roof, are the remains of a wall painting of the Royal Arms,

*The Green Man*





in their rightful position on the east nave wall, above the chancel arch. The Perry Lithgow Partnership have made a detailed examination of the painting and have discovered evidence of three sets of Royal Arms from the 17th and 18th centuries, one superimposed over the other as a fresh monarch came to the throne. The clearest remains are those of the latest repainting, which was executed some time before 1714.

The present set of wooden royal arms, carved in relief and fixed to the front of the western gallery, are those of Queen Victoria, dating probably from the early years of her reign. These were not made for this church, but arrived as a gift in 1948.

The late 18th-century gallery, with its simple Gothic font, contains narrow benches for Thornton children, who had the fun of getting to their seats by the only means of access, through the little external door and up the narrow staircase in the side of the tower. At present stored in the gallery are two 19th-century chairs and a simple bier, which was used to convey the coffin at a funeral.

From here a ladder gives access to the upper stages of the tower. The chamber below the belfry contains the disused workings of the 18th-century clock and also an eastern opening. This now gives access to the roof-void but in mediaeval times it may have acted as a sanctus bell window to give a ringer in the tower a clear view of what was taking place at the altar, so that he could ring a bell at the Sanctus and the Consecration at the daily Mass.

In the belfry and hanging in a 17th-century bell-frame, are the three bells. The treble bell is thought to have been made by an itinerant local bell-founder when the tower was newly built in the 14th century. The word 'Elya' in its Latin inscription (+sint : pro : elya : michael : deus :

atove : maria) may refer to Elias de Tingewick, who was Rector here from 1315–1347. The second bell was cast in 1635, almost certainly by Richard Chandler I at his village bell foundry at Drayton Parslow. The tenor bell (inscribed 'sum rosa pulsata mundi maria vocata') has a diameter of 43½ inches and is a 15th-century bell by Richard Hille of London.

A memorable feature of this interior is the unusual arrangement of the furnishings. The eastern bay of the nave now forms the sanctuary, divided off by communion rails of 1850 and containing a simple panelled altar of oak which was installed in 1952, together with riddell and dossall curtains which hide the 1850 text beneath the east window, 'This do in remembrance of me', with its biblical reference. In the sanctuary are two metal chests, the larger of which dates from the 1600s.

The rest of the nave area is free of furnishings, providing a dignified setting for the Ingylton tomb (rebuilt here in 1948), the priest's effigy (set up in 1994) and the small octagonal font of 1850, which displays in the eastern and western panels of its bowl the 'IHS' monogram of Our Lord's name.

The seating, which fills the north and south aisles, consists of deal box pews which (in the fashion of the late 1700s when they were made) have been painted and grained to make their woodwork resemble oak. It appears that a few minor adjustments have been made to their arrangement since they were installed, but in them we have an interesting survival of the furnishing of a church before the influence of the Oxford Movement revolutionised church interiors. The pew doors still retain their original brass handles and hinges and the commodious pew at the east end of the south aisle was occupied by the Lord of the Manor and his family. Those pews towards the east have seats facing inwards, whilst the seats in the other compartments face east and west. The pulpit, which is also part of this late 18th-century scheme, occupies the eastern



end of the north aisle, to the north of the sanctuary. It is a simple rectangular box, elevated four steps above the floor. Unusual as its position may seem for a pulpit, the preacher can in fact see almost every seat in the church from it. The reading desk was beside it, to the west.

Two of the windows contain colourful scenes in 19th-century stained glass. The east window portrays Jesus, the Saviour of the World, with his hand raised in blessing, flanked by the Lamb of God emblem and the Dove of the Holy Spirit. It has been suggested that this glass, installed c.1850, may be the work of William Wailes of Newcastle.

The south east window shows Jesus with the woman at the well in Samaria; also Lazarus, having been raised to life by Jesus, is seen with his sisters, Martha and Mary, and other characters. This window is by Cox & Sons of London, who also made the brass plaque fixed to the sill beneath, which records that the window was given by Cecilia Lafayette Cavendish in 1878, in memory of her husband.

Set in the west wall of the south aisle is a mediaeval stone corbel, decorated with oak leaves and acorns and retaining some of its original green and red colouring. Its flat crenellated top clearly supported something, although its original position and purpose are unknown; it was discovered with the priest's effigy in 1994.

At present in safe keeping are some 14th-century floor tiles, originally in the church floor, but removed by Thomas Sheppard to his new grotto in the late 1700s. They are of a type which were made at Penn, near High Wycombe, the four forming a pattern of radiating leaves within a circle, with four birds outside the circle in the corners. Discovered in the grotto were fragments of stained glass, which probably also came from the church.

## MONUMENTS

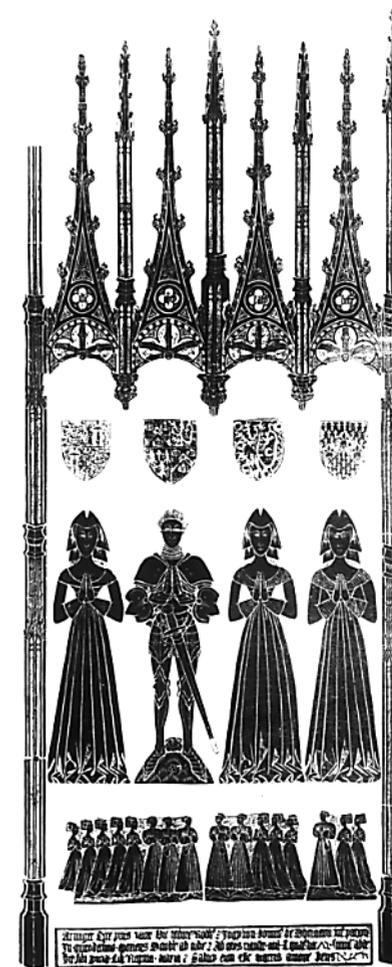
St Michael's is rich in monuments and memorials to people who belonged to this church, manor and parish.

### The tomb and brass of Robert Ingylton and his family

This, the easternmost of the tombs in the centre of the nave, was reassembled in 1948, when the great top slab (measuring 7'7" and weighing over half a ton) was taken from the sanctuary floor and reunited with the exquisitely carved sides of its chest tomb. These were salvaged after 150 years from the walls of Thomas Sheppard's garden

grotto, thanks to a generous grant from the Morris Fund of the Society of Antiquaries.

Magnificently portrayed in brass is Robert Ingylton, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the reign of Edward IV and Lord of the Manor of Thornton from 1464 until his death in 1472, with his three wives – Margaret Dymock, Clements Beaumonte and Isabella Cantelupe. Above the effigies are their coats of arms (on lead shields, which are possibly later replacements of the originals) and beneath them are Robert's six sons and ten daughters, in three groups, beneath their appropriate mothers. All are set beneath a rare quadruple canopy, one of only two in England, the other being at Charwelton, Northamptonshire. The canopy is a beautiful piece of architectural design in metal, even down to the tiny faces which form bosses at the centre of each vaulted bay and the four quatrefoils in the lower parts of the spires, inscribed 'ihs' 'Mcy' 'lady' 'helpe', asking the mercy of Jesus and the help of His Mother for their departed souls.



Robert Ingylton, Esq., and wives Margaret, Clements, and Isabella, 1472.  
THORNTON, BUCKS.

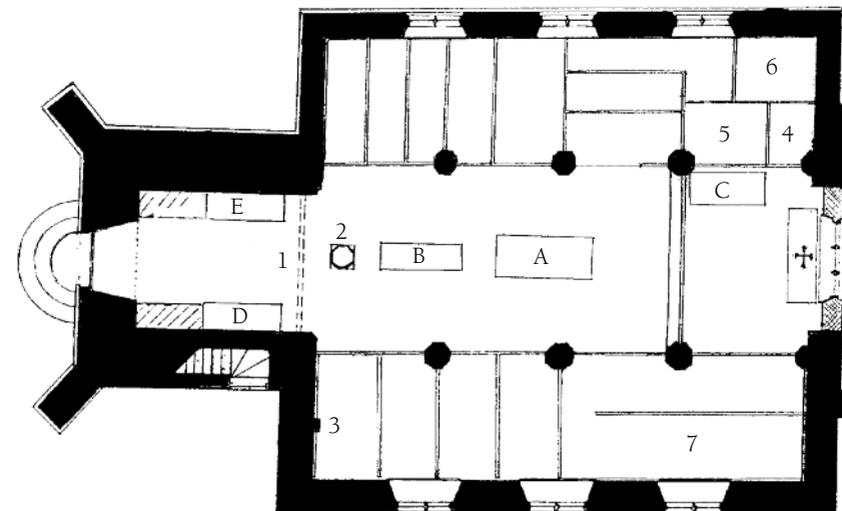
Surrounding the tomb chest and set beneath canopied niches which are a mass of stone carving, with crockets and buttresses, are standing figures of angels, holding shields which bore the arms of families connected with Robert and his wives. The north and south sides each have seven and the ends have two, and also two saints (St Catherine and St Peter at the west and St Margaret and a figure believed to be St Bartholomew at the east). Although many of the shields have lost their painted arms and some of the angels have been damaged, it is good that this superb piece of craftsmanship (believed by experts to have been a mass-produced work, assembled in numbered parts), after having been hidden away in fragments for a century and a half, now appears again in almost its original position.

#### 'Tomb' with effigy of a priest

The stone plinth was constructed in 1994 to support the 14th-century stone effigy of a tonsured priest, vested for the celebration of the mass. He was discovered beneath the floorboards under the pews in the north aisle. Before Thomas Sheppard's re-ordering, there were known to have been two effigies of 14th-century priests in the church. One was the Revd John de Chastillon (son of John, who was Lord of the Manor), Rector from 1347–77, the other was his predecessor, Elias de Tingewick, Rector from 1315–47. Although the identity of this priest (seen here with his tonsured haircut, his loose-fitting amice and his feet upon a lion) is uncertain, it is thought that he is more likely to be John de Chastillon, whose monument was still in the church when Browne Willis visited in 1735, whereas the monument of Elias appears to have gone by then.

#### The brass of Jane St John

Originally on a raised tomb in the former chancel, but now set in the sanctuary floor to the north of the altar, this is the memorial to Chancellor Robert Ingylton's great-granddaughter Jane, who died in



#### THORNTON CHURCH TODAY

##### Location of some of the features:

- 1 Gallery front, with Royal Arms
- 2 Font
- 3 Ancient corbel, re-set in wall
- 4 Pulpit
- 5 Position of reading desk
- 6 Vestry enclosure
- 7 Manor pew

##### Monuments

- A Robert Ingylton and family
- B 14th-century Priest (? John Chastillon)
- C Brass of Jane Seynt John
- D Male effigy (? John Barton)
- E Female effigy (? Isabella Barton)

1557 at the age of 55. She is portrayed in Elizabethan costume, with an inscription beneath. There are four shields with coats of arms, (the names of the families to which they refer are given below them) and an inscription which forms an outer border, framing the brass. Jane married Humphrey Tyrell in 1519, having already inherited the manor; the Tyrells were to own Thornton for the next 200 or so years.

#### The effigies of John and Isabella Barton

These figures of a knight and his lady (originally beneath the arch to the lost north chapel) which now guard the western entrance, beneath the

gallery, are those of John Barton, who died in 1434 and of Isabella, who died in 1457, having married Sir Robert Shotesbrook. He lies on the south side, clad in his armour, his hands folded in prayer, his sword by his side and his head resting upon a helm. The collar of twisted cords round his neck is very unusual. Its pendant, in the form of a lion, undoubtedly represents the white Lion of March, which is normally shown attached to the Yorkist Collar of Suns and Roses on monuments of the supporters of the House of York during the Wars of the Roses (Lancastrian supporters wore the Collar of SS). John Barton, however, died long before a widespread Yorkist faction had developed. It is likely, therefore, that the Lion of March pendant which he wears on a much simpler collar indicates that he was actually in the service of Richard, Duke of York (1411–1460), father of King Edward IV.

Isabella's head rests upon a cushion, held by two small figures, and there are two little dogs at the feet of her skirt. The detail of her clothing is beautiful and there are traces of original colour.

John's will requested the rebuilding of the north chapel as a chantry for himself and his parents. This was duly done and the licence for it was granted on 4th July 1468, which must have been about the time when these effigies were made at one of the Midlands alabaster workshops, almost certainly at Chellaston, near Derby. They rank alongside other high-quality work of the period, including monuments at Norbury (Derbyshire), Stanton Harcourt (Oxon), Ryther and Methley (Yorkshire), Salisbury Cathedral, St Helen's Bishopsgate, London and at the Trust's church at South Cowton in Yorkshire.

### Memorial tablets.

These are fixed to the walls of the aisles and commemorate the following Thornton people from the past 250 years:

#### NORTH AISLE (WEST – EAST)

- 1 Mr Leigh Smith (1827) – a parishioner buried in the vault beneath.
- 2 Lieut.-Col. Francis Harris of the Scots Guards (1944), also smaller tablets to his godson and nephew (1977) and to his half-brother (1966), who were both Scots Guards officers.
- 3 The Revd George Turnor, Prebendary of Lincoln, who died at Thornton House in 1824, also his wife Eleonora, who died in 1845. Their daughter was the wife of Sir Thomas Cotton Sheppard.
- 4 Sir Thomas Tyrell, who died in 1755, has a fine wall-tablet, using various shades of marble, with an urn at the top and his coat of arms at the base.

#### SOUTH AISLE (EAST – WEST)

- 5 Sir Thomas Sheppard (1821) and his two wives – Elizabeth (daughter of the Revd Dr Cotton and Hester – née Tyrell) who died in 1800 and Margaret, who died in 1813. It was he who transformed the church at the close of the 18th century. His tablet, by Hopper of London, has a small sarcophagus and shield.
- 6 His son, Sir Thomas Cotton Sheppard (1848) and Mary Ann (1872), are commemorated on a similar tablet, but made by Poole of Westminster.
- 7 Elizabeth Hart (daughter of Sir Thomas Sheppard) who died in 1854 and Thomas Hart, her husband, who died in 1848.
- 8 Their daughter Elizabeth (died 1858) and her husband, Richard Cavendish (died 1876).
- 9 Henry William Harris (died 1943) and Maud (died 1950).

THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS

Two wooden battlefield crosses commemorate Brigadier General Sir William Kay (died 1918) and Lieutenant P. A. D. Jackson (died 1917) – both victims of the First World War.

I acknowledge with gratitude the research of Mr Bryan Huntley-Egan, who has kindly made his material available to me. I am also indebted to Mr Claude Blair, FSA, for his help and advice.

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and Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England  
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