

## Our old Schoolroom

Above the main entrance to St Michael's (the south porch) we have a curious small room which dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays this room is set up as a museum, but in the past it was (originally) a priest's residence and (later) a schoolroom.

### History of the Schoolroom

The main room was constructed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It stood on top of the church porch and was detached from the main church building. (Evidence for this is an original Norman corbel inside the room, which matches one outside on the south transept.) Access to the room at this time was from an external staircase in the north-west corner of the church, which has since been removed.



At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the floor and roof were extended over the south aisle of the church, with the new floor supported on flat four-centred arches. The floor was also extended westwards to form a second little room, and additional windows were put in. Access was also made from the inside of the church, by breaking through from the turret.

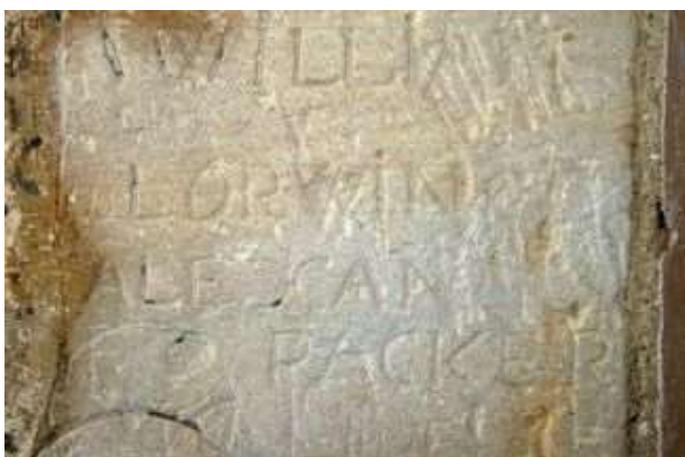
There are no records to show how the porch room was used in the early days, but it is likely that it would have been used as living quarters for anyone whose duty was to care for the church. This could be a priest who watched over the building at night, or another who tended to chantry altars. The later room may well have been used for storing church records and archives.

In a typical village the priest or parish clerk may have been the only literate person. Even then he would probably not have been well educated by the standards of today. He might well have offered some teaching at a rudimentary level, with an aim of educating the local children, supplementing his income, and perhaps making his day more interesting. Bishop's Visitations of 1572, 1576 and 1662 record that a schoolmaster was licensed to teach here, and the registers record the burials of schoolmasters such as, in 1746, Thomas Tomes 'schoolmaster of Cleeve'.

The school may have suffered a setback in 1755, for we have Vestry Minutes which read::

*Apr 13th 1755. Agreed at Vestry that the Room late the School Room be fitted up by taking down the Boarded Partition, & floored, so as to be made fit for a Vestry Room, to transact all Parish Business in for the future.*

(The "Vestry" was a body which oversaw the running of all kinds of parish business, rather like a mix of our modern Parish, Borough and County Councils. It also managed a lot of the business of the church - and these functions live on today in the roles of the Churchwardens.)



We don't have written records to show whether the school closed down when the Vestry took over the room, but if we look at the names carved into the walls these seem to stop in 1749. This suggests the room wasn't used as a school again until the 19th

century. It is possible there are other later names under the plaster which was applied later to some of the walls.

The names in the stonework were carved at various times, probably by pupils, particularly in the window recess on the west wall. The quality of the carving suggests these were not just surreptitious scribblings but were properly executed as a record of the children who passed through here, and the names are all from the long-standing families within the parish (which then covered all of Bishop's Cleeve, Gotherington, Southam and Stoke Orchard.) Some of the families have lived here for several centuries and are still known in the villages today.

Heating the room must always have been a challenge. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a fireplace was inserted into the south-west angle of the room, but this seriously weakened the wall. It was removed during the restoration of the 1890s, along with its ugly brick chimney.

### **The Wall-Paintings**

Today the most striking feature of the schoolroom is the decoration on the walls. Although these have a pencil-drawing look, they are in fact painted onto the plaster. They date from two separate times, and were presumably created by the schoolmasters at those times.

The Rules of the Academy (on the left of the window) and the skeleton appear to be 18th century.

The skeleton painting was no doubt used for educational purposes, but it also included the words MEMENTO MORI ("remember you must die") written above. This must have served as a stern reminder to the pupils of the frailty of human life! In similar fashion the words LEARN OR DEPART - since obliterated - are thought to have been written over the south window and were presumably intended as a warning to pupils that neither school nor life should be taken lightly.





The later drawings were probably done by Mr Sperry, the schoolmaster in 1818, after the walls had been whitewashed. They include a battle scene (from the biblical story in 1 Maccabees 6) with a lion and an elephant, and a tiger.

In the earlier days there would not have been an inner ceiling. The present one was probably put in during the 19th century restoration. It certainly dates from after Mr Sperry's paintings were done, since it cuts across part of his painting.

The painting showing the schoolmaster as artist, along with his quarterly charges for tuition, is said to be a self-portrait of Mr Sperry.

	s	d
Reading	3	6
Writing	6	0
Arithmetick	9	0
Grammar	15	0

He evidently boarded up the south window and plastered over it. Later this section was removed during the 19th century when the window was once again exposed. The panel was found above the ceiling in the roof space and is now displayed in a wooden frame on the floor.

## Today

The room ceased being used as a school when a new National School was built across the road in 1846. The National School closed when the new Bishop's Cleeve Primary School was opened in 1981, and it has become St Michael's Centre, a community facility associated with the church. In 1990, the porch room paintings were restored by Richard Parker Crook, and the room was set up as an exhibition. Now, in 2017, cleared of clutter, we present it as a remarkable piece of architecture in itself, and we use it to store and share with you some of our church and village stories and heritage. Open the boxes. Find the photos and documents and plans for a glimpse of our past. Enjoy. End.