

## **St Michael The Archangel**

### **A Guide to the Parish Church**

Quite when the area now occupied by the town of Lyme Regis was first settled by our ancestors is buried in the mists of time. The remains of an ancient hill fort have been found nearby and a Roman villa was unearthed some years ago in the neighbouring parish of Uplyme so it is likely that some human presence was to be found in this sheltered valley from very early times. The earliest recorded settlement here dates from AD 774 when King Cynewulf granted land on the west bank of the River Lym to the Abbey at Sherborne: they needed salt for preserving foodstuffs and at Lyme they had a ready source of salt water in the sea and a sheltered site where they could extract the salt. The area now known as Sherborne Lane is thought to be the site of the salt-extracting activities of the monks.

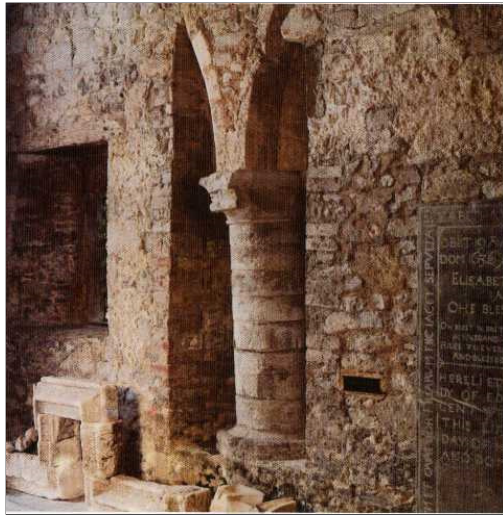
Many visitors to our church are surprised that such an exposed site should have been chosen with the sea barely twenty yards beyond the east wall of the building. The truth is that when the first church was built on this site it was not exposed at all, as there would have been a considerable tract of land between church and sea. Due to the unstable nature of the ground in this area the coast has been eroded to an extent difficult for us to imagine today. Various attempts have been made over the years to stabilize Church Cliffs, the present very substantial sea wall, we hope, having finally arrested the erosion.

It had always been suspected that a church existed on or near the present site in Saxon times though until recently no proof existed. During extensive repairs to the church tower in 1994-5 a late Saxon window, believed to date from around AD 980, was discovered in the south wall of the first-floor ringing chamber and it now seems likely that all but the top third of the tower is largely of Saxon origin. What seems originally to have been a Saxon tower was retained and "modernised" by the Normans around AD 1120 when they rebuilt the remainder of the church.

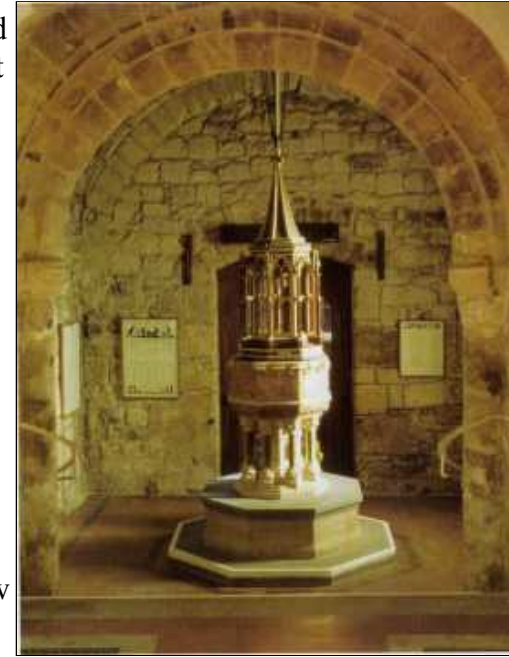


The development of the Saxon church by the Normans and again in the early 16th century makes any description of the Saxon church tentative to say the least. It does seem probable, however, that the Saxon church would have been little more than a small chapel. The present porch is almost certainly built on part of the foundations of the Saxon nave, which would have been quite narrow in relation to its length and height and possibly at least partly of two stories. Any windows would have been small and high up in the walls, thus making the church dark inside.

The Norman church was created from the Saxon church, was cruciform in plan, and although the evidence is sketchy we can deduce its likely form. The nave had an aisle to the north and either a chantry or an aisle to the south. There was a central tower probably with transepts, and a semi-circular apse at the east end. The remains of the nave of the Norman church now form the porch of the present church. This part of the building originally extended ten feet further to the west than is now the case, having succumbed to an early road widening scheme in 1824.



There was a room over the porch, added at some time unknown, which was known as the Old Vestry. This room was removed during an extensive restoration of this part of the church in 1933 when much was done to expose as much of the Norman masonry as was possible. The scheme included the rebuilding of the west front, the original intention being also to add new aisles to the north and south of the porch so that the original arches could be opened up and the fine 12th century pillars seen to their best advantage. The present unfinished appearance of this end of the church when viewed from the outside is the result of the work being left uncompleted due to lack of funds. Regrettably the expense of such work now makes the completion of the scheme very unlikely.



From the porch we enter the baptistery which is under the base of the tower. The large font with its impressive cover was erected in memory of the Rev. Frederick Parry Hodges who was vicar from 1833 to 1880. The fine arch which opens from the baptistery into the present nave was the chancel arch of the Norman church while the arches to north and south, now walled up but still visible, are 13th century, all inserted into the earlier Saxon tower. The upper stages of the tower were added in the early 16th century when it was raised to its present height of 58 feet.

The present nave was completed in about 1506 and is a surprise to many after the rather austere atmosphere of the porch. The nave is spacious and well proportioned with, unusually, all upward slope from west to east leading the eye inexorably to the high altar at the east end. The nave has been restored at various times during its life, most recently in 1885 when among other things the gentle slope up to the east end was substituted for the series of broad steps which previously spanned the whole width of the church. The rest of the work carried out in 1885 concentrated mainly on re-ordering the interior to make it suitable for the style of worship of the time, and was more sympathetic than that suffered by many churches at the hands of Victorian restorers. The exterior of the building has certainly in modern times, and probably throughout its life, required frequent restoration, partly due to its exposed site and partly because of the very poor nature of the local blue lias stone from which it was constructed.

The nave consists of six bays, two of which form the chancel, with some fine carving around the pillars at the point from which the arches spring. The roof bosses form a fine set, though a keen eye is required to pick out the detail.



The large window half way down the south aisle is one of the town war memorials and was erected in 1921. The tablets under the memorial record the names of those from Lyme Regis who gave their lives in the two world wars.

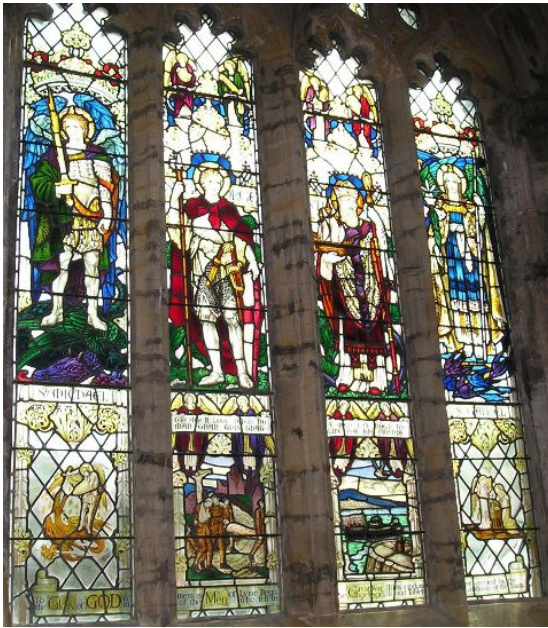


The great mural across the barrel of the chancel roof, depicting the raising of the Cross, was added about 1850.

None of the window glass is old though some is of more than passing interest. The small window in the porch on the left as you enter is a memorial to Thomas Coram, a Lyme man who became wealthy as a sea captain and merchant. He was appalled by the destitution he saw among children in London and after many frustrations eventually established his Foundling Hospital. After using all his own fortune on the venture, Coram himself finally ended life as a pauper.

The first window along the north wall of the nave was given in memory of [Mary Anning](#), who was born and lived all her life in Lyme Regis. She gained an international reputation for her painstaking recovery of a number of important fossils from the local cliffs, several of her finds being in the Natural History Museum in London; her grave is just outside this window.





The next window along the north side is unusual and is intended to depict Sir Galahad's vision of the Holy Grail. The east window was originally nearly twice its present length, having been reduced in size during the 1885 restoration. Some of the glass removed was used to glaze the small windows on either side of the sanctuary.

The church is fortunate to possess two fine examples of Jacobean wood carving in the pulpit and the west gallery.

The pulpit was given by a man who had been a Mayor of Lyme, and the inscription on the canopy reads "To God's Glory Richard Harvey of London, Mercer and Marchant Adventurer 1613. Faith is by Hearing".

The west gallery was given by John Hassard and carries the inscription "John Hassard built this to the glory of almighty God in the eightieth year of his age Anno Domini 1611". The additional words "seven times Mayor"; have unfortunately been lost. Also there were originally galleries over the north and south aisles which were removed during the 1885 restoration.

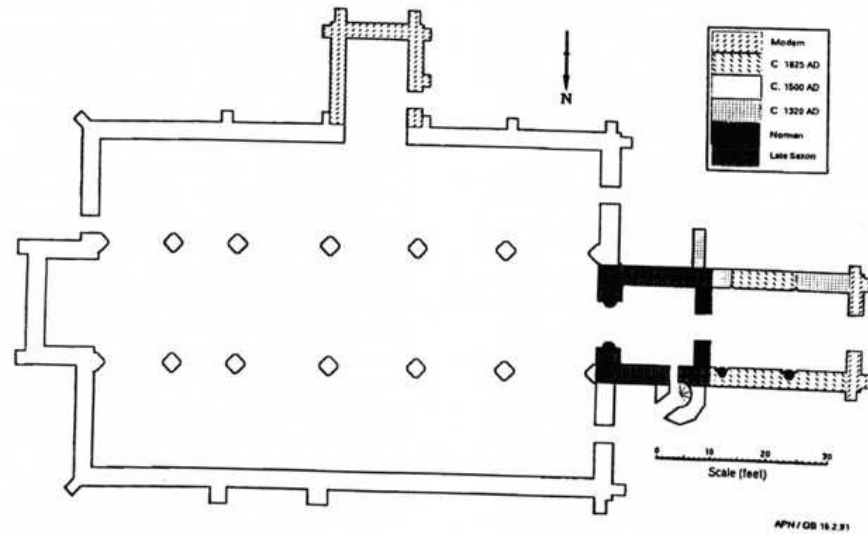


The chancel screen was erected in 1889 to the memory of the Rev. George Harlow. The remains of what may have been an earlier screen have been incorporated into the partitioning used to create the sacristy in the south east corner of the nave. The remains of what is thought to be the old rood beam are to be seen in the porch above the doorway leading into the baptistry. There are various memorial brasses displayed on the nave walls. Among them is a group towards the east end of the north wall, several of which appear to have been removed from the slabs now in the porch floor. Probably these brasses were removed in order to preserve them. In the centre of the group of brasses hangs the ship's bell from the fleet minesweeper HMS Lyme Regis. This ship was launched on 19th March 1942 and broken up in 1948. The ensign above the bell was given by the officers and men, and was carried by HMS Lyme Regis during the Normandy landings of World War II in which the vessel took part.

The large tapestry on the north wall of the nave has had a chequered history, only the more recent parts of which are certain. The tapestry was on loan to the National Trust and hung at their property at Trerice in Cornwall, only returning to the church in 1996. Woven in Brussels around 1490, recent research

suggests that the tapestry portrays the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. The tapestry was given to the parish church in 1886 by Rev. Edward Peek who lived at what is now the Alexandra Hotel but was then a private house. A tapestry is known to have been found behind a false plaster wall in an old house in nearby Somerset and was subsequently sold for £20, the sum which Rev. Peek is thought to have paid for the Lyme tapestry. During the recent cleaning and conservation of the tapestry pieces of plaster were found trapped in the fabric, suggesting that our tapestry may be that found in Somerset. Most of the church plate is modern, though there are several older pieces including a large silver chalice and paten. The paten is inscribed "This peece wase given by Robert Jones of Lyme gent: to the Church of Lyme Regis. Anno 1664". On the base it carries the following: "Ecclesiae Lyme Regis 1664". There are two more silver chalices and another paten all dating from about 1630.

The church registers date back to 1538, though there is a gap from 1572 to 1653 with the exception of a single entry in 1649. As well as giving the usual details of births, deaths and marriages in the parish, the pages also contain information of other events. Among these are the following: "Dedicated to St. Michael, 1405"... "A legacy given to rebuild part of this church of Lyme 1503"... "1688. The town of Lyme in Dorsetshire suffered by an earthquake"... "1759, 31st May. The sea flowed 3 times in, in an hour at Lyme"... "1797, 18th Aug. The sea flowed as above attended with lightning"... "1799, 26th Jan. The sea flowed as above with the shock of an earthquake about 4 o'clock in the morning"... "May 11th, 1844. A large fire in Lyme burnt down a great number of house amongst which was the Custom House, the Cupps Hotel and the anchent Inn The George ware the Duke of Monmouth quartered when in Lyme".



## VICARS OF LYME REGIS

1329	William Dare	1650	Ames Short	1883	George Barlow
1375	Roger Danyell	1663	Emmanuel Sharpe	1887	Charles Myers
1397	William Barton	1663	Timothy Hallett	1894	Rowland Hill
1408	John Herte	1729	Hugh Key	1898	William Jacob
c. 1423	Thomas Shapplegh	1731	David Symes	1915	Wm. Norman Willson
1425	Peter Greve	1744	Cornelius Norwood	1927	Chas. Carew Cox
2. 1443	William Bynham	1745	James Davies	1954	Geoffrey Lewis Tiarks
before 1514	Daye (or Dare)	1780	John Jones	1962	John Hugo Charles
1534	Laurence Odham	1783	Henry Seward	1974	Peter Charles Nicholson
c. 1548	Robert Palfrey	1787	Joseph Domett	1980	Murray John Dell
1564	John Toller	1798	William Evans	1997	John G. Andrews
1567	Thomas Washington	1804	William Jones		<i>(Priest in Charge)</i>
1573	George Elkin	1826	Charles Randolph	2004	John Harrisson
1574	Symon Norrington	1833	Frederick Parry Hodges		<i>(Team Vicar – Golden Cap Team,</i>
1608	John Geare	1880	John Smith		<i>)</i>