

St Michael & All Angels, Flax Bourton

Statement of Significance

Introduction and context

Flax Bourton is a village of approximately 750 residents, located within the unitary authority of North Somerset, 5 miles southwest of Bristol. Despite being so close to a large urban centre, the village is still surrounded by extensive farm and woodland and retains a strong sense of its rural heritage and connection to the land even among those whose lives today are orientated towards the city.

St Michael's Church has served the Flax Bourton community for almost a thousand years and today is the only community space in the village which is open and accessible to all on a daily basis. Both the building and the small churchyard which surrounds it provide a much-valued oasis of peace and seclusion from the clamours of life, not to mention the traffic on the busy A370 which runs through the parish!

The church has undergone several modifications between the late 13th and 15th centuries, with a significant Victorian restoration in the mid-19th century, including the creation of the north aisle. The Grade II listed building comprises a three-bay nave and features a mix of Saxon, Norman, and later Gothic architectural elements. Particularly notable features include the Saxon sculpted relief of St. Michael vanquishing the dragon in the porch, carvings of a similar date on the chancel arch, an ancient 12th-century font, a three-stage west tower, and beautiful stained-glass windows. The most recent of these was added in 2024 and celebrates the community and landscape in which we're set, with images of distinctive local flora and fauna as well as notable buildings and landmarks.

We are a small but committed congregation (around a dozen regular Sunday worshippers alternate weekly between Barrow Gurney and Flax Bourton) and nonetheless play an active role in community life. We enjoy a thriving partnership with Flax Bourton Church of England Primary School and host regular midweek

gatherings in our building, including prayer meetings, a monthly soup lunch, and a weekly café.

We find that our mission and outreach to the community is increasingly built around the Eco Church framework, and a programme of church-hosted events and talks throughout the year engage a wider audience from the immediate community and beyond.

It is out of this missional context of community engagement, hospitality and creation-care that the current proposals for adaptation of our heating system have arisen.

Exterior

The church is surrounded by a small churchyard which remains open for burial of bodies and cremated remains. It is tended by the PCC in line with a churchyard management plan which aims to balance the provision of a peaceful and reverent environment for remembering the departed alongside promoting habitats for a diversity of living creatures and cultivating a ‘green oasis’ in the heart of our community.

The churchyard contains a number of historic memorials, including a listed chest tomb which the PCC regularly inspects and maintains as necessary, and the remains of the base of a 14th C preaching cross.

An area for cremated remains has been delineated with slate edging and gravel around the perimeter of the churchyard on the western and northern sides.

The most recent additions to the churchyard include a crab apple tree planted in 2023 in memory of those who have served the community over the years (this year’s harvest produced jam for the community to enjoy!) and a bench with herb planters to create a place for quiet reflection, as well as various wildlife-friendly habitats such as nesting boxes and a small ‘scrape’.

Interior

Similarly to the churchyard, the interior of the building seeks to maintain the palpable sense of intimacy and sacred space which

the ancient stonework exudes alongside accommodating the busy life of a vibrant parish church and community gathering place.

The porch maintains its historic identity as a ‘liminal space’ linking church and community. It has a glass outer door, encouraging access and protection from the weather, and presents visitors with a host of accessible information about the life of the church today, including a display of artwork from the school which changes on a termly basis. There is also a book exchange and seed swap, plus field guides to explore the churchyard.

Inside, although occupying a relatively small footprint, the building has evolved to accommodate a range of uses appropriate to a community-focused parish church whilst maintaining the sense of intimacy and sacred space which its prayer-soaked stones express.

Re-ordering in the 1980’s saw the removal of the Victorian pipe organ and pews to create a flexible nave with a level, solid stone floor and stackable chairs (which are regular repositioned for different expressions of worship/prayer as well as other events), and an enclosed meeting room. The addition of a small kitchen and WC to the north west in 2005 completes the more recent adaptations which serve the mission of the church.

A moveable nave altar is used to celebrate Communion on most occasions. Passing through the Norman arch, the chancel with its beautifully crafted reredos, remains reserved for prayer and reflection throughout the week with resources available for visitors to pray and reflect.

Of the historic fixtures, most notably, a 19th C oak pulpit reached by three steps remains in situ to the south of the chancel arch along with a Victorian double-sided lectern.

Many of the windows contain stained glass of particularly high quality and interest (including some Kempe), the details of which are recorded in a separate publication. They are often used as focus for teaching and prayer, particularly for school visits.

The walls contain a number of historic memorials in stone and brass, predominantly on the south wall, as well as two RBL standards laid up when local branches closed. These are positioned

on the west wall, either side of the entrance from the nave to the tower which, in turn, houses a small vestry and storage area, plus access to the belfry and clock room.

In summary, the interior of the building is ‘small but perfectly formed’ and ‘punches above its weight’ in terms of the flexibility of uses it is able to accommodate without losing a sense of integrity. This has been achieved by careful adaptations, developed organically out of missional reality, over an extended period. This is a tradition we are keen to continue with the current proposals.

Impact on significance

The current proposals seek to replace the gas-fired central heating system with an far-infra red electrical installation manufactured by Herschel, comprising two ‘Halo’ chandeliers and three ‘Horizon’ panel heaters placed in the nave and north aisle respectively.

Once the boiler is decommissioned, we propose to leave the Victorian cast-iron radiators in place to minimise disruption/damage to the floor and walls by removal, as well as maintaining a part of the story of the building’s evolution and visual character.

In terms of the new installation, we have identified three areas of impact. These are described below, together with assessment of the ‘harm’ and proposed mitigation.

Visual

On entering the building, the primary visual impact will be the addition of two ‘Halo’ chandeliers hanging from the ceiling in the nave. On progressing further into the north aisle, three ‘Horizon’ panel heaters will also be visible in the ceiling space.

The Halo heaters are of an elegant design which we feel complements the architectural character of the space. Historically, oil lamps were suspended from the ceiling during the Victorian period, as illustrated in the accompanying photograph (we still have four of them preserved in the belfry and one was recently on display as part of a community history exhibition). The proposed heaters reference this historic precedent, meaning their visual impact is both sympathetic to, and consistent with, the heritage values of the building.

We have selected a gold finish to the heaters rather than bronze, as it complements the gilding of the altar rail and the detailing around the reredos. The daisy motif surrounding the reredos is subtly reflected in the trefoil pattern chosen for the engraving on the heaters, ensuring a coherent and respectful visual relationship with the existing decorative scheme.

The Halo heaters incorporate both upward and downward lighting at each corner. This will enhance illumination within the space, allowing the decorative wooden ceiling bosses—currently obscured in shadow—to be more clearly appreciated.

We judge that the addition of the Halo chandeliers could actually have a positive impact on the overall visual experience of the nave and complement the rich history of high quality additions to the church over the centuries.

The design for the fixing of the units is in the process of being revised after consultation with Structural Solutions to move the lower *Square hollow section steel* to above the internal timber finish so that it will no longer be visible from within the nave. The supporting cable and power cables will come together through a minimal sized hole in the centre of the nave roof.

In the north aisle, we propose, after some deliberation, to mount the Horizon heaters from the ceiling, rather than fit them to the walls, with the aim of minimising visual impact and distraction without reducing effectiveness. We therefore judge the visual impact to be minimal.

The cables for the Halo heaters will remain in the tower vestry until they go into the tower clock room and then to the cavity above the nave roof. The power cables to the Halo heaters will therefore not be visible in the nave at all.

The route for the power cables for the Horizons have yet to be precisely determined although they will remain in the tower vestry until they follow existing cable runs to the north aisle roof. They will then run along the edge of the wooden ceiling where it meets the arch walls and then down along the ceiling ribs.

The colour of all the cables that would be visible will match the background on which they are installed.

Historic fabric

We are aware that one of the potential harms of electrical heating in a historic building is an increase in humidity levels caused by rapid cooling when the units are switched off.

Whilst we note that there is little in terms of historic woodwork in the building (e.g. no organ or pews), nonetheless we are cognisant of the potential for condensation/damp on historic stonework and windows. To mitigate this, we are already monitoring humidity levels in various points throughout the building and would continue to do so following the new installation, noting any significant change against the current baseline.

On the advice of our inspecting architect, we would also look to instigate a regime of good ventilation at the end of an event or service immediately as the heating units are switched off.

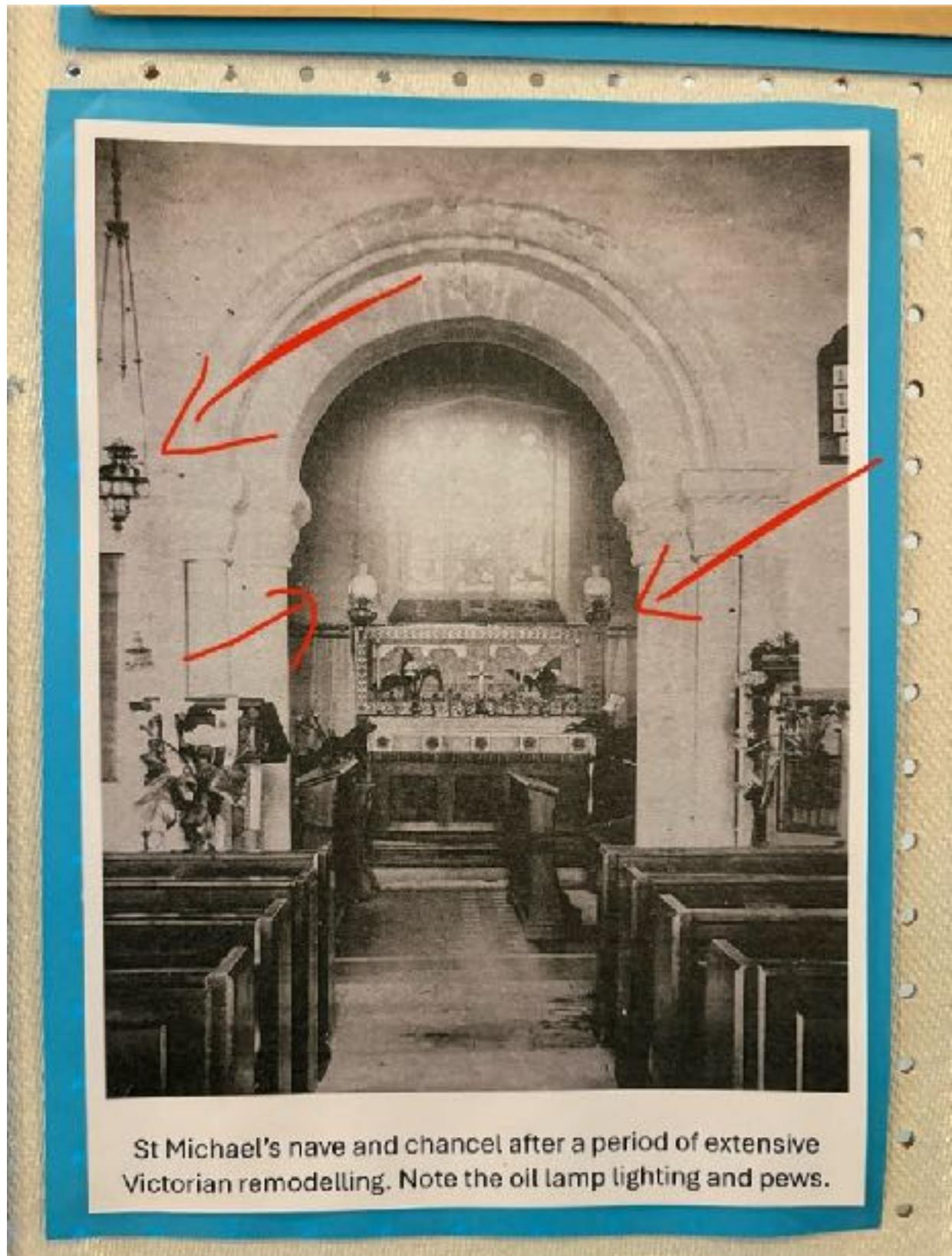
As noted above, the fixings and cable routes have been carefully designed to involve minimal impact on the historic fabric.

Character

As noted above, St Michael's has a palpable sense of living history and the evolution of its story across the generations is visible to trace in its existing architecture, art, fixtures and fittings.

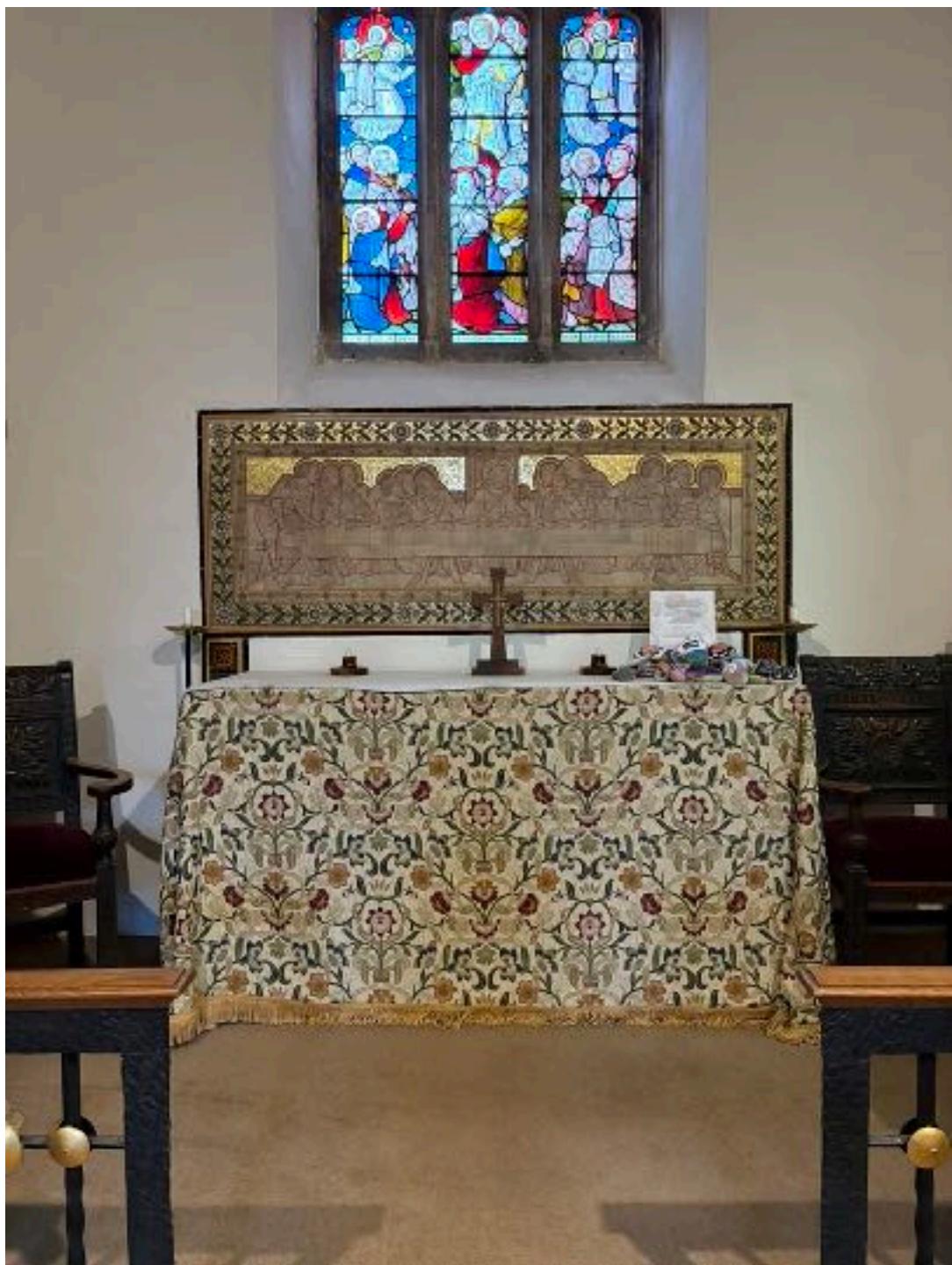
The current proposals certainly add another layer to this history and will undoubtedly change the character of the building. However, we judge that the scale and quality of the proposed installation, as well as the missional impetus which motivates it in terms of hospitality and creation care, are a positive addition to that evolving story, rather than a radical intervention or indeed dramatic loss of historic fabric.

Images



St Michael's nave and chancel after a period of extensive Victorian remodelling. Note the oil lamp lighting and pews.

Historically, oil lamps were suspended from the ceiling during the Victorian period



The detailing around the reredos is picked up in the colour and engraved detail of the proposed new Halo units.