



Statement of Significance

St Michael and All Angels Church,
East Coker

Prepared by East Coker PCC – October 2025

Statement of Significance – St Michael and All Angels Church, East Coker

Section 1. The building and churchyard: its significance

Location and setting

St Michael and All Angels is Grade II* medieval church of golden hamstone, built on a hill in the heart of the village of East Coker. It has commanding views over the Somerset countryside and, particularly from the North and East, can be seen for a good distance greatly enhancing the attractiveness of the view of this part of the village for passers-by and walkers.

The church is situated adjacent to Coker Court, a Grade I listed 15th century manor house, and sits just above a row of Grade II listed 17th century Almshouses. These buildings, and other nearby dwellings in the village, are highly complementary in age, style and built of the same locally quarried stone. The church is very much in keeping with the village's built environment and contributes greatly to the overall aesthetic of East Coker, a village that is popular with walkers and day trippers and much loved by its residents.



East Coker is situated in a conservation area. The countryside surrounding the village and St Michael's Church is predominantly working farmland, used mainly for livestock. It is crisscrossed with footpaths and bridle paths. The church is flanked by open country and mature woodland.

Churchyard: memorials, natural environment, biodiversity and archaeology

The graveyard was in use since at least Medieval times. The churchyard is consecrated but was closed for burials by Order in Council in 1860. There is no Scheduled Monument within the curtilage or precinct. There are twelve Grade II listed chest tombs. Another small headstone, of local historical interest, records the death of Nathaniel Cox, a Police Constable who was killed in the discharge of his duty in 1876.



Incised Slab C14

The northern boundary of the churchyard is marked by a low stone wall topped with cock and hen, to the east and south with mixed hedges and trees and to the west by the Coker Court boundary wall.

Not listed, but of moderate to high significance, is the incised slab, 14th century, with an image of an unknown female on a ham stone coffin lid. This is thought to be a unique example. As well as its historical notability, it is captivating in that the inscription can rarely be properly seen. It takes a light dusting of snow or just the right light to reveal the figure.

A mid-17th century plague pit is marked with a memorial headstone at the edge of the churchyard.

In the churchyard is an English oak planted in 1977 to mark the late Queen's Silver Jubilee and a crab apple planted more recently as part of the late Queen's Green Canopy initiative to mark her Platinum Jubilee.

The churchyard is not actively managed, but its position in a tranquil corner on the edge of the village, adjoining woods and farmland makes it a haven for wildlife.

Social history and value to the community

The church is the oldest in-use building in the village and remains the natural focus for key life and community events. When Queen Elizabeth II died the village Book of Condolence was made available to villagers in the church - the only building that is open to everyone, every day of the year, and the only one with the heft and gravitas for such a purpose. The village was packed for the service of thanksgiving for her life, as it was for a service to celebrate the coronation of King Charles III. These recent events are the latest manifestation of the close links the church has had with village life for over a millennium.



Surviving Anglo-Saxon fabric at the west end is a physical reminder of the preconquest settlement of Cocre that was held by Countess Gytha, mother of King Harol Godwinson. It is likely that she built a manor on the site of today's Coker Court. The handsome Norman font, still used for baptisms today and mentioned by Pevsner, shows that a church stood on the present site in the 11th century though today's is largely late twelfth century, with fifteenth and nineteenth century work. The first documentary reference of a church on the site is in 1276, shortly before the Courtenay family, Earls of Devon, acquired the next-door Coker Court. The Courtenay link explains why, until the late 20th century, the Dean and Chapter of Exeter had the right to appoint vicars of East Coker and remains a patron of the church to this day. Coker Court was bought in 1616 by Archdeacon Helyar, one time chaplain to Queen Elizabeth I, who extended the south transept of the church and added a private entrance. The south transept of the church was owned by the Helyar family and their descendants, the Heneage family, until the 1980s. The crucifix that would have been carved into a floor slab in the late 15th or early 16th century to mark its entrance can still be clearly seen

England's turbulent 17th century is very much in evidence in the church. Faded and damaged remnants of stained-glass at the very top of a window tracery in the south transept is all that was left by ransacking parliamentarians in the mid-1600s and the imposing coat of arms above the North door speaks to the reimposition of religious and political control by the monarch following the collapse of the Commonwealth.

T S Eliot

It is likely to have been this political and religious climate that led Andrew Eliot, a Puritan Congregationalist cordwainer, to emigrate from East Coker to Salem, Massachusetts in the late 17th century. His descendant, renowned poet T. S. Eliot, having rediscovered his ancestral roots, chose St Michael's for his final resting place. His ashes were interred in the church in 1965. A plaque on the west wall marking the site of the interment bears the opening lines of his famous poem 'East Coker'. In 2012 his second wife Valerie was also interred here, and her name added to the memorial. The north aisle window of 1936 by Leonard Walker in streaked Tiffany colours was paid for by Walter Graeme Eliot, a cousin of Thomas Stearn Eliot, dedicated to their common ancestors.

The Eliot corner attracts visitors from around the world. Analysis of entries made in the church visitors' book shows that 20% of visitors are from overseas, of which 33% are from the USA (Eliot's country of birth) and 26% all of entries either mention T S Eliot or quote his poetry in the comments section of the page. A nearby Grade 1 listed priory (Naish Priory) has recently been acquired by the T. S. Eliot foundation and is to be used as a writers' retreat and study centre. This will further enhance the importance of East Coker as a

destination for academics and Eliot devotees and is bound to see still greater interest in the church's memorial corner. The village is enormously proud of its connection with the poet; a thriving village poetry club is evidence of this, as is the fact that recently commissioned village signs bear quotations from his work.

William Dampier

William Dampier, sea captain, buccaneer and explorer, was born in East Coker and was baptised in the church in 1651. Among many distinctions, he became the first Englishman to step foot on mainland Australia (almost a century before James Cook) and was the first person to circumnavigate the globe three times. A plaque on the south wall records his achievements and a second one commemorates the visit of the Agent General for Western Australia in 1988, the 300th anniversary of the landing of William Dampier in Australia. 20% of overseas visitors to the church are Australian which suggests that this historic figure, far better known in Australia than in the UK, is also a draw for tourism.

The church is used as a venue for the biennial Od Arts Festival, a contemporary arts events featuring exhibitions, performances, film and workshops.



tlk performs 'The Butterfly Effect' - Od Art 2025

The village war memorial is found in the church, and it hosts the perennially well supported Remembrance Sunday service.

.Church building: exterior

The west front considered without the added aisles and 15th century doorway is a tall, relatively narrow structure, which is completely unbuttressed. This gives very strong support to the suggestion that this wall has an Anglo-Saxon origin. The walling between quoins of well-dressed ashlar is of local rubble stone, typical of Anglo-Saxon churches. The church is of hamstone squared rubble with ashlar. There are tile roofs to the nave, chancel and north transept, stone slate to the south transept and lead over the aisles

Church building: interior

St Michael's is a cruciform church with a nave and added side aisles. It is normally accessed via the north, where there is a porch. It has north and south aisles either side of the nave and south and north transepts. It has a chancel, incorporating choir and sanctuary. There is a tower at the NE corner. On the ground floor of the tower is the vestry, and a WC; on the 1st floor the ringing chamber; 2nd floor the clock mechanism and carillon; and on the 3rd floor are the bells; a peal of 8. There is a lean-to shed and underground boiler room outside, south of chancel.

The south aisle has an arcade of thirteenth century early English arches; the north arcade is formed of pillars and arches of the fifteenth century Perpendicular style. The contrasts in style result from the enlargement of the church in the fifteenth century when the population of the village was increasing.

The chancel, rebuilt in 1711, has a timber ribbed and bossed vault ceiling with later 19th century tracery. The transept arches at the former crossing have pilasters of 1792. The chancel arch was similar but is now Gothic, redone with the roofs in 1862-3. The side aisles have wooden boarded ceilings, and the north and south transepts have plaster barrel vaults. The bosses in the chancel were painted and gilded in 1995, the bosses in the nave were painted in a similar fashion in 2006. The windows in the church are mostly of Perpendicular style. The east window is a 19th century copy of a former blocked 15th century one.

A central tower was removed in 1791 due to its ruinous state, and a new tower was rebuilt on the northeast end of the church alongside the chancel. In a second chamber between the belfry and ringing room the clock mechanism and carillon are housed. The carillon is about 200 years old. It plays the same tune every three hours through day and night. The clock is described as an 18th century "blacksmith's" clock, possibly due to the work being of a local craftsman.

The nave and side aisles contain Victorian pews of plain style with no carving, which were installed in the late 19th century, most of them in 1896. The choir stalls date from 1905. In 1987 the pews were removed from the north and south transepts. The north transept is used as a chapel with a Jacobean altar, brought to St Michael's church from St Luke's church in North Coker when the latter was closed. In the south transept is an east facing window with modern stained glass commemorating people from the village.

The church is lit by electric powered sodium wall lanterns in the nave, transepts and cancel, and florescent strip lights in the side aisles. While light levels are adequate, the quality of light, particularly colour rendering, is poor.

The church has a wet heating system fed by an oil-fired boiler.

Contents

There are many features and artefacts of historical and social significance in the Church. These include¹:

High Significance

- The connection to T. S. Eliot and the Eliot Memorial. This is of international significance.
- The William Dampier memorials, celebrating his connection to the church and village. This is of international significance.
- The rare 13th century Purbeck marble effigy of an unknown noblewoman (thought to be a de Mandeville) currently in the northwest corner. It is one of only 9 known surviving female effigies cast in Purbeck marble and so is nationally significant.
- Surviving Saxon fabric and design features are of high significance.

Moderate to High Significance

- A highly unusual acrostic ledger stone, 1673, commemorating a former rector is set in the floor of the crossing beneath the chancel arch.
- The north door is a fine example of a 15th century oak tracery door. The lock, still in working order, is enclosed in a single baulk of timber.
- In the churchyard is a 14th century incised slab, with the image of unknown female on a ham stone coffin lid. This is thought to be a unique example.
- A mid-17th century plague pit is marked with a memorial headstone at the edge of the churchyard.

¹ The grading used here is that recommended Church Buildings Council in their 2025 guidance on Statements of Significance and Need – page 17.

- The four tracery lights at the head of the window in the south transept are the remnants of a 16th century window that depicted the coats of arms of the Courtenay family who owned the Manor from 1310 until 1591, and of various other families to whom they were related by marriage. It is the oldest glass in the church and a visible reminder of ransacking of churches by Puritans in the mid1600s.



13th Century Purbeck marble effigy of unknown female



15th Century oak tracery door



1920 hamstone war memorial



Plague pit marker

- The Royal Coat of Arms hanging above the North door is over 300 years old. The conjoined cypher of W and M indicate that it is the coat of arms of William and Mary, though restoration work in 1986 showed that under the date and cipher are signs of the original CII and the date 1660.
- The Norman font on a 19th century base, which would have been used for the baptisms of *inter alia* Andrew Eliot and William Dampier and is still used for baptisms today.

Moderate

- The carillon is about 200 years old and a rare example of its type.
- There is a ham stone effigy of an unknown male civilian circa 1340, mentioned in Pevsner.
- A crucifix is incised into a floor slab in the south chapel floor - 15th, early 16th century.
- Wall plaques, particularly those in the North transept, commemorate prominent village families whose fortunes were made through making Coker Canvas sail cloth.
- The war memorial in the south aisle was placed in the church in October 1920, of carved hamstone. It commemorates the dead of the First and Second World Wars.
- The brass lectern in the form of an eagle was placed in the church to mark the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897.
- The east wall and the chancel and sanctuary floor are of Victorian tiles with a bright and striking symmetrical design.
- The 1936 Faith, Hope and Love stained glass window by Leonard Walker, is made using the unusual Norman Slab technique.
- The late 20th century memorial window which commemorates past villagers, made by Molly Kettlewell and Nora Brown in a studio that used to be in an outbuilding of Coker Court.
- The gilt and coloured bosses that adorn the nave and chancel ceilings that were funded by public appeal in the early 21st century.

Section 2. Project Beacon proposals: the impact on significance

Modification of North Entrance

Proposal

Modifications to the north entrance are aimed primarily at improving accessibility. This will include building an exterior ramp and steps to achieve level access into the porch, altering floor levels in the porch and to a small area in the church, and building a ramp to the nave floor level.

It is also proposed to install a glazed door at the entrance from the porch into the main body of the church. This will replace a door curtain and will make the church both better insulated and more welcoming.

Significance

The north entrance is moderately significant in that it is the most commonly used entrance to the church. It is mainly of aesthetic significance rather than having any particular heritage or archaeological significance.

Impact	Mitigation
The introduction of a ramp and steps will alter the look of the North Entrance which is currently accessed via a single step from the church-path.	Careful design will minimise visual impact. The stone used for the steps will match the church path paving, and the stone used for the main ramp structure will be a close match to the existing masonry.
The alteration of floor levels in the porch and inside the church will introduce change.	Existing slabs will be re-laid at the new levels. The external doors will remain in place (albeit they may have to be altered slightly) so the porch entrance will look largely unchanged
Installation of a glazed door will necessitate minor relocation of the existing oak tracery door.	The relocation is only by about 300mm, so the position of the door will appear unaltered.

Pew removal and re-ordering of west end

Proposal

We plan to remove fixed pews from the west end of the church (from in line with the North entrance back to the West end). This area will be refloored in stone tiles. The threshold to the west door will be lowered and there will be some local relevening to improve the entrance. A timber-framed dais

and engineered timber boards will form new steps from the west door and larger storage units will replace small cupboards currently in place either side of the west door.

Significance

The west entrance is of low significance in itself. The threshold is artificially high due to modern modification, so lowering it will be insignificant and will simply revert it to the original level.

We have carried out an under-pew survey using an endoscope camera and have confirmed that there is nothing of any architectural or historical note under the platforms. A report on the provenance of the pews has also been prepared, showing they are late 19th century (circa 1890) and of no particular significance.

Impact	Mitigation
Removal of pews will change the look of an area of the church.	The majority of pews will remain. Very few of our congregations are so large that they could not fit into the remaining pews. We will however be procuring sufficient stackable/moveable chairs to generate as much (more) seating as we have today when required (large services such as weddings and funerals).
Reduction in seating	There is currently congregational seating for 188 in the church (plus 23 in the choir stall, plus 12 chairs in the transepts). This proposal would remove 76 pew seats leaving 112. We would be able to reimpose at least this amount of seating using stackable and deployable chairs.
New stone flooring will replace existing pew platforms.	Stone flooring will be attractive, hardwearing and will fit the church aesthetic. Existing slabs in the west (in aisles between pews) will remain in place and new flooring will be carefully joined.
New timber dais and steps.	These will be built over existing stone steps and will be reversible.
New cupboards.	These will replace existing cupboards but will be bigger in terms of capacity. Viewed from the nave it will be hard to notice the difference. The stain/finish of timber will be selected to blend with other furnishings in the church.
Anglo-Saxon fabric	The west end is where Anglo-Saxon fabric can best be seen. None of this will be obscured by the planned work. Indeed, this project is an opportunity to offer better interpretation of many aspects of the church's history and heritage, and we would plan to make use of the additional space created to offer interpretation and information related to the pre-Conquest pedigree of the

	building.
Eliot Memorial Corner	The proposed works will not adversely impact on the T. S. Eliot Memorial. The removal of a radiator and fixed pews in close proximity to the memorial will in fact give us the opportunity to enhance the corner and offer better interpretation.

Relocation of font

Proposal

We intend to move the font from its current position to a central position to the rear/west of the remaining nave pews.

Significance

The location of the font is not significant. It is not in its original position. Where it is currently, jammed up against a column and pew frontal, makes it awkward for baptisms.

Impact	Mitigation
People will notice a changed position.	We believe the new position will enhance the significance of the ancient baptismal font. It will be in a better position to be admired as an object, it will be in a far better place to be used for baptisms as the family and congregation will be able to gather around the font and we feel the new position in the central aisle will better symbolise the significance of baptism as part of the Christian journey.



Installation of a Servery

Proposal

We plan to install a small servery in the southwest corner.

Significance

The southwest corner is of low significance.

Impact	Mitigation
It is a new addition - the church does not currently have a servery.	Currently teas and coffees are made and served in a transept in a rather Heath Robinson fashion with kettles, water urns, trestle tables and so on. The servery, which will be discreet and at the back of the church, will be less of an eyesore than the current arrangement.
The server will require services (utilities)	Existing pipework, rendered unnecessary by the replacement of the heating system, will be repurposed for the servery.

Accessible W.C.

Proposal

We plan to install an accessible W.C. at the base of the tower with access via a new door through the east wall of the North Transept.

Significance

This transept is currently used as an occasional chapel. Its east wall bears a number of plaques commemorating prominent local families which are significant in terms of local history

Impact	Mitigation
A new door will need to be created through an existing wall.	The wall has been subject to an archaeological survey which has shown that it is not historically significant.
The creation of a door will force the relocation of one or more plaques.	There is sufficient free wall space for the relocation of plaques within the north transept.
Space will be lost from the vestry	Better organisation of the vestry will make the remaining space sufficient.
Alternative arrangements will need to be found for altar frontal storage.	The altar frontal cupboard can be relocated to a similar position against the east wall of the south transept.

As the route to the new loo, the transept will become unsuitable as a chapel.	The south transept, which previously was a chapel, will be converted back to this purpose.
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Heating

Proposal

We will replace the existing fossil fuel based wet heating system with cleaner, greener more economical electrical alternatives.

Significance

The existing heating system is of no significance

Impact	Mitigation
Part of the solution will be far-infrared heating chandeliers (HALO) hung from 2 arcade arches.	Only 2 hanging heaters will be installed at the west end of the church. Augmented reality images provided by the supplier show that in these locations they are very unobtrusive and do not impact significantly on the look and feel of the church interior. We will opt for a modest finish on the chandeliers to keep them as unobtrusive as possible.
All radiators will be removed	Forward of the nave pews, 2 electric convection heaters housed in bespoke joinery will replace 2 radiators. Under pew heaters will be fitted to the side aisle pews.
Environmental gain	The new heating system will significantly reduce the church's carbon footprint.

Restoration and Interpretation

Proposal

There will be far greater interpretation of heritage throughout the church which will include Eliot, Dampier, the Saxon origins of the church, the story of the Lords of the Manor through the ages, the turbulent 17th century and its impact on the village and the importance to East Coker of sailcloth manufacturing.

Significance

These artefacts and stories are of great significance. Restoration and interpretation will boost local interest in the church and enhance community cohesion. It will act as a vehicle for outreach and education and will boost tourism and the local economy.

Impact	Mitigation
De Mandeville effigy move	The de Mandeville effigy is delicate, is already damaged and is visibly deteriorating. It is also presented vertically, when it would have been designed as a horizontal object. A conservation report will be commissioned with a view to restoring and appropriately mounting the effigy. Our intention is to install it in the south transept where it will greatly complement the 15th century incised slab and the surviving remnants of 16th century stained glass, but this will be contingent on expert advice, and the subject of a separate faculty.
Unknown male effigy move	The unknown male effigy (C14) currently resides out of sight, under the altar. We may mount it and display it in the south transept, though again, this will be contingent on expert advice, and the subject of a separate faculty. However and wherever it is displayed, moving it from under the altar will be a significance gain as the object is presently not on display at all.
Creation of a Dampier display will impact visually and take up some space.	The Dampier display will be centred on the area beneath the Dampier memorial plaque on the south wall, which is currently taken up by fixed pews, pews that will be removed as part of the re-ordering. A well-conceived display will explain the extraordinary achievements of this remarkable man and will be central to our outreach and education plans, not least through closer partnering with the village school, and will be another reason for tourists to visit.
Removal/shortening of chancel carpet	Pending a conservation report, we plan to restore the interesting and unusual acrostic ledger that is currently concealed by the chancel carpet. This slight change in furnishing will be more than compensated for by revealing an item of historical interest – one that will help with the heritage narrative we will develop as part of the project.

Sources:

The Buildings of England Somerset: South and West - Julian Orbach and Nikolaus Pevsner

Somerset Historic Environment Record

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Somerset Heritage Centre: Records of the Diocese of Bath and Wells

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Stained Glass in Somerset 1250 to 1830 - Christopher Woodforde

Terrier and Inventory



The T. S. Eliot memorial

