

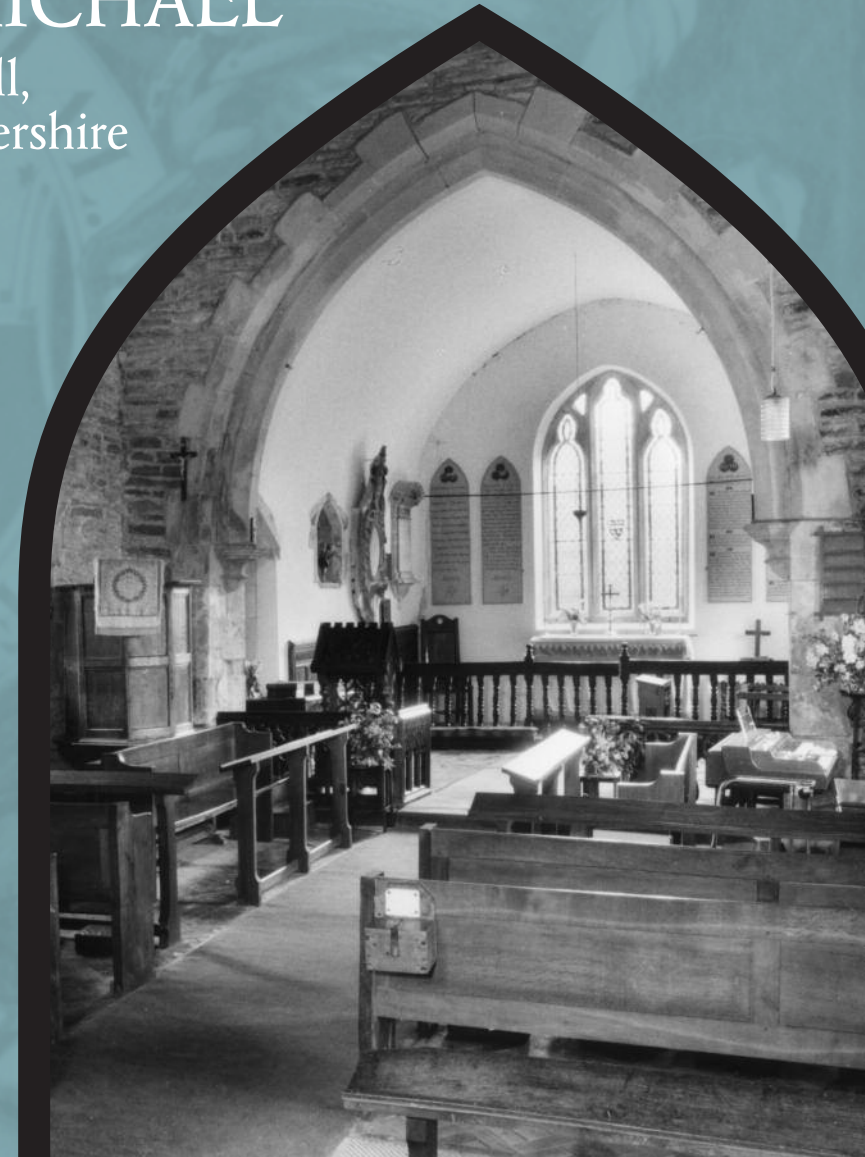


THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

Churchill,
Worcestershire



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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Churchill, Worcestershire

CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

by Michael Wall (retired from industry, founder of the Worcestershire & Dudley Historic Churches Trust)

INTRODUCTION

The church of St Michael, Churchill stands, as the name suggests, on a small hill with its attendant village now very much reduced. To the north of the church is a moat denoting the position of the former manor house and nearby a deserted village site. The parish is bounded by the Evesham to Worcester road to the north and the Bow Brook on its eastern side. The southern part adjoins the neighbouring parish of White Ladies Aston. The geological constitution of the area is partly Keuper Marl (a sedimentary rock of clay and limestone) and Lower Lias (a limestone often rich in fossils). There is no industry here except agriculture. There was, however, a chalybeate spring much frequented by invalids about 200 years ago. The name was spelt 'Circehille' in Domesday Book and it has been variously spelt as 'Chirchulle', 'Chirkhull' and even 'Schercheshull' at various times. The name is often referred to as 'Churchill-in-Oswaldslow' to distinguish it from 'Churchill-in-Halfshire' near Kidderminster. 'Oswaldslow' and 'Halfshire' are two of the several hundreds into which the county was formerly divided. Indeed the Courts of the Hundred of Oswaldslow met under a great oak tree in the village.

The church was well served by clergy up to the end of the 19th century, but thereafter the costs of maintaining the building with several churches nearby led to its being joined with White Ladies Aston in 1926 to be used only for burials. This does not seem to have happened since services were regularly celebrated every other Sunday until it was finally handed over to The Churches Conservation Trust in 1999. The parish church is St John Baptist, White Ladies Aston, about half a mile (0.8km) to the south.

St Michael's is almost surrounded by trees and high hedges. Not having a tower means that it is well hidden, but it is a delightfully secluded and peaceful place.

*Front cover: Interior looking east
(Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: The west end and bell turret
(Christopher Dalton)*

HISTORY

St Michael's church, as in many other cases in the centre of the county, was a chapelry of the large parish of St Helen's, Worcester, in the 11th century. It separated before 1269 and the advowson (or right of presentation of the priest to the living) followed the descent of the manor through the Guise, Wysham and Croft families, but it was eventually acquired by the Berkeley family of nearby Spetchley. The church there is also in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust.

Churchill seems to have played little part in the history of the county, except that in 1792 some

English nuns of the order of the Poor Clares were given shelter by Mr Robert Berkeley when they were banished from their home at Dunkerque during the French Revolution. Evidence for this is still to be seen, with a gravestone near the churchyard gate commemorating those nuns who died here and their chaplain William Southworth who died in 1814.

The registers contain within their flyleaves occasional descriptions of the weather and other events, and are housed in the County Record Office. They date from 1564 to 1810,



EXTERIOR

though some Burial and Baptism Registers are housed at White Ladies Aston. The registers were transcribed, with an introduction, in book form in 1914. The most sensational entry was the burial of one Ralph Sowley, the incumbent of nearby Broughton Hackett in 1597. He had conspired with a certain Mrs Goold to murder her husband for which he was tried and executed. The Civil War touched even this small parish when two soldiers were buried here in 1646 and 1651.

The churchyard is small with a modest number of gravestones, but few of any antiquity can be read. Apart from a few modern well-tended graves, most of the churchyard is now a wildlife sanctuary.

St Michael's is a simple two-cell church with a nave and chancel only. Most of the stone used is the local blue lias but as this cannot be cut into large blocks, the corners, window and doorway surrounds are of Cotswold limestone. There is a south porch of timber of 1910 in memory of the Revd John Bates, a former rector and his wife Emma. The adjoining south wall of the nave





Left: Exterior from the south-east (Christopher Dalton)

Below left: The south doorway (Christopher Dalton)

Below: Interior looking west (Christopher Dalton)

was almost completely reconstructed in 1910 as it leaned dangerously outwards and had done so for at least a hundred years previously. To avoid collapse, the wall was propped up by no less than four buttresses of which only the



westernmost one still exists. Two of these were curious 'flying buttresses' each side of the old porch and roofed over with it. The architect for this work was Charles Ford Whitcombe who also supervised extensive repairs to the roof and walls in 1906.

The chancel was restored in 1892 but has 13th-century windows, the eastern one being of three lights. The small wooden bell turret was renewed in 1862 by the architect Henry Rowe senior of Worcester, the gift of the Revd George Dineley, the rector. Below the bell turret is a two-light west window of 1903, replacing the crumbling three-light window. On the north side is a blocked-up doorway in the nave converted into a window in 1910. The chancel north window was rediscovered under plaster, also in 1910, and reglazed. Nearby, original external plastering can be seen – this would have originally covered the entire church.

INTERIOR

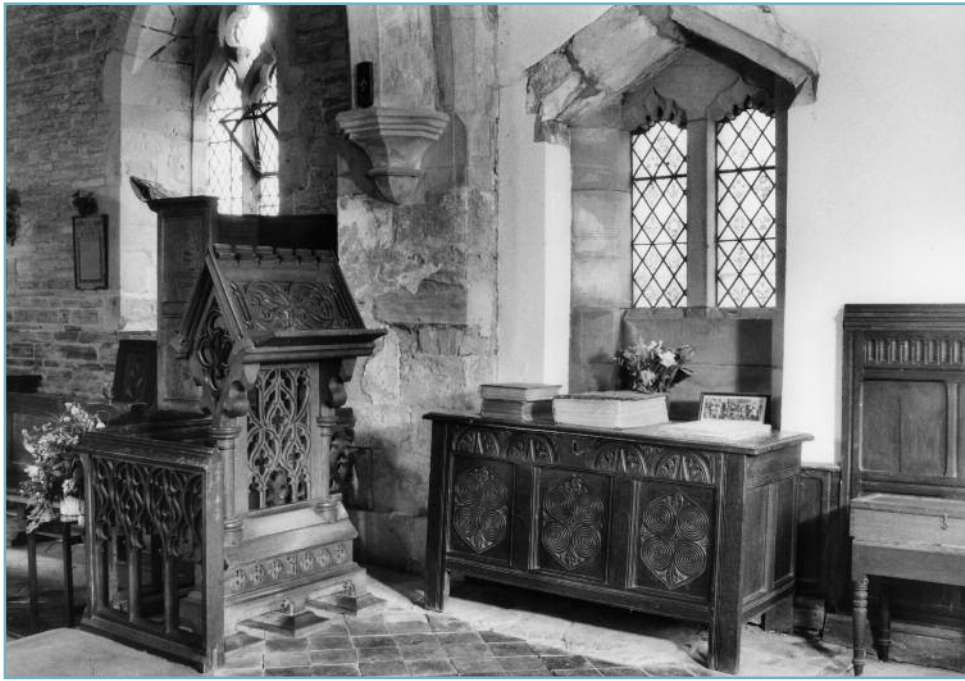
NAVE

Entering by the Early English south doorway, the church presents a typical simple village interior, the nave walls, now bare of plaster, revealing the lias stone. In the north and south walls are several fragments of earlier masonry, possibly Norman. The doorway itself has deep holes for wooden drawbars. All the fittings used at the time of handing over to The Churches Conservation Trust remain in place. With very

little stained glass the interior is bright and welcoming. Before 1910, the nave roof was plastered, but this was removed revealing the timbers beneath. The massive wooden tie beams have been replaced by stainless steel rods.

At the west-end is the bell turret containing two bells. The larger is marked '**PROSPERITY TO THIS PLACE**', cast by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester in 1713. The other is unmarked but appears to date from about 1600.





The lectern and chest in the chancel (Christopher Dalton)

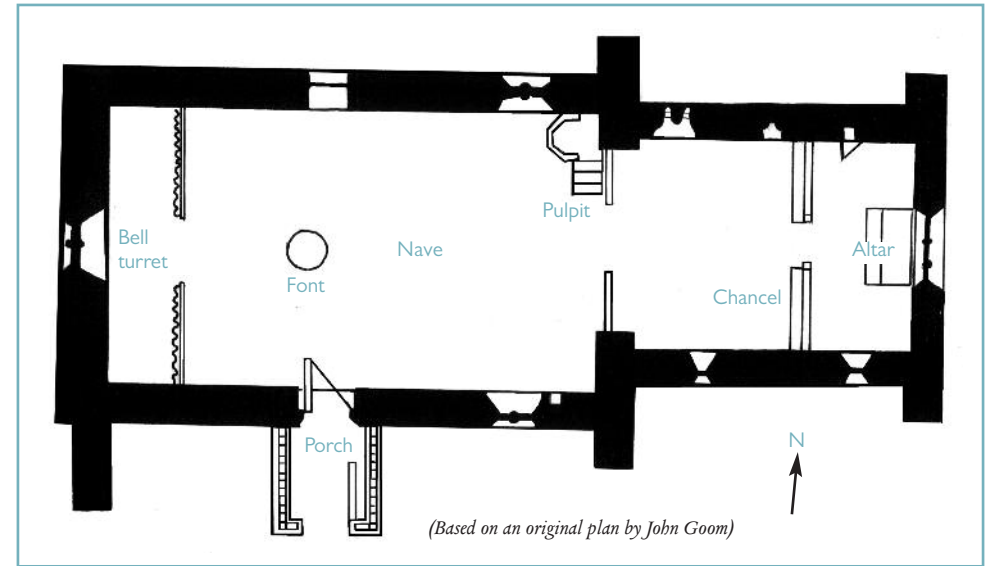
The simple octagonal font near the entrance is 15th-century with marks on the top where the hasp of the lock was fixed to prevent the holy water being stolen. The cover is probably



The 15th-century font (Christopher Dalton)

Jacobean. The nave seating was renewed in 1910 using earlier oak ends and the curtained vestry at the west end is made up from pieces of 17th-century box pews, some of which have delicate guilloche carving (similar to plaited ribbon) and almost identical to the communion rails. The plain panelled pulpit is also 17th-century, but stands on a later base. It was placed on the south side of the chancel arch before the 1910 restorations, and seems then to have formed a two-decker arrangement with a reader's desk. The chancel arch is Decorated (though much repaired in 1862) and below the nave south window is a piscina with a credence or shelf, still retaining some medieval colouring. This piscina was discovered in 1910 and would have related to the chantry chapel set up here in the 13th century by Sir John de Churchill and his wife Maud, who gave two watermills to support the priest here.

On the south wall of the nave is a small benefaction board indicating that in 1733 six pounds were given in stock, to be 'laid out in



Books of devotion & piety to be distributed yearly to ye poorer Inhabitants at the discretion of the Minister'. Opposite is a royal arms of Queen Victoria, dated about 1840. Nearby are two old photographs dating from the 1860s of the Revd George Dineley and his curate the Revd George Jenkin. On the sill of the north window are two stone fragments, apparently parts of a lion and representing a finial from an earlier building.

CHANCEL

Dividing the nave from the chancel is a low 19th-century screen which, with the nearby lectern, was given to St Michael's in 1910 by the vicar and churchwardens of Great Malvern. The ceiling is still plastered. The floor is of mostly 19th-century tiles with a number of earlier ledger slabs, now almost unreadable being very worn and broken. The three-light east window was restored in the 1860s and contains a small shield of the Wysham family who were lords of the manor in the 14th century. It is flanked by four stone Gothic panels showing the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments. The 17th-century communion rails have turned balusters, ball finials and a fine guilloche carving along the top, comparable to the western vestry; nearby is

much panelling of this date.

On the north wall is a rather mysterious lozenge-shaped blocked window and an ambry or cupboard with a small door. To the east are two monumental tablets; the one to Thomas Barker, who died in 1688, is very fine with draperies, a wreathed skull and coat of arms. Further east is the other to Simon Barker who died in 1717 and his second wife Olive, much more restrained with a segmental pediment and shell apron. Near the pulpit is a window, rediscovered in 1910 and glazed with diamond-shaped quarries, illustrating many flowers to be found locally. The chest, the



The royal arms of Queen Victoria (Christopher Dalton)

settle and the panelling are all 17th century.

RECENT HISTORY

The repairs carried out from 1903 to 1910 served the church well for most of the 20th century and little was done apart from the installation of electricity in 1955. By the 1990s extensive repairs were found to be beyond the scope of the scattered parish. The congregation was small and the proximity of two other churches within half a mile (0.8km) meant that they had no means to deal with the problems of



subsidence then prevalent. The church was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in April 1999. Works were immediately started which included the strengthening and repair of the roof, repairs to the bell turret, complete replacement of rainwater goods including a new soakaway, repairs to the porch and its gates, some reglazing and improvement in ventilation and rewiring. Soon after this there was dramatic cracking of the east wall of the chancel which then needed to be pinned together and underpinned. The Architect for this work was John Goom of Evesham.

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THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are some 340 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF
All Saints, Spetchley
3 miles E of Worcester on A44

St Swithun, Worcester
Church Street, off High Street, in city centre

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Left: The 17th-century pulpit (Christopher Dalton)

Back cover: The Wysham family shield in the east window (Christopher Dalton)