

A DETAILED GUIDE TO THE CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS, STOKE PRIOR



‘Standing amidst its beautiful ‘God’s Acre’ where the memorials of the sleeping dead relieve the beautiful sylvan nature of the scene, and amidst typical Worcestershire scenery, few churches can boast of such lovely attributes of beauty ... the most beautifully-situated churchyard in the diocese.’

*Bromsgrove, Droitwich and Redditch
Weekly Messenger,
August 1895*



Welcome!

There are some 16,000 parish churches in England, each of them special and different. They share much in common, of course, but each one also has a unique story formed by the history of the place in which it is set and which, just by being there, has helped shaped that history. This is true of any church, even modern ones.

We know that there has been Christian worship here for well over a thousand years. Tens of thousands of people have lived their lives in within the influence of a place of worship close to a river which is itself remarkable. Less than 200 yards from the church the sweet waters of the Sugar Brook turn, almost instantly, into the saltiest inland river in England—the River Salwarpe ('salt water'). It passes through the ancient settlement with its story of weirs, mills and fish ponds, all long gone but whose marks are there for those who can see. The salt pan, just below the surface of the ground, the last remains of an ancient sea that dried out millions of years ago, leaches salt into the river and into the lives of dozens of generations of people.

We can stand today and breathe in all that long, long story and look up at the glorious wooden steeple with its woodpeckered shingle covering. Around us are many trees, but especially yew trees, two of which are 1200 years old. But if you visit those trees you are close to a Pokémon Palace and not far away is a geocache. The war memorial is a testimony to the brutality of the 20th century and the headstones are no longer readable because of the acid rain caused by industrial pollution.

This is no place to escape from reality, but to ponder it all in the presence of a stone witness to the truth that our complex world with its turbulent history is not meaningless or a sad accident... but is held together, made meaningful and full of hope, by the love of God which this place insists is the bedrock of existence.

So approach the porch, open the door and enter. Then open your ears, your nose, your eyes. Touch the stone, feel the wood, feel this place. The angels await you.

The Revd Canon Wyn Beynon, Priest-in-charge, 2020

Historical Introduction

In 1860, Revd. Dr. John Day Collis, Headmaster of Bromsgrove School, wrote in a pamphlet with a description of Stoke Prior Church for the Worcester Diocesan Architectural Society:

The church affords to the student of church architecture an excellent model of arrangement for a small country church. The various times at which it has been built, altered, enlarged, restored, present a great variety of styles - all of which, however, combine into a very harmonious whole, and serve as links to connect the present generation with the very earliest times when church architecture flourished in England.

The manor of Stoka or Stocka was given in about 770 AD to the Benedictine monastery at Worcester by Prince Uthred. At the time of the Domesday Book (1085) there was a priest here and therefore a church, which means that it is probable, though unproven, that there would have been a church of sorts here in Saxon times. Pevsner draws attention to what he calls a 'reused Anglo-Danish stone' set into the Norman doorway which seems to be incised with a Saxon cross motif and might suggest an earlier church. The Benedictine monastery at Worcester was dissolved at the time of the Reformation in the 16th Century, and the parish was given over to the Dean and Chapter of Worcester Cathedral.

Although churches were not the most important aspect of the Norman building programme, and despite the priority given to castles and, to a lesser extent, monastic houses and grander churches, there is much evidence of Norman activity locally—Stoke Prior itself, Henley-in-Arden, Holt and Astley to name four.

In his 'Collections for the History of Worcestershire' of 1781-2, Treadway Russell Nash gives the boundaries of the parish. The area delineated by Nash included the district that from 1868 became the separate parish of Finstall ('Estone' in Domesday—now Aston), where from as early as the 14th century stood a Chapel-of-Ease dedicated to St Godwald.

The boundaries of this manor beginning at Salop bridge extend to the broom-house, from thence to Howlard's Lane, thence to a ground of Stephen Knight, called Casbridge, including the same, from thence to Finstal heath, including it likewise, so taking in Little Finstal, and from thence to Breedon brook, and from thence to Kinchfords, including the same, from thence to Moyeslane end, including part of Warden hill, and so to Piper's hill thence to Sharpway gate, so along to Nether end of Puck Lane, thence to Obden brook, so along to Stoke heath, taking in the lord of Shrewsbury's coppice, so along to Sugars bridge, and from thence to Salop bridge where it began.

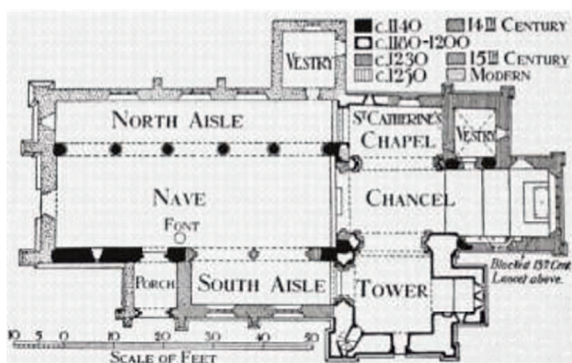
In the Domesday survey, in addition to the priest are recorded thirteen villeins, seven boaderers, four men servants and one maid. At that time much of the district was part of the extensive Forest of Feckenham which was reserved for royal hunting. For many centuries the parish was dependent on an agrarian economy, including milling which is still recalled in house names near the River Salwarpe. The parish was thinly populated until the advent of industrialisation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and the building of the canal and railway. The main occupations in the 1840s were given as agriculture, the Alkali Works (later the Salt Works), needle and nail manufacture. According to Nash, in 1563 the parish contained 49 families and by 1776 this had increased to 110 families. The Census returns show the rapid increase in the population over the 19th century:

	<i>1801</i>	<i>1851</i>	<i>1901</i>	<i>1951</i>	<i>2001</i>
<i>Persons</i>	754	1613	2744	2329	2008
<i>Households</i>	168	318	609	684	872

The Architecture of the Church

St. Michael's, Stoke Prior, like most of the churches to be found in this part of Worcestershire, is built of local sandstone.

The general architecture of the church falls into five main periods: Norman, Early English, Decorated, Perpendicular and Victorian. It is this delightful variety of 'languages' used in the architecture of St. Michael's that makes the visitor's experience such a fascinating one. The church comprises a Chancel, a Vestry, North and South Aisles, a Sacristy, two small Chapels, and a Tower and Spire South of the Chancel, which forms the South East corner of the church.



Plan of St. Michael and All Angels

The Nave

The North Arcade consists of five bays, all uniform, squat and massive Norman pillars, surmounted by simple Norman arches, resting on round abaci with plain capitals. It is typical of Norman architecture, but unremarkable when compared with, for example, the elaborately moulded chancel arch of St. Nicholas' Church, Beaudesert, suggesting an earlier date after the Norman conquest. It has been suggested that the original Norman Church consisted only of the Eastmost three bays of the Nave. The third freestanding column from the East does look as though it could have been a respond. But if this were indeed the case, it is difficult to

account for all the Norman features to the West of the third bay. The South door by which one enters is indisputably very ancient and there is a Norman window to the West of this doorway. Both door and window are consistent in style and age with the rest of the Norman work, and yet would have been outside the supposed three-bay Church. It is as likely that the original Norman Church was of the five bays that one sees today, and that the third free-standing column from the East has simply been repaired in a way which makes it look as though it was once a respond.

The North Aisle wall, which had been originally of very rough rubble, was rebuilt in 1848 during a restoration under the supervision of architect Harvey Eginton (1809-1849); for some time before that it had been partly bricked up and used as a school. It was again rebuilt during the major restoration under John Corbett of 1894-5 which was supervised by John Loughborough Pearson (1817-97). Outside the building is preserved the threshold and lower parts of the jambs of the old North Door (or 'Devil's Door' as such doors were often known). To the West of this doorway can be seen a stone with old consecration crosses. The Bishop, when he consecrated the Church, used to mark a cross with holy oil, and the masons followed him and incised a cross on the stone. The West end of the nave was rebuilt in 1865, which J. L. Pearson thought had been done 'with little regard to the character of this ancient work' and further repairs were made in the restoration of 1895.

The Roof of the Nave was built in the 1895 Corbett restoration, and it replaces one dating from 1865 with 'light timbers, poor in effect' (Pearson). It is a barrel-vaulted roof, a type which is more usually found in the South West of England. The roof of the North arcade is of much the same date. Also worth noting is the small carving of St. Michael on the North Aisle wall, made from the wood of the old mediaeval roof.



Carving of St. Michael

The South Arcade consists of two bays, built a century after those of the North Arcade, in the Early English style. The pillars have four conjoined shafts and their bases are of the water table type. The capitals consist of moulded bells with overhanging abaci. According to Dr. Collis, they ‘are the gem of the Church. They have often been measured and used as a model, and a better one it is hardly possible to conceive. There is an elegant simplicity united with all requisite strength.’

The South Aisle is built in the Perpendicular style, the last phase of English Gothic—of about the 15th Century. There are two graceful four centred arch windows of three lights, which contrast well with the two centred pointed arches in the South arcade. The battlements, windows and pinnacles are all the hallmarks of this Perpendicular style.

At the East end of the South Aisle can be found a 12th or 13th Century effigy of a priest—originally a horizontal coffin slab—in very poor condition. He is wearing an alb, chasuble and maniple, and there was once a serpent at his feet (now gone). It was moved from the South Aisle in 1848 to make way for additional seating, to return in 1895. In 1982 it was affixed to the wall beside the arch. It is said that in the 19th century the coals for heating the church were broken on this figure, perhaps explaining its poor appearance!



The coffin slab

At the West end of the South Aisle are two small early 17th Century brasses in memory of Henry Smith and Robert Smith, both of London. The charity founded by Henry Smith to assist in the education of young people in the parish still exists, although its resources are now quite limited. The Robert Smith memorial originally stood in St Catherine's Chapel but became hidden when the organ was placed in the Chapel; it was eventually moved here and mounted by Pancheri & Son in 1975 (the Pancheri family were woodcarvers in the tradition of the Bromsgrove Guild, an early 20th century collective of craftsmen working with traditional materials). Pancheri carried out much work in the church.

Also at the West end of this Aisle stands an ancient dug out chest in poor condition. It is not possible to date this chest accurately since it is constructed of elm, a wood not capable of providing data for analysis with dendrochronology. However, expert opinion suggests that it could date from the 12th or 13th Centuries which could make it the original parish chest, in which were stored the vestments, records, plate and other valuables of the church. The oak lid and 3 locks are of later date. The two churchwardens and the priest would each hold one of the 3 keys, so that the chest could only be opened when all three were present. G. K. Stanton says in 1884 that the chest was kept in the vestry.

The roofing of the South Aisle is 15th Century and is the only section of roofing which has not been replaced in Victorian times. Its date is consistent with that of the embattled South wall and its Perpendicular windows. One can see above the Tower arch at the East end of the South Aisle the line of a steeper roof that would have existed before the present 16th Century roof.

The floor of polished tiles and wood that one sees now was laid in 1895. J. L. Pearson, whose report of 1892 was taken very seriously by the restoration financier, John Corbett, suggested lowering the floor nine inches to its original level by removing the surface earth, 'impregnated with human remains,' that lay beneath the old floor. A layer of concrete was then laid, upon which the tiles and wood blocks were put down.

The Font, on the right as one enters the church, is octagonal in shape and dates from the 14th century. Dr. Collis says that the carvings were all plastered flat until 1848. It is possible to make out relief carvings of a baptism on one of the sides, and on six others there are censuring angels, and angels with shields. The remaining side has no carvings, which has been the side facing or against the wall. On the base there are carved oak leaves, and above them are Tudor roses and ornamented cresting. Church records say that in 1846 the font stood in the South Aisle when it was moved to its present position. The cover is believed to have been made as part of the work in 1895.



The Font

The South Doorway is Norman and has one order of colonettes, with plain leaf capitals and a rounded arch with roll mouldings. On the exterior, according to Pevsner, to the left of the left capital is a re-used Anglo-Danish stone with close interlace. To the West of this doorway is a round leaded Norman window, with modern glass. The present Porch of the South Doorway was built during the 1895 restoration and replaces an old Perpendicular one of open timber work. It is thought that this may have been the old lych-gate removed from the East side of the churchyard—parts of which have also been reworked into the present lych-gate on the South West side of the churchyard.

St. Catherine's Chapel

St. Catherine's Chapel was built onto the North arcade in the later 12th Century but, unlike the Lady Chapel on the opposite side of the 'quasitranssept,' is not in normal use; it houses the organ, which was placed there in 1895. The Norman Arch leading from the North Aisle has, like the chancel arch, been greatly restored. The Chapel contains an interesting dormer window of Early Decorated date, reckoned at the time of the 1895 restoration to be probably one of the first examples in the country, and also a small Norman window. There were once stairs leading up to the Rood Loft on the South side of the Chapel, but they were knocked down in the 19th Century. Despite the order for the removal of the lofts and screens at the time of the Reformation, a great many still survive, particularly in East Anglia and the South West of England, which is an area rich in the loveliest fan vault screens. The only remains of this feature of St. Michael's, like St. John's, Bromsgrove, is the loft doorway, which can be seen above the North jamb of the chancel arch. The Choir Vestry, to the West of St. Catherine's Chapel in the North Aisle, was added in 1895.

The Chancel

The Chancel Arch has trumpet capitals, and a double chamfered arch but has been much restored in the 19th Century. J. L. Pearson considered that the walls of the chancel were of 12th Century origin into which windows of later dates have been intermittently inserted—a practice which is by no means uncommon. The window on the North side is Early English, and that on the South side is Early Decorated. The East Window of five



One of three Sedilia in the Chancel

lights and flamboyant tracery, which almost completely fills the gable end, is Decorated, apparently replacing an earlier Early English window. The Piscina and Sedilia are of the 13th Century. The Piscina has a rough trefoiled head, a circular basin and a modern shelf. The three Sedilia are divided by detached octagonal shafts supporting pointed and moulded heads. Above the shafts, one can see small grotesque figures. In the 14th Century the Chancel was extended, and it was at this time that the large East Window, with its superb reticulated tracery, was added.

The oak Pulpit was made for the 1895 restoration, replacing one situated on the opposite side of the Chancel steps, where there now stands the 19th century Eagle Lectern made in Spanish Chestnut.



The Eagle Lectern

Much of the decoration in the Sanctuary is owed to the Price family, who lived at Field View, Brickhouse Lane. The Reredos, panelling and Altar Rails were designed in 1938 by Eric Gill (1888-1940), a controversial figure in the artistic world of engraving and sculpture. They were presented to the church by Charles Price, the Altar rails being in memory of his son Cecil, who died in action in 1917, and the Reredos and panelling in memory of his wife Alice who died in 1935. Later a pair of oak altar candlesticks were presented by daughter Alice in memory of both her parents.

The original working drawings for the Reredos were not well received by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (acting as the Lay Rectors of the Chancel), who considered the figures to be 'balletic' and preferred a more 'architectural' design. Initially they threatened to withhold their consent to the work, but subsequently agreed that they would not object if the Bishop of Worcester's Advisory Committee accepted the design, which they did. Gill himself died in 1940, and the War also intervened, and it was not until 1948 that Gill's work was realised by Pancheri, possibly in association with Anthony Foster who posthumously completed some of Gill's work, though even then the work was not without its difficulties owing to the shortage of timber after the War.

The Reredos forms a kind of triptych with three panels. In the centre panel is the figure of Christ on the cross. His mother Mary stands on the left and St John the 'beloved disciple' on the right, holding the chalice of the Last Supper and a book with Christ's words: 'Love one another' from the Gospel attributed to St John. This pairing of Our Lady and St John can also be seen in the East lancet windows of the Lady Chapel. In the panel on the left is the figure of St Catherine holding the wheel as the

symbol of her martyrdom and a book representing her famed learning. The right-hand panel has an unusual representation of an un-warlike St Michael, holding his spear upright and wearing a sheathed sword at his side, but lacking a depiction of the dragon. One of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners' objections was that this figure of the archangel Michael had no wings!

In the oak case on the wall near the Lectern is an illuminated manuscript of the Litany, according to the Book of Common Prayer. It was written, illuminated and bound by Ivy E. Harper and completed in March 1906, a work of great skill, patience and love. The manuscript and the oak case in which it is housed, made by Pancheri in 1947, was given to the church in 1948 by Christine Headley in memory of her father and mother, Lorenzo and Frances Helen Headley. The manuscript can be lit up by the light switch placed on the top of the case.

The Choir Stalls (replacing temporary seating in the Chancel) and the ornately carved Parscreens, designed by C. Ford Whitcombe and made by Houghton of Worcester, were given in memory of Charles Steer by his wife following his death in 1906. There is also a Wooden Cross in the Porch preserved from his grave. Charles Steer was the first Chairman of the company GKN (formed in the early 1900's through an amalgamation of the Guest, Keen and Nettlefold companies), which was then a major manufacturing company based in the West Midlands, and is now a £multi-billion supplier to the automotive and aerospace industries throughout the world. He built Forelands, a house at the top of Rock Hill, which was later used as a hospital but is now demolished. He was churchwarden at Stoke Prior at the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 and his name was inscribed in that capacity on one of the two new bells of the church cast that year.



The Parclose Screen

The Sacristy

On the North Wall of the Chancel is a doorway leading to the 13th Century Sacristy (normally locked), which is lit by an Early English lancet window on the East wall. The roof is of very simple stone vaulting, the ribs of which spring from angled corbels. Above the sacristy and St Catherine's Chapel is a small room which is said to have housed a recluse, or to have been used by a priest who guarded the sacrament before the Reformation, or used as a strong room. The only access to this cell is from St Catherine's Chapel, and the opening can just be seen by the Chancel arch.

The Lady Chapel

The Lady Chapel (known as St. Mary's Chapel) is in the base of the Tower, at the East end of the South Aisle, and like the Tower is Early English in style. The Chapel is lit by a single lancet on the West wall, a single lancet high on the East wall, a pair of lancets on the South wall and a pair of small lancets in the peculiar projection on the East side. This small projecting Chapel was thought by J. L. Pearson to be unique, and he suspects it may have been rather an afterthought, added while the Tower was being built. It has caused the re-organisation of the windows on the East of the tower, because in order to avoid the projection, these windows had to be raised above the general line of the other second stage windows.

Before 1848 the Chapel was blocked up 'for the purpose of keeping the church warmer' but it was then opened and used for siting the organ. Even after the 1895 restoration the Chapel was not used for worship but for seating boys who were marched to the church from the local Reformatory School (another benefaction by John Corbett). When this ceased, the Chapel was re-ordered in 1934 with oak posts and decorated curtains surrounding the early 17th Century table then placed here, with materials supplied by the Bromsgrove Guild. The only survivors of this work are a silver-plated decorative cross and two candlesticks made by the Guild in the Arts and Craft style, donated by churchwarden Edwin Bowen.

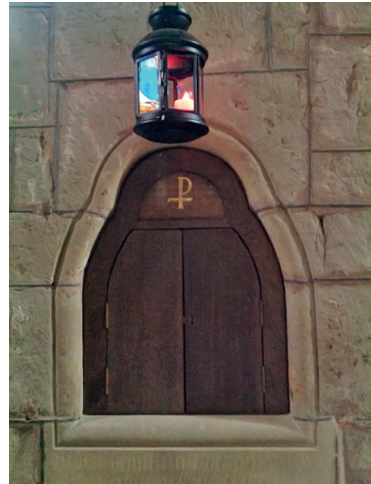
The Chapel was re-ordered again in its present form in 1982 in memory of Edwin Gittus, a local Alderman and several times churchwarden, with a new altar, kneelers and benches made in elm by Robert Pancheri. The

small square altar is decorated with versions of the ancient Christian *chi-rho* symbol on each side (*chi* and *rho* being the first two letters in Greek of the name 'Christ'). On one panel there is also a picture of a fish - another old Christian symbol, since in Greek the letters of the word for fish (*ichthus*) can stand for: 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.' The matching furnishings are in gold. The old communion table, with its frieze of incised lunettes which may date from c1580, was renovated in 2006 and is now regularly employed for Communion services in the main church. When not in use it is to be found against the wall of the South Aisle.

The piscina in the south wall next to the altar was converted into an aumbry in 1996, again by Pancheri, with the addition of an aumbry lamp with the fish motif and displaying the words: Faith, Hope, Love, Peace.

The black colour of the cement, especially noticeable in the chapel but also elsewhere, is the result of the use of sand which had become blackened from polishing needles in the local needle-making industry.

Two doors can be seen on the South wall of the Lady Chapel, the one nearest to the altar leading to the churchyard, and the other opening to the Tower staircase.



The Piscina

The Tower

The Tower is considered by Pevsner to be 'the visual climax of the Church... The whole tower is a splendidly self-contained, sturdy piece.' It dates from the 13th Century and is a beautiful example of a more or less unaltered Early English tower, despite the later addition of a Spire. It is placed on the South side at the East end of the South Aisle, standing quite clear on two sides, and partly engaged on the third. The fourth side opens with a

fine arch into the Chancel. Dr. Collis remarks:

In many modern towers there is want of blind stories; the use of which is to rest the eye, by sparing it the fatigue of taking too much ornament; and the blank spaces also serve to give greater prominence to the ornamented stories—they answer the same purpose as shadows in a picture.

Here at Stoke Prior, the untouched excellence of detail in the Tower is enhanced by the positive functioning quality of the blind arcading on the second stage of the Tower, and the semi-blind windows on the fourth stage. The totally blind third stage, a common device, draws the spectator's eye upwards. The second stage consists of two Early English lancet windows (the first phase of English Gothic), decorated with dog-tooth carving, flanked by two shorter blank arches, resembling those found on the East



The Tower

wall of the Tower. The third stage, originally blind, has had two modern lancets cut into the North side to light the ringing chamber. These North side third stage windows are seen only partially from one side, therefore affecting little the function of the blind third stage. The fourth stage, or bell chamber, has three lancets of beautiful proportions on each side. Above this runs the original corbel table, in which human heads and rams' heads have been carved in irregular sequence. At the very top of the Tower, a Victorian parapet has been added; before this the base of the spire overlapped slightly with the top of the Tower. The stair turret projects slightly on the South West corner of the tower but does not affect the overall balance of the tower. It is an altogether beautifully organised piece of work.

The Ringing Chamber was added in the 19th Century before which the ringers stood in the Lady Chapel itself. There are eight bells, of which originally the earliest was cast in 1620 and the last in 1897. Stanton in 1884 lists the inscriptions on the four bells existing at that time:

Honi soit qui maly pense 1620
Soli Deo Gloria hominibus. 1663
Thomas Carpenter. Stephen Smith. 1663
Henry Bagly made me. 1676

Two more bells were cast in 1886, one bearing the inscription: J Corbett.

Then in 1897 two bells were made to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, funded by public subscription and John Corbett, with the following inscriptions:

Victoria LX annos regina. C. Steer, S. Harrell testibus.
V.R.1837-1897. Jubilate Deo. Hujus reg Joh Corbett
ecclesiam restituit.

In 1948 the bells were extensively refurbished by John Taylor of Loughborough. Six of the bells were re-cast; the others were cleaned by sandblasting and had their clappers turned to strike unworn surfaces. The peal is tuned in the key of A natural.

The Window Glass

The only ancient glass in the Church is to be found in the Lady Chapel, in the top East facing lancet window. It is medieval and is believed to have been brought from Malvern Priory. One account is that it was brought to Stoke Prior by the Vicar's wife in 1845. Another more colourful account given in about 1911 is as follows: 'Many years ago the Vicar of Stoke Prior being at Malvern noticed a man near the Priory, who was wheeling away a barrow of rubbish amongst which were several pieces of broken glass. On asking the man what he was going to do with it, he replied, he was going to throw it away. 'Well,' said the Vicar, 'pick out the glass and put it in a box, and I will give you half-a-crown for it.'



The East Window

Many of the windows—though not all—are connected in some way to John Corbett. A large part of the East window commemorates his ending the practice of female employment in 1860. The five main lights were designed by Dr. Sebastian Evans and made by Chance Bros of Smethwick in 1860 and are considered by Pevsner to be ‘rather strident in colours’ although they were much admired at the time. It was paid for by ‘friends of John Corbett,’ as the plaque to the South of the Altar Rail declares, for having ‘nobly stood forth in the cause of Morality’ in putting an end to the employment of women and girls in his pits—a humane step that was to have wide-reaching social repercussions. Christ and the four Evangelists stand within architectural niches. In the centre Christ holds the chalice of the Last Supper signifying his Passion and raises his hand in blessing. The Evangelists hold their distinctive emblems: a man for Matthew, a lion for Mark, an ox for Luke and an eagle for John (the symbols being based on Revelation chapter 4). The upper lights of the East window, also showing the Evangelists’ emblems and figures of angels surrounding the Lamb of God, were inserted during the 1895 Corbett restoration by Samuel Evans of Smethwick. He had previously been employed by Chance Bros but had set up his own stained-glass firm after being made redundant when Chance ceased making stained glass windows in 1868. It is said these upper lights previously housed the fragments of mediaeval glass brought from Malvern, or fragments of old glass from the church itself, which were then placed into the East window of the Tower.

Many stained-glass windows in the Chancel, Nave and Tower, with their decorative cartouches and multi-coloured floral motifs and diamond quarries, were part of the re-ordering largely paid for by John Corbett in 1865, the windows being executed by Chance Bros. The centrepiece of this work is the West window, representing in its central middle light of three the winged Archangel Michael overcoming a fierce red dragon with green and red wings, representing Satan or the Devil. This traditional depiction of St Michael comes from Revelation chapter 12:

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated ...

The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent,
who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole
world—he was thrown down to the earth.

Beneath the St Michael panel is a roundel showing a raven at its centre,
with an elephant and a castle: this is the Corbett coat of arms. The Corbett
motto: *Deus Pascit Corvos*—‘God feeds the Ravens’—also appears.



The Raven Roundel

In the Chancel in the lancet of the North wall is a window of St John the Evangelist. This was designed by Herbert Bryans in 1904 in memory of George Edmund Abell who died in 1901. Bryans usually signed his work with a running hound, and this can be seen placed after the dedication. The two lower lancet windows in the East wall of the Lady Chapel show Mary, the mother of Jesus, bearing white lilies for purity, and St John, Apostle and Evangelist, holding the chalice of the Last Supper. This pairing may be

explained by the story that when Jesus was dying on the cross, he entrusted his mother into the care of St John, who was also described as the ‘beloved disciple’ of Jesus. The date and maker of these windows is unknown.

The stained glass in the East lancet window of the Sacristy features the 350ft chimney which was the dominating edifice of John Corbett’s Salt Works. At the time of its construction in 1836 it was said to be the second highest structure in the country. It was finally demolished in 1957 after standing for 120 years. Dodford artist Paul Phillips was commissioned to design the window, which was funded by Bayer Co., operating on the site of the old Salt Works. The window was commissioned as part of the centenary celebrations to commemorate the 1895 restoration funded by Corbett and dedicated in 1997.



The Salt Works Window

The Statue of Christ the King

Set into a niche—probably originally made to accommodate a statue—in a buttress to the South wall, to the East of the South Porch, is a statue of ‘Christ the Servant King’, showing Christ looking out over the churchyard with hands held out in welcome and blessing. It was made by John Poole F.R.E.S. of Bishampton near Pershore and was commissioned as a Millennium gift for the church, financed by the Stoke Prior Millennium Fund. Befitting its description, it was dedicated by the Bishop of Worcester on the Sunday of Christ the King, 26th November 2000.



The Statue of Christ the King

The Restoration of St. Michael's, Stoke Prior, 1894-5

Following a report in July 1892 by the London architect, John Loughborough Pearson R.A., an impressive restoration programme was carried out in 1894-5 at a cost of £4,500. It was financed by John Corbett who owned the nearby Salt Works, and lived at Chateau Impney, a large flamboyant house in the Louis XIII style, outside Droitwich. John Corbett is mentioned for restoration work on St. Michael's Stoke Prior on more than one occasion. He spent about £1,500 in 1864-5 and £4,500 in 1895. There was no doubt that Corbett was very generous in his giving to the parish where his fortune was

founded. Just how generous depends on the interpretation of sums of money in Victorian times compared with the present day.

Measures of inflation are hard to stretch over a century, because the pattern of expenditure, the 'basket of goods', has changed so much. In 1878 the Winsford Saltmakers Association paid its members who were in dispute £0.25 for each married couple and £0.05 for each child, both per week. So if we take a family of four working 48 weeks per year, we arrive at an annual income of about £17 for a Cheshire saltmaker. So the smaller restoration cost 88 years' pay and the large work of 1895, 265 years' pay. The calculations based on these pay rates for £660,000 received on the sale of Stoke Works and the reputed £200,000 spent on Chateau Impney are left to the reader. Captains of Victorian industry could apparently afford to spend freely, and Corbett's wealth was certain to arouse envy as well as respect.

John Corbett's early years were spent with his barge-owning family in Brierley Hill. This was a time when canals were at the cutting edge of a transport revolution which was happening alongside the industrial revolution, each sustaining the other.

He left school at eleven to work on the boats and seems to have been content with this business for some years. In 1840 at the late age of 23 he apprenticed himself to the chief engineer of an ironworks at Stourbridge. He must have felt something wanting in his education, and engineering was certainly a key discipline of the time and area where he lived.

Six years later he came out of training to become a partner in his father's business. Canals were at the peak of their success but threatened by the emergent railway network for the carriage of passengers, mails and urgent goods. From 1845 John seems to have been interested in the British Alkali works at Stoke Prior. In 1852 Corbett senior and John sold the canal boat business. His father retiring, it was only two years before John bought the derelict works at Stoke Prior.

He was then 37, and faced with a seemingly impossible task. Although brine had been discovered here in 1825, no one had so far made their fortune from exploiting it. The previous owners had failed financially since surface water had run into the brine shafts and diluted the liquid so much that it was uneconomic to evaporate out the salt because of the expense of the coal needed. Coal had to be carried to Stoke by canal and so was dear.

The Salt Works

No records survive of what must have been an uphill financial and physical struggle to put the works back into production. At first John lived within the factory complex, supervising the lining of the brine shafts with cast iron segments sealed together to prevent water seeping in to dilute and spoil.

This would have been a great expense before a ton of salt was sold. Once the brine could be pumped at acceptable strength, Stoke Works was back where its previous decline had started. It took only John's inspired improvements to turn it into a little gold mine.

One of these innovations was a larger salt pan, still heated by coal fires and scraped by hand, but making the best possible use of fuel and labour because of its increased size. As the brine crystallized it was raked to the side of the pan for packing into tapering mould boxes before final packing in lumps or as the powder we know today. All this was carried out under cover in an atmosphere of coal smoke and evaporating brine which was nothing if not hot and humid. At first men and women worked together, all usually stripped to the waist. There was no proper shift system and the use and abuse of alcohol abounded as a reaction to the appalling working conditions. This was totally destructive of the family life which the Victorians so cherished and which even today forms a framework for the upbringing of children.

So far you have read about a great Victorian who succeeded by determination and technical skills. In 1859 John Corbett gave his workers something he didn't need to. He abolished female labour at the salt pans. No law said he must, and women were commonly employed in factories. His profits would have continued to roll in had he simply kept women at Stoke Works. Yet he did not.

The appalling conditions of work for his women seem to have made a deep impression on the barge-owner's son. Where he had no doubt enjoyed a family background, the salt works was denying it to his employees' children. He also seems to have had a very fundamental belief in correct relations between the sexes, and in Victorian times this could have been strong enough to overrule the profit motive.

What this decision of 1859 brings home to me, apart from the joy of the East window in which it is commemorated at St. Michael's, is a separation of moral thought from economic practice. John's morality overwhelmed his profit motive. In business dealings he was seldom so particular, and has been accused of sharp practice, notably in contesting the Droitwich parliamentary seat. Nonetheless, his care for his workers won through in this instance.

Just sacking the women would not have bettered the lot of man, woman or child. John Corbett went ahead with a thorough campaign to

improve living conditions for his families. He provided 'model' housing and a school, as well as raising his men's wages to compensate for the loss of female earnings. To be fair, his men received only 15% above the salt industry norm, but even this was a great deal in times when the salt trade could be depressed, and he was forced to warn his workers of the need to save coal.

As the years went by the lean times for the industry became more frequent, John's exhortations to save materials more desperate, and the issue of the emerging trades unions more pressing. Although a Liberal MP, he opposed the unions, telling his men that they would lose their jobs. In 1888 he sold the works at Stoke Prior to the coming employers' monopoly.

If he was successful in business, his married life was less reason for pride. During the lean times refurbishing the derelict works he remained single. However, soon afterwards he made a trip to Paris and met Anna Eliza O'Meara. She was the French daughter of a partly Irish family, who were very proud of a Napoleonic connection. He was then not living 'over the works', but at Stoke Grange (now the Bromsgrove School Pre-Preparatory building, Stoke Heath). Here he brought his new bride in 1856, when he was 39. Although the early years of their marriage seem to have been happy, Anna Eliza insisted on retaining her Roman Catholic faith and regularly attended services and confession. This sowed the seeds of discord as John began a political career. During the 1868 election campaign for the Droitwich seat, his political opponents, the Tories, made capital out of his wife's religion.

His other great scheme of this period was the French palace at Chateau Impney. One of the architectural successes of the age, no expense was spared in turning a plot near Droitwich into a little corner of France. The expense of all this was only too obvious to his Stoke Works employees, despite their generous pay. It was little satisfaction to them that the Chateau was already being financed by shrewdly invested profits as much as new wealth from salt.

Family life at the Chateau Impney was far from happy. The male children were brought up as Anglicans, the girls as Roman Catholics. Mrs. Corbett

was kept very short of money. To cap it all, in Spring 1876 she announced she was pregnant, and John insisted the child could not be his. Thereafter she and the children lived in the property he modernized near Towyn in Merioneth. The separation was made official in 1884. Thereafter he lived an increasingly solitary life.

John Corbett's later years were dogged with illness. He began to suffer from a persistent paralysis. His constant companion was his brother, Dr Tom Corbett. Tom may have written the last will, which John regretted on his deathbed as unfair to his children.

A few last great works belong to this period. The Stoke Prior restoration of St Michael's was an empty triumph—John was on his sick bed when the Bishop came to the re-dedication service. He also missed the opening of the new station at Droitwich Spa. The end came in 1901. It was sudden, the result of a stroke. He was buried with great ceremony in Stoke Prior churchyard under two ancient yew trees. His brother Tom was buried next to him 5 years later.

There were things for which we could blame John Corbett. Others deserve praise, such as the ending of female labour. In the United Parish of Stoke Prior, Wychbold and Upton Warren we owe him two churches. For these we must be grateful.



The Corbett Graves

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