

☞ St Michael's Church ☞

The earliest reference to St Michael's Finmere dates to the late twelfth century, though there may have been a church here before then. During the Middle Ages, it was a typically unpretentious village church, with a modest nave and chancel overlooked by a squat tower. Until 1560, the Abbey of St Augustine, Bristol, appointed Finmere's clergymen though the reason for this arrangement is no longer known. The priests visited the village infrequently and the church was often in disrepair. It was almost a ruin between 1520 and 1666, when much needed major repairs were undertaken. After that date, St Michael's was entrusted to the care a series of good rectors and patrons who dedicated themselves to improving the church fabric, the standard of worship and the quality of life in the village.

Palmer's Legacy

The village and church owe much to Rector William Jocelyn Palmer and, in return for his benefaction, villagers were expected to attend church regularly. John Burgon recorded that Palmer's sermons were 'sound, simple and short.' Holy Communion was celebrated monthly and, on the day before the service, parish clerk Gabriel Friday walked around the village to draw up a list of parishioners who intended to communicate. Some parishioners were not welcome at Palmer's services, including:

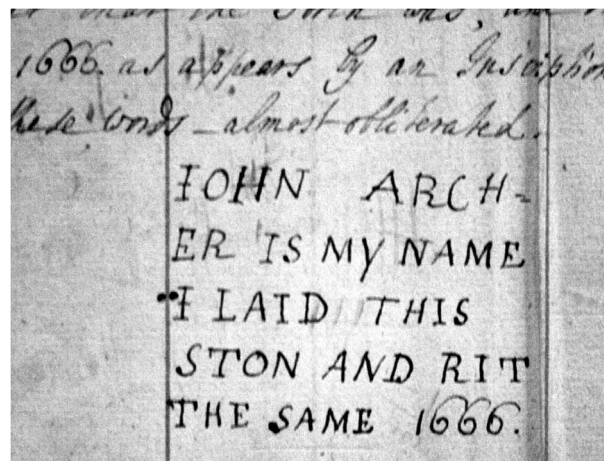
A certain person [who], in defiance of his repeated admonition, persisted in listening to an itinerant ranting preacher under the 'cross tree.' (John Burgon)

On Sunday, 30 March 1851, everybody attending a place of worship in England and Wales was counted for a government census of worship. Palmer returned the information for Finmere:

Finmere. Population 399. St Michael's Parish Church. On 30 March. In the morning 220; in afternoon 220. Average attendance in morning 220; in afternoon 220. Signed W.J. Palmer Rector.

Despite Palmer's insistence that everyone attend church, we should not trust these surprisingly consistent figures. They reflect his contempt for the census, which he regarded as an intrusion by politicians in church affairs, and he refused to return figures for Mixbury, where he was also Rector.

Whatever the true attendance figures, St Michael's Church was regularly full and it is probable that Palmer had begun to plan to expansion. Already in his seventies, however, his health was failing. During the last two years of his life, he was largely confined to his Rectory by infirmity and curate John Burgon ministered for the parish until Palmer's death.

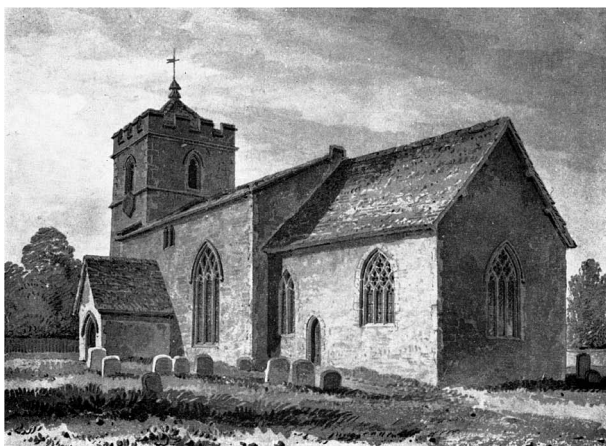


John Archer recording the 1666 rebuilding of the church

The photograph shows a copy in the Rectors' Book of an inscription, now lost, in the porch of St Michael's

In John Burgon's otherwise admiring account of the village, he described St Michael's as 'singularly deficient in architectural beauty... and containing no single feature calculated to distract attention from the proper business of the sanctuary.'

William Jocelyn Palmer's family contributed more than half the cost of rebuilding the church in 1858.



St Michael's Church in 1824

1858 2000
£100 £6,580

The sanctus bell, or priest's bell, was rung during services to call the attention of people at work in the fields or at home to the service, encouraging them to stop and pray for a moment.

1858 2000
£820 £54,000
19s 5d £64

1858 2000
£94 £6,200

Frederick Walker's Rebuilding

The task of repairing and expanding the church fell to Palmer's successor, Frederick John Walker. Shortly after his arrival in Finmere, Walker surprisingly recorded that the church was in good repair. He possibly had not probed behind the wooden panelling in the chancel as, two years later, major repair work was underway.

2 June 1856. The repairs of the Chancel were begun. The south wall was in a very weak state, caused by the Sedilia which had been unseated. The Sedilia were much defaced as was the Piscina & were unfit to be re-set up. These injuries had been inflicted when the Chancel was ceiled and panelled round the walls. (Rectors' Book)

On Sundays, the church was full and there was a general expectation that the population of the village would continue to increase.

1858. From the increase in population, the ancient church of Finmere was inconveniently small to the people. Increased room had long been desired & an offer of £100 having been made to the Rector by a friend of the Parish, a Vestry meeting was called on January the 9th at which it was resolved that subscriptions should be obtained towards building a North Aisle to the Church. (Rectors' Book)

The north aisle was designed by George S. Street and provided accommodation for eighty-eight parishioners. As well as the new aisle, the south and east walls, and windows and doors were rebuilt and repaired. A cross was placed in the nave in place of the broken sanctus bell and another was erected in the chancel. The construction cost, excluding the architect's fees, was £819 18s 1/2d, including 19s 5d for beer for the workmen. These costs were matched by donations of £848 11s 10 3/4 d.

The alterations have been effected in excellent taste, and are in complete architectural keeping with the older portions of the edifice, reflecting great credit on the architect. (Buckingham Advertiser, 20 November 1858)

	£	s	d
Incorporated Society for Promoting the Enlargement, Building and Repairing of Churches and Chapels	50	0	0
Oxford Diocese	45	0	0
Merton College	50	0	0
Other clergymen	18	3	0
Offertory collections at the opening services	94	7	9 3/4
The family of the late Reverend William Jocelyn Palmer	455	0	0
Parishioners	52	16	0
Reverend Frederick Walker	61	0	0
Other donors	22	0	0

Donations for the 1858 rebuilding of the church

On 30 May 1858, Frederick Walker celebrated Trinity Sunday in St Michael's Church. After the service, the church closed for rebuilding. Services were held in the cramped schoolrooms for five months. In November, on a wet and stormy Sunday, the church was re-opened with much ceremony. Clergymen from all the parishes in the Bicester Deanery attended, accompanied by two Bishops and the Rural Dean, J.C. Blomfield, who was later to write the History of Finmere. Rector Frederick Walker, who described the events as 'a day which will long be remembered in the annals of Finmere' recorded the proceedings in detail in the Rectors' Book.

15 November 1858. The main work being all but complete the church was re-opened. At 11 o'clock a procession of 21 clergy with the Bishop of Oxford and the newly consecrated Bishop of Nelson, New Zealand attended by the Reverend J.W. Benson & J.C. Blomfield (Rural Dean) as Chaplains left the Rectory and walked in procession to the Church.

Morning Prayer was said by the Rector. The 1st lesson was read by Reverend B. Maddock, Curate of S. Georges, Liverpool (the former curacy of the Rector) & the 2nd by the Reverend G.H. Palmer, Rector of Mixbury. The hymn 'O Word of God Above' was sung after the morning Prayer. The office of Holy Communion was said by the Bishop of the Diocese, the Epistle being read by the Rural Dean, the Rector of Launton, and the Gospel by the Bishop of Nelson. The hymn 'Jesus the very thought is sweet &c.' having been sung, the Bishop of Oxford preached from the text 'No man cometh but by ME.' The offertory was collected by the Churchwardens in the Nave, by I.J. Anderson of Liverpool in the Aisle & by the Reverend I [?] Larne in the Chancel. The Bishop of Oxford celebrated—the Bishop of Nelson, the Rector and the Rural Dean assisting—about 120 communicated, very many being of the poorer sort (the Mixbury Chalice was lent on the occasion).

[?] Walker's handwriting here cannot be deciphered.

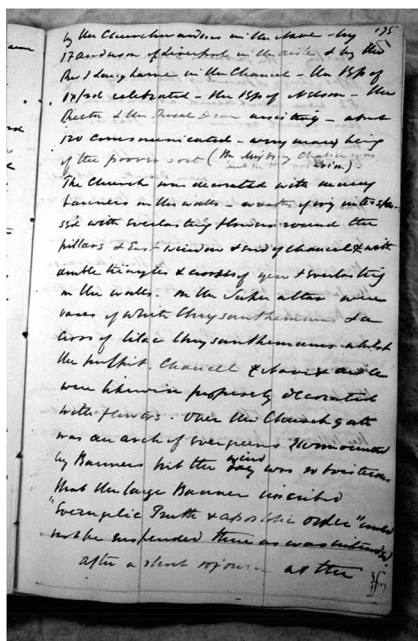
The Church was decorated with many banners on the walls, swathes of ivy interspersed with everlasting flowers around the pillars and east window and end of Chancel & with [?] triangles and swathes of yew & everlasting on the walls. In the Super altar were vases of White Chrysanthemums & a cross of Lilac Chrysanthemums above the pulpit. Chancel, Nave and Aisle were likewise properly decorated with flowers. Over the Church gate was an arch of evergreens decorated by banners but the day was so boisterous that the large Banner inscribed 'Evangelic Truth and Apostolic Order' could not be suspended as was intended.

After a sojourn at the Rectory, the farmers and their wives, the Bishops, Clergy & friends of the Rectory, in all 82, were entertained at luncheon in the School rooms by the Rector. The health's of Queen, the Bishop of Oxford, the Rector, the Bishop of Nelson, the Churchwardens and the Reverend J. Burgon were drank. At half past three, all adjourned to a large marquee erected in the Rectors close (to be near the boilers) where tea had been provided at the cost of the Farmers for their labourers, the labourers wives and confirmed children. The trades people of the Parish paid 0s 6d,

The week before the opening was bitterly cold, with four degrees of frost (28°F, -2°C) on Tuesday, 11 November. The Buckingham Advertiser speculated that a wet winter was coming.

Such early frosts do not necessarily indicate a severe winter, but the contrary if the old saying be true about St Martin's Day—the 11th of November: 'If Martinmass ice will bear a duck. The winter will be mud and muck.'

As a short-term forecast, this proved correct and the weather had turned by the weekend.



Frederick Walker's description of the reopening of
St Michael's in the Rectors' Book

each person not of the Parish 1/- each. The farmers wives poured out the tea & the farmers and others waited. The Bishop addressed a few words to the assembled tea drinkers.

[A] procession was made from the tea at 6 o'clock [to] evening service in the church. Prayers were said by the Rector, the first lesson read by Reverend B. Maddock, the 2nd by Reverend I De Sales, Rector of Fringford. The Sermon was preached by the Reverend J. Burgon, fellow of Oriel College, a former Curate of Finmere. The subject of the sermon was the 5th commandment. A collection was made at the door after the service (£3-15-3?).

The Church was crowded at both services and thus by the Blessing of God has brought to a conclusion a work which it is hoped will long tend to the Flock of the Blessed Deity & a day which will long be remembered in the annals of Finmere.

The celebrations continued the next day when the schoolchildren had tea in the schoolroom. On the Tuesday, the remaining cake and other food was distributed to those who could not attend the luncheon or the tea, including the infirm.

The church extension proved overambitious. The rebuilt church could hold more than two hundred people. At the opening ceremony, only 120 villagers attended and—unknown to those who had worked hard to improve the building—the population of Finmere had reached its peak. In 1851, there were 399 people in the parish; ten years later, there were sixty people less. Fifty years later, in 1931, the population reached a low of 187 and many of those parishioners attended church less frequently than Victorian villagers.

Seymour Ashwell's Woodcarving

As the rain fell on the afternoon of Tuesday, 31 December 1901, mourners filed into St Michael's Church. Churchwardens Alfred Lepper and William Barrett guided villagers and visitors to their pews in a church still adorned with Christmas decorations. The schoolteacher, Miss King, played the organ. Mourners had come to commemorate the life of Finmere Rector Seymour Ashwell, who had died at the Rectory, aged 64 years.

During the 35 years of his incumbency he made great changes in the parish, the building of a new rectory, the improving of many cottages in the village, thereby adding materially to the comfort of the occupants, besides being a large subscriber to the schools, of which he took a large interest. (Bicester Advertiser, 4 February 1901)

Seymour Ashwell had worked diligently to improve the decor of the church, which had been enriched with dedications to his family.

Beneath the lovely stained-glass east window, erected to the memory of the deceased's mother, were the words in white lettering 'Alleluia' and 'Emmanuel.' Wreaths of ivy hung at the ends of the choir stalls, and in the sill of another beautiful stained-glass window in the wall of the south aisle (erected to the memory of the deceased's father) had been placed floral wreaths. The massive stone pillars were draped with ivy, and above were the texts 'Glory to God' and 'Prince of Peace.' A floral anchor was hung on the lectern and the front of the pulpit was decorated with a large cross of white blooms. (Bicester Advertiser, 4 February 1901)

Ashwell was a skilled woodcarver and he spent many years carving decorations to enliven Finmere's otherwise plain church. Among his contributions are the pulpit, font cover, reredos, tower screen and the ends of the pews in the choir and nave. Ashwell also rebuilt the Rectory (now the Old Rectory), commissioned Hill Leys, and continued Palmer's good works to support the poor and the school.



Ashwell's font cover



Detail from Ashwell's font cover

Carvings by Seymour Ashwell in St Michael's Church

Pulpit. The pulpit is of English oak with walnut panels, on a base of Corsham Down stone. Seymour Ashwell carved the panels, cap and cornice to designs by Swingen Harris in 1874.

Font Cover. Carved and presented to the parish in 1879.

Reredos. Erected in 1881, the Reredos was made of English oak and is painted with panels representing the four Evangelists. It was carved and paid for by Seymour Ashwell to the designs of Swingen Harris.

Tower Screen. 'June 13th [1884]. An oak screen placed across west Tower Archway at the expense of the Rector—the carving on it being done by him.'

Choir stalls. The ends were carved between July 1886 and 1891.

Nave stalls. The carving of stall ends began in 1891 and was completed before his death.

Other Improvements by Seymour Ashwell

1868. Vestry constructed at the expense of Seymour's father, also patron of the church, William Ashwell.

1869. An organ purchased from Messrs Bevington for £25.

1869	2000
£25	£1,600

1879. Memorial window in south nave in memory of William Ashwell, who died at Chetwode Priory in 1870, aged 70 years.

1880. New churchyard gates erected at expense of Seymour Ashwell and young holly trees planted against churchyard wall.

1881. Chancel repainted 'in quiet colour to emphasise the architecture.'

1884. Glass for a memorial window at the west end portraying The Annunciation. New glass in the east window depicting The Ascension, the old glass from the window put into the south window in the Chancel.

1886. 8 stone corbels which support the hammer beams, carved at Seymour Ashwell's expense.

1895. A figure of St Michael, carved by Mr Hitch of London, was placed over the entrance in the porch, paid for by Mrs Bethell of Finmere House and Seymour Ashwell.

After Ashwell

William Jocelyn Palmer	1814	<i>W.J. Palmer</i>
Frederick John Walker	1853	<i>F. Walker</i>
Seymour Ashwell	1866	<i>Seymour Ashwell Rector</i>
Henry William Trower	1902	<i>Henry W. Trower</i>
George Dangerfield	1919	<i>George Dangerfield</i>
Alfred Wheeler	1935	<i>Alfred Wheeler</i>
Christopher Francis Cross	1940	<i>C.F. Cross</i>
Percy Augustus Parrott	1948	<i>P.A. Parrott</i>
Maurice Geoffrey Sheldon	1956	<i>M.G. Sheldon</i>
Frederick Hosier	1960	<i>F. Hosier</i>
Leslie Ronald Swingler	1962	<i>Leslie R. Swingler</i>
Anthony Hichens	1976	<i>Anthony Hichens</i>
Donald James Allan	1978	<i>Donald J. Allan</i>
Ronald Bernard Jennison	1984	<i>R. Jennison</i>
Warwick John Yates	1993	<i>Warwick Yates</i>

Seymour Ashwell, one of Finmere's longest serving Rectors, died two years into the twentieth century. His predecessor, Palmer had been Rector of both Finmere and Mixbury and, in 1931, this link was revived when the two parishes were united as a single living. This arrangement continued until 1976, in which year further parishes were brought into the group.

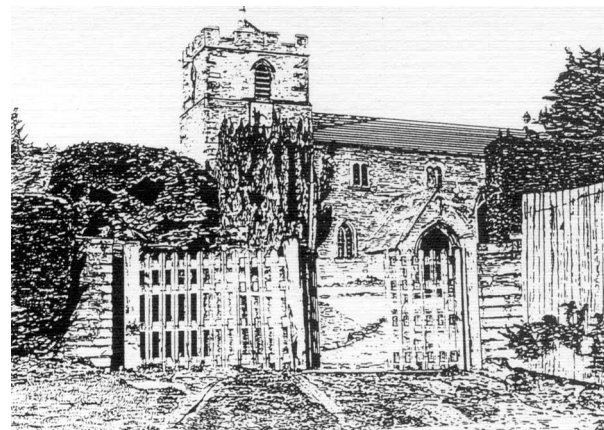
Leslie Swingler was the eighth Rector of the twentieth century and the last clergyman to be Rector of only Finmere and Mixbury. His was not, however, a full-time post; he was also secretary to the Oxford Diocesan Council of Education. After his departure in 1974, he was for three years Diocesan Youth and Community Officer and lived in Headington, Oxford. He then retired to Norfolk, where he died on 21 August 1993.

The presentation to the living was suspended after the departure of Swingler. For a period of eighteen months until the end of 1975, Reverend C. Rhodes, who lived at Somerton and worked on the Church Times, took Sunday Services. Although he was never officially appointed Rector or priest-in-charge, he signed himself acting Rector in the church registers, an unofficial title.

At the beginning of 1976, Reverend Anthony Hichens returned from missionary work in Guyana and was appointed priest-in-charge of Stratton Audley, Godington, Stoke Lyne, and Finmere and Mixbury. He resided in a newly purchased property in Stratton Audley. In the middle of 1978, Reverend Donald James Allan became priest-in-charge of Finmere and Mixbury and took up residence at the Rectory in Finmere. With Anthony Hichens, they together looked after the ten parishes which were to become the Shelswell Group and later the Shelswell Benefice. Hichens retired in April 1995 and lives in retirement at Middleton Cheney.

Donald Allan had been appointed following the retirement of Reverend John Sergeant, who lived at Newton Purcell with responsibility for that parish along with Fringford, Hethe, Cottisford and Hardwick cum Tusmore. Sorting out how the ten parishes were to be run resulted in arguments and correspondence covering nearly five years. Finally, the new Benefice of Finmere with Mixbury, Cottisford, Hardwick with Tusmore, and Newton Purcell with Shelswell (the Northern Benefice of the Shelswell Group) was formed by Order of Her Majesty in Council and came into effect on 1 March 1983, with Donald Allan as Rector.

Allan remained in post for just a further six months before taking up a post in Essex. His successor as Rector of the Northern Shelswell Benefice was Reverend Ronald Bernard Jennison. He was instituted and inducted on 4 February 1984. Before coming to Finmere, he had served two pairs of English-speaking chaplaincies in the south of France and held the title of



St Michael's Church in 1979

Drawn by Norman Burnley

Archdeacon of the Riviera. Ronald Jennison retired on 30 June 1992 and moved to Tingewick. He died on Easter Day, 1998.

Warwick (Ricky) John Yates was instituted and inducted on 29 January 1993. By Order of Her Majesty in Council, he became the first Rector to the newly created ten-parish Benefice of Shelswell on 1 December 1995.

Church Attendance

The changing engagement of rural people with their church is an important thread of village history. In comparison to the nineteenth century, church services are now held less regularly; the number of clergy has been reduced; many parishes have been combined into benefices; and services often attract smaller congregations. Records from St Michael's, however, show that there has not been a simple decline in church-going but a more complex change in the patterns of worship.

We have very little information on attendance during the nineteenth century, when attendance was almost compulsory. John Burgon recorded that there were eighty communicants on Easter Day 1852, forty-four men and thirty-six women. The average number of communicants on Sunday was about thirty. In 1854, Frederick Walker noted that there were between eighteen and thirty-six communicants at services through the year. Half the adults attended on Sundays (115 of 228), and just six at the daily service. These numbers, he noted, were not increasing.

By 1919, attendance had settled into the now familiar pattern of a small number of regular communicants and a larger participation on holy days and festivals. In 1920, only three parishioners on average took communion at the mid-week Holy Communion. An average of eight people took communion on Sundays, down from about thirty seventy years before. The holy days and festivals attracted an average of fifty-six communicants, and Easter numbers were much the same at seventy years before.

Easter	73 communicants
Whitsunday	50 communicants
Harvest	46 communicants
Christmas	42 communicants

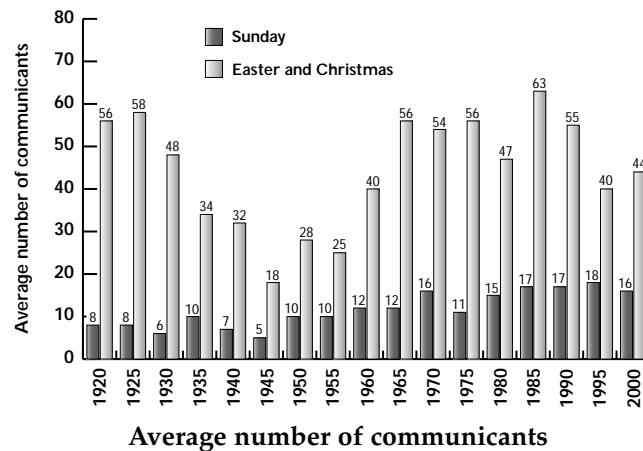
The analysis is based on numbers of communicants because this information has been reliably recorded since 1919. The number of communicants will generally be less than the total attendance at services and our data may exaggerate the decline in congregation sizes during the twentieth century. The data has been sampled at five year intervals.

Weekly services in 1854:

Sundays	11 am (with sermon), 3 pm
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday	9 am (Matins)
Wednesday and Friday	9 am (Litany)

Weekly services in 1919:

Sunday, Holy Communion	8.00 am
Sunday, Matins with Sermon	11.00 am
Sunday, Children's Service	3.00 pm
Sunday, Evensong and Sermon	6.00 pm
Wednesday, Holy Communion	8.00 am

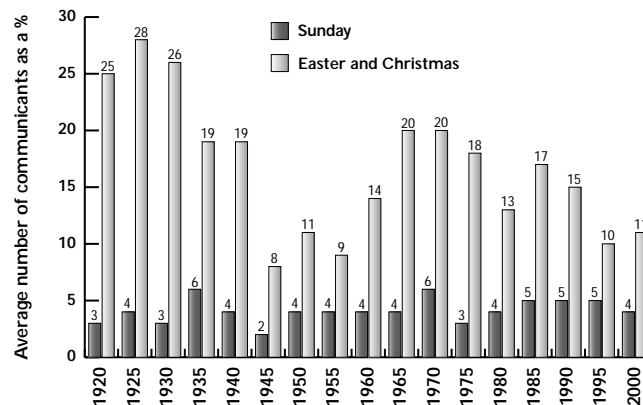


The number of Sunday communicants remained at an average of seven until the end of the Second World War, since when it has averaged thirteen, reaching a peak of seventeen in 1985. Participation at holy days and festivals fell to a low of eighteen in 1945 and then increased to sixty-three in 1985. The number of communicants at Easter, Whitsunday and Harvest Festival has declined. The last Harvest Festival at which communion was taken was in October 1993, though a popular family service has continued. In contrast, communion numbers at Christmas have nearly doubled.

Communicants on holy days and festivals

	1920s	1980s
Easter	72	40
Whitsunday	47	20
Harvest	50	–
Christmas	44	70

One of the reasons for a decline in church-going was the decline in Finmere's population, but the fluctuating number of parishioners alone cannot explain the changes. The popularity of Rectors and the average age of parishioners play a part. While the 1940s and 1950s were a low point the recovery in numbers from 1965 at a greater rate than the growth in population was perhaps due to younger people coming to the parish.



Average number of communicants as a percentage of the population of Finmere

Not all communicants will have lived in Finmere but the population of nearby villages has declined and grown in a similar way.

The Churchyard

The churchyard, with its traditional yews, hollies and other trees, is both a place of rest for the dead and a historical record. At St Michael's, visitors are first greeted by the village memorial to the dead of the First and Second World Wars. To the left, are reminders that death can be premature, including the grave of James Shaw of the Kings Head, who died in a carting accident. A memorial cross nearer the tower commemorates Edmund and Elizabeth Symes-Thompson, one of many graves for this family in the churchyard; the majority are clustered behind the tower.



A burial in the 1930s

The photograph shows the grave of Elizabeth 'Nun' Sikes in April 1939. She was daughter of Charles Clark of Finmere House. Joyce Sikes stands to the right.

Some of the earliest memorials in the churchyard are in the southeast corner. They include the Bakers' tomb, an ironstone chest tomb protected by railings, beneath which are buried Isaac Baker (died 1728) and his wife Susannah (died 1744). Behind the church, the graveyard is crowded with graves, the congestion eased by extensions in 1907 and 1955. Here, in new graves and old, are many of the familiar Finmere family names that recur throughout this book: Barnes, Barrett, Davis, Lepper, Paxton, Sikes, Tredwell and Wakelin.

On 21 May 1907, a Parish Meeting was called to discuss increasing the size of the crowded churchyard. It was agreed to accept an offer of a piece of Glebe land to the east of the churchyard from the Rector and Patron. Messrs Yardley, Tredwell, Windsor and Lepper were appointed to a working party to oversee the work. Miss Alice Ashwell and Mr Cottrell were appointed collectors of funds.

On October 11th 1907, the Bishop of Oxford Francis Paget consecrated a piece of ground which was given to the Parish as an addition to the existing Church Yard by the Rector (being part of the Glebe) for a Burial Ground. The morning had been very wet but at 11.40 the Sun came out and the consecration ceremony was carried out in sunshine.

There was a good congregation of Parishioners and 4 of the neighbouring clergy were present and the consecration deed was attested by the Reverend R.R. Kirby, Rector of Mixbury & the Reverend P.E. Raynor, Rector of Tingewick. The Expenses connected with the fencing, levelling, etc. and also the legal — amounting to £37 were defrayed by the parish with good will. (Reverend Henry Trower in the Rectors' Book)

1907	2000
£37	£2,380

The churchyard was again extended in 1955.

The collection from the village raised £32 13s 6d; the balance was contributed by the Rector.

Motorised mowers are not well suited to traditional churchyards and on 15 September 1980 the Parochial Church Council agreed to ask for a faculty (permission) to level mounds in the churchyard to make mowing easier.

Catholics and Nonconformists

During the later twentieth century, the Church of England has become more responsive to the ecumenical movement, which sought to embrace all believers in Christ. Before, it was often hostile and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Catholic worship was severely restricted. Despite this opposition, some areas of the country, including north Oxfordshire and Finmere, were generally friendly towards Catholics. William Keat, who lived at Bacon's House in the seventeenth century, had to worship privately. He nevertheless felt a part of the village community and bequeathed five pounds to be distributed to the poor of Finmere each year by the Church of England Rector and the Churchwardens.

The parish was not friendly towards Catholics during William Jocelyn Palmer's time as Rector. In 1825, the government proposed to allow Catholics to sit in Parliament. Finmere Vestry, led by Palmer, sent a petition of protest.

With every feeling of duty & respect for your Humble House, we your petitioners conceive that the particular tenets of the Romish Church are not mere speculative doctrines, but rather indeed most mischievously practiced as the history of this County & all of Christendom shows. (Vestry Minute Book)

Lady Gifford, a Catholic living at Finmere Grounds in the 1930s, had a private chapel on the site of the current barns. It was brick built, with altar and stained glass windows, and held about thirty people.

Non-conformism was not welcome and no chapels were built in the parish. There was a 'poor Family of Quakers' here in 1739 and in the 1830s two houses were licensed for non-conformist worship. In 1854, there were seven or eight 'dissenters' in the parish and no place of worship and, by 1866, there were no dissenters at all.



The congregation at St Michaels, 1 January 2000