

St Michael's Church, Compton Chamberlayne

Information about the Church located inside St Michael's:

From a brief entry in Domesday Book we glean that this valley is little changed from Norman times, though there is no evidence of Norman building. Contone, as it was then called, was renamed Compton Chamberlayne when it became the property of one Robert le Chamberlayne in medieval times.

“Compton” means “the village in the valley”, and the manor had even in early times two woods, a mill, pastures and meadowland and comprised some 2000 acres. The lake which adds so much to its scenic beauty was created by a dam across the northern end in the 18th Century; it is fed by large springs. Compton House was built in 1550 by Sir Edward Penruddocke, who came from the Cumberland village of Penruddock near Greystoke and Penrith.

There are no signs or records of a Norman or Pre-conquest church. The present church was built at the end of the 13th century in the Early English style, when Salisbury Cathedral was rising ten miles away. The church is thus three hundred years older than the great house which, with it, dominates and graces the valley. The church registers, which date from 1538 and are as old as any in the country, have been transferred to the care of the Diocesan authorities for safe custody.

The path to the church leads to the south door, beneath the TOWER. The tower is little changed, with gargoyles that are Early English. There are six bells, three of them ancient with the inscriptions:

- Anno Domini 1616 RP
- GPR John Porte Francis Ford CW 1656 (Named for the churchwardens)
- Honour the King 1616 I.W.

The bells were re-hung in 1978 and the ringing chamber with the steep staircase to the left of the porch constructed in 1982. Before the ringers stood in the porch and the congregation moved between them whilst ringing (very dangerous!) in order to enter the church. The tower is home to bats.

Outside the church door to the left is the base of a churchyard cross, but the cross itself has disappeared.

Above the PORCH doorway is a cleft in the stone that has, for at least twenty-five years, been the home to wild bees. One enters through the porch, underneath the tower, and through the south door into the nave.

There are two fountains, both ancient. The one in use is just inside the south door: it is about 13th century. The other which is late Norman (12th century or later), lay in the churchyard for some years. It is no longer in use and is now in the porch.

Beside the south door of the nave is a Holy Water stoup.

In 1878 the church was re-roofed, the north and south transepts largely rebuilt, the floor of the nave taken up and re-laid, and a gallery removed from the west end. There is a light airy interior owing to the lack of stained glass in the relatively big windows, and the narrowness of the church. To accommodate the Penruddocke family vault the floor of the chancel is raised at the east end, coincidentally adding the one hint of High Church to an otherwise very plain Low Church interior.

In the NAVE floor is a gravestone in memory of Christopher Ford 1681, who may have been related to both the Vicar and the churchwarden of the same name. At the west end is the organ, which replaced a harmonium by Alexandre. The organ belonged to Sir Walter Alcock, MVO, Salisbury Cathedral organist from 1917 to 1947, who used it for some years for choir practices at his home in Cathedral Close. It was acquired by him in 1936. The electric blower was added in 1951 when the church was wired for lighting. The organ

was completely refurbished by Richard Godfrey in 1983 and again during the summer of 2005, and was ready for the celebration of Harvest Festival.

The NORTH TRANSEPT was at one time a chantry chapel: there is a credence table, and an ancient cross is carved into the floor. It is now used as the vestry.

The pulpit is oaken, in good style but not ancient.

In the SOUTH TRANSEPT there is mounted an ancient iron chest with elaborate locking devices. It was put in working order sometime around the 1970s by a member of the congregation.

The seats in the CHOIR were the gift of the Penruddocke family and were used by them. On the ends are blazoned the family arms, some impaled with those of the Long family of Rood Ashton, to which Mrs Flora Penruddocke belonged. Charles Penruddocke married her in 1855.

In the floor of the CHANCEL is the impress of a brass, now lost, probably that of a woman or priest. On the north wall of the chancel are two interesting tablets:

1. A record of the Penruddocke family with the dates of their deaths. This includes Sir John Penruddocke who rose in support of Charles II after the battle of Worcester, was driven westward to Exeter by the Cromwellian cavalry, captured & executed. His letters to his wife from gaol in Exeter are notable in English literature.
2. A memorial to Rev J Martin, who died in 1693 having suffered ejection from his cure during the Commonwealth. It was he who buried Colonel Sir John Penruddocke in May 1655.

The communion table is of carved oak and is thought to be Cromwellian.

All in all, it is a beautiful little church, and with it the mellow dignity of Compton House, the lake and the wooded parklands, make it a scene hard to rival. Please sign the visitors book before you go.

(written 1979 and edited 2006)