

The following article first appeared in the July 2021 edition of the Awliscombe & Weston Times.

Our Place in History

Go and stand in the churchyard at the East (top) end of the church and look up at the right hand gable end. The creamy Bath stone copings, each shaped to interlock with its neighbour, march symmetrically up each side to the cross at the top. They look strikingly crisp and clean above the weathered gothic window arch below (take a moment to examine that window while you're there - the complexity of the design that looks simple because the proportions are so perfect). Now walk back round the path and, standing on the steps up to the entrance porch, scan the stonework above the window next to it. Look carefully and you'll find two small square blocks sticking out from the stonework. In the right light you can just make out the features of the faces carved on them.

Now continue on round to the West end of the church and stand at the door, with the tower soaring above you. The stone you're standing on is strangely uneven - not the neatly dressed symmetrical shape you'd expect in such a prime position.

Those creamy gable coping stones look new because they are - installed in May, with a new lead dressing beneath them. They replaced a length of cast concrete which was put there at some point in the twentieth century when it was no doubt seen as the modern solution to failing ancient stonework. In time the concrete cracked; there was no lead underneath, and water started getting in and soaking down through the wall - all too evident from the sad state of the plaster inside.

The stone heads take you back to the very beginnings of this building - some of the very few remnants of the original Norman church: they've been looking out over the churchyard for around 900 years.

The strangely shaped stone by the West door takes us much much further back: it is thought to be a pagan standing stone - evidence that the site has always been a significant one for the people of Awliscombe - which the builders of the early church made use of.

Three features which demonstrate how we and our predecessors have used and developed this place over thousands of years.

If you have time, go into the church (it's currently open on Wednesday mornings and Saturday afternoons, but as soon as Covid restrictions end it will be open every day again). See if you can estimate when different features originated. Here are a few questions to get you thinking. The answers will be in the next edition.

1. Between the chancel (where the choir stalls are) and the Lady Chapel (the area off to the side with its own altar) there are two arches, of different design - why?
2. In the wall to the right of the pulpit there is a niche, currently with a small Madonna figure in it. Look carefully and you'll see the sides slant to the left. What was that for originally?
3. The list of parish priests at the back of the church includes some 'intruders': why were they called that?
4. There are two memorials inside the church to young Awliscombe men who died in the First World War: can you find them both? Can you find memorials to two Awliscombe brothers from an earlier age who also fought for their country?
5. The oldest stained glass in the church is a medieval fragment in the East window of the South Transept. Can you find the newest?

As you look and ponder you may get a sense of the church developing over time, of the wider events of history leaving their mark here, and of the people of Awliscombe using it, developing and enhancing it over the centuries.

How do we use it? For services of course, for christenings, weddings and funerals; generations of Awliscombe schoolchildren have come here for weekly worship, and also for nativity plays and leavers' services. More recently we've had wonderful concerts, from India Electric Company to

Thomas Bowes playing Bach violin sonatas as the light faded on a Summer evening: the acoustics make it a wonderful atmospheric performance space. With a toilet and a simple kitchen area, which many churches now have, it could be even better, and regular performances would become a real possibility.

The job of maintaining and developing the church, and finding the funds to do so, falls on the Parochial Church Council (the PCC) whose members tend to (but don't have to) come from the small worshipping congregation. At St Michael's, as in most rural churches, the congregation is smaller than it once was - just a fraction of the village community - and the cost of maintaining a large Grade 1 listed building, let alone developing it, far outweighs the PCC's income.

Many people believe that parish churches receive financial support from the Church of England. Sadly that is not correct. The Church has substantial historic endowments which are managed by the Church Commissioners to produce an income, but about half of the annual expenditure (£120 million in 2019) goes towards clergy pensions and the remainder to strategic mission activities such as expanding the Church's outreach and projects in low income areas.

Support for parishes comes in the form of parish priests to minister to congregations, and intangibles such as advice, expertise and training. In return, parishes are asked to pay an annual 'Common Fund' payment to the Diocese, based on the number of regular adult worshippers in the congregation. In 2020, St Michael's Common Fund payment was £18,605 based on around 30 regular worshippers. Insurance, electricity, repairs, and other running costs come on top of that. Major projects, such as the new coping stones described above, are only possible with grant funding. We are still looking for grants to pay for the rebuilding of the leaning churchyard wall on Church Hill. We would love to fully restore, rehang and retune our magnificent bells, a once-in-a-century undertaking. The indicative cost is almost £60,000.

Up to now, generous giving by the congregation, occasional donations and legacies, an annual grant from the Parish Council towards churchyard mowing and, crucially, fund-raising events such as the Fete and the Harvest Supper, to which very many of the wider community come and contribute, have meant that St Michael's could just about make ends meet.

Looking to the future, that is unlikely to be possible: costs rise remorselessly, congregations do not, while age, weather and gravity take their inevitable toll on the building itself. The last year has been particularly bad of course: in 2019 income from fund-raising events was £6,158; in 2020 that was reduced by 90%. However, even when such events return to normal, we will need new sources of income if we are to maintain the building properly in addition to paying the Common Fund to the Diocese.

We believe that for many, perhaps most, people in the village, St Michael's is significant: it may be memories of school days next door, family weddings or funerals, carol services, or simply pride in our historic church building, but as a community we care about it. We know that because of the many people who volunteer to clean the church, produce fabulous floral displays, and help out at events.

In truth, the church building belongs to the village as a whole and we should aim to preserve it and if possible improve it while it is in our care. Later this year we plan a survey to ask you, the current custodians of St Michael's, how you think we can best meet that challenge and how we can best make use of St Michael's as a village asset. Should we have more events or performances? Could it be used more for local groups? Would you love to learn how to ring? Are better facilities (a loo, a kitchen, better heating) crucial if we want to make more use of it? Would you be prepared to pay a couple of pounds a month to become a 'friend of St Michael's' or lead or join a committee dedicated to raising funds? If you do nothing else, please respond to that survey when it comes out. If you already have views or ideas or questions please contact me at any time (nick@nickthwaitesfurniture.co.uk).

In the mean time, some people have said they'd like to make a one-off donation to help to make up the hole that Covid has blown in PCC finances. If you would like to do that, please contact our treasurer, Julie Hawkins (treasurer.awliscombepcc@gmail.com) who can tell you how to make a donation as efficiently as possible.