

St Michael's Church and Parish, Leicester

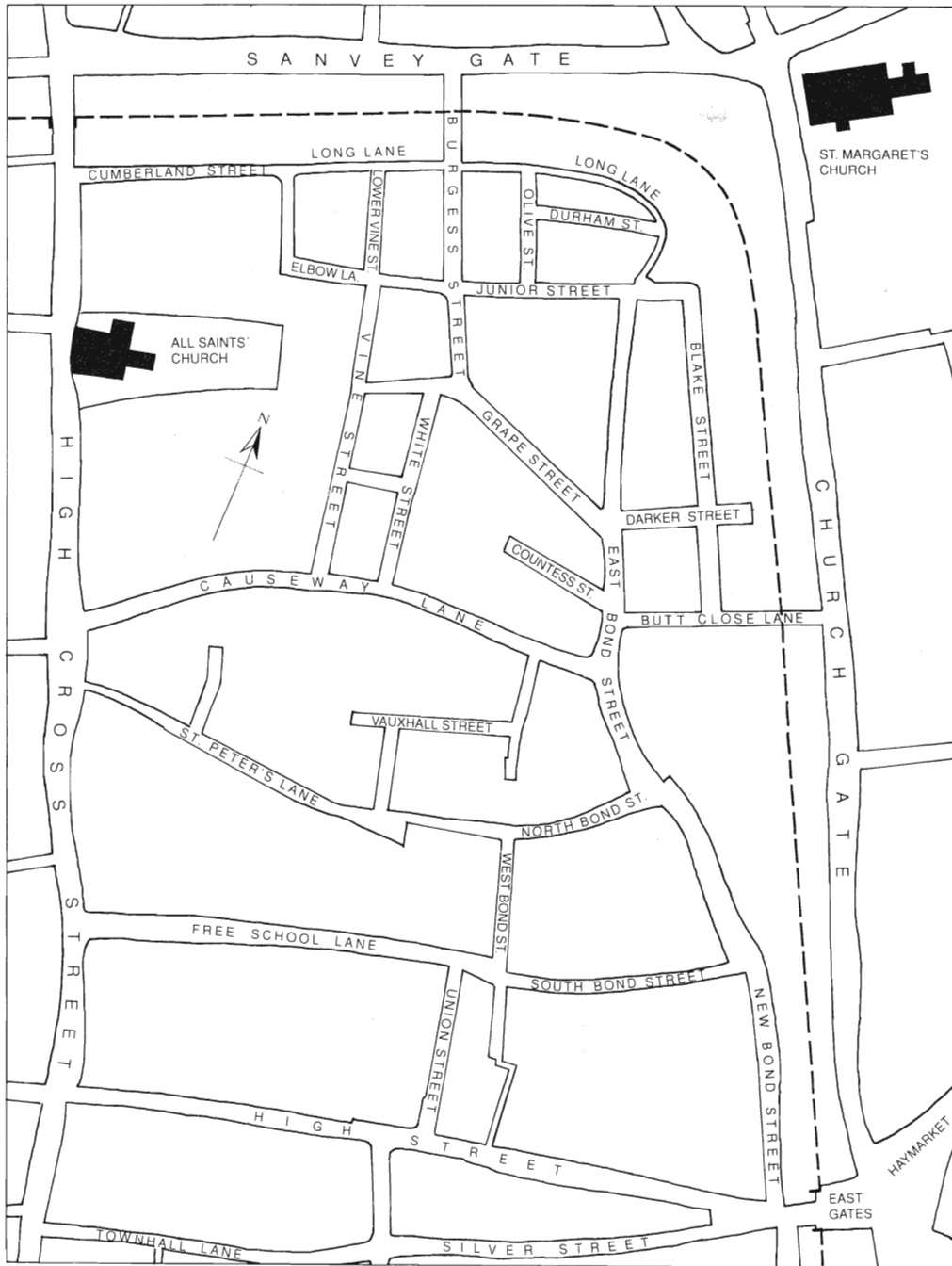
by Janet D. Martin

St Michael's was one of Leicester's oldest parishes, but very little is known about its church which had decayed by and was apparently demolished not long after 1450. It stood in 'the back lanes', the area in the north-eastern part of the medieval walled town which Throsby, Nichols, and later writers believed to have lost its population after it was devastated in the siege of 1173. Recent opinion, however, has inclined to the view that there had never been very many houses in that part of Leicester and that it is unlikely that a prosperous and inhabited area, in which any kind of established trade or commercial activity took place, would not have recovered, even from serious devastation. It might be helpful to gather together what is known about St Michael's parish and to suggest a site for the church.

It seems likely that the church existed before the Conquest, and that it formed part of the original endowment of the college of St Mary de Castro and later of Leicester Abbey. It appears in the matriculus of Bishop Hugh of Wells, c. 1220,¹ as belonging to the abbey and even then was said to be very poor, although it had both a priest and a chaplain c. 1200, when they were witnesses to the foundation charter of St John's hospital.² A vicarage was established by the abbey in 1221–22.³ The parish occupied the north-eastern corner of the walled town and certainly included land which touched upon the wall and ditch. In 1332, William, son of John Black, released land to his brother Ralph which included two plots in St Michael's parish, one of which lay upon the town ditch.⁴ In 1454, William Wymeswold of Leicester and Robert Hanson granted lands to Robert Brown and others among which was land in St Michael's bounded by the ditch.⁵ The southern boundary of the parish was probably Causeway Lane, where St Michael's marched with St Peter's. In 1459 land in both the parishes was bounded by Causeway Lane, then known as Jail Hall Lane.⁶ On the west side St Michael's would have joined the parish of All Saints (illus. 1).

Two other streets in the parish are known, both of which seem to have been lanes running through the crofts and gardens which comprised the greater part of it. None of the deeds which survive for St Michael's mentions any houses or cottages attached to those pieces of open ground. There must have been some originally, or there would have been no parishioners to endow and then to support the church, but from the fourteenth century at least the records suggest that the parish consisted only of open ground and

1. *Rotuli Hugonis de Welles Episcopi Lincolniensis, 1209–1235*, 1. Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 3, 1912, p.238
2. *Records of the Borough of Leicester: being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Leicester, 1103–1327*, edited by M. Bateson. London: Cambridge University Press, 1899, pp.9–10
3. *Rotuli Hugonis de Welles Episcopi Lincolniensis, 1209–1235*, 2. Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 6, 1913, pp.285–86
4. *Records of the Borough of Leicester: being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Leicester, 1327–1509*, edited by M. Bateson, p.395. London: Cambridge University Press, 1901
5. *A calendar of charters and other documents belonging to the Hospital of William Wyggeston at Leicester*, edited by A. Hamilton Thompson, p.354. Leicester: Edgar Backus, 1933
6. Thompson 1933, as n.5, p.355



1. The north-east corner of Leicester in 1886, showing street names referred to in the text (based on the first edition Ordnance Survey map; not to scale)

approximate line of town wall

orchards. One of the lanes ran east from High Cross Street on or near the line of Cumberland Street, just inside the wall, and followed a twisting route towards the enigmatic stretch of water called Torchmere, by which name the lane itself was sometimes known. It probably followed the line of Cumberland Street, Long Lane and East Bond Street, and joined St Peter's Lane at its eastern end, now North Bond Street.⁷ St Michael's Lane must have been a turning to the west off this lane. It ran towards the church, roughly parallel with and north of Causeway Lane, and may perhaps be seen in the western end of Grape Street. It was referred to in 1329 as the common way leading to St Michael's church.⁸ A garden released in 1483 was bounded by St Michael's Lane on the north and Jail Lane on the south.⁹ Mary Bateson, incidentally, read Jail Lane in this deed as 'Idyll' Lane, an error which led C. J. Billson to add that non-existent lane to his reconstruction of the topography of medieval Leicester.¹⁰ The matter was further confused by Nichols who rendered the same name in another deed as 'Feill' Lane.¹¹ The deed of 1483 released a garden bounded on the east by the highway called Torchmere, on the south by Jail ('Idyll') Lane, and on the north by St Michael's Lane. The same land figured in a deed of 1586 and must have been at the corner of Causeway Lane and East Bond Street, on the site of the later clinic and maternity hospital.¹²

Almost the only traces of human activity revealed in the surviving records of St Michael's parish are not of living but of dying. A man hired to dig in Henry Thornton's croft died there in 1297.¹³ Another was found dead at the corner of St Michael's Lane in 1303,¹⁴ and a woman was killed in the lane near the church in 1307.¹⁵ The only instances of other events in the parish occur in 1278 when Geoffrey Mauclerk was accused of washing woollfells in Torchmere against the prohibition of the community,¹⁶ and in 1335–36 when Roger of Glenfield was charged with removing a stone from a common well in St Michael's.¹⁷ One might have expected to find houses in the area abutting upon the town wall, but the only mention of either church or parish in the list of properties on the wall and ditch which was made in 1492–93 records that the abbot of Leicester held three pieces of ground 'sumtyme the pariche churches of Saint Michell'.¹⁸ There is no indication that this ground was even in the parish, but it seems very likely that it was.

7. Billson suggested that Torchmere could have been named from the great mullein, *verbascum thapsus*, or 'torch' which possibly grew there in quantity: C. J. Billson, *Mediaeval Leicester*, p.5. Leicester: Edgar Backus, 1920. The name of Elbow Lane appears to have been transferred at some stage from this line. It is indicated on Thomas Roberts's map published in 1741 as the sharp bend at the extreme east end of Long Lane where the road turns south to become East Bond Street. By the 19th century the road to the south of Cumberland Street and Long Lane had become known as Elbow Lane. I am grateful to Richard Buckley of the Leicestershire Archaeological Unit for drawing my attention to this.
8. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.388
9. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.436
10. Billson 1920, as n.7, p.6
11. John Nichols, *The history and antiquities of the county of Leicester*, 1.2, p.327. London: John Nichols, 1815
12. Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327
13. Bateson 1899, as n.2, p.359
14. Bateson 1899, as n.2, p.367
15. Bateson 1899, as n.2, p.371
16. Bateson 1899, as n.2, p.172
17. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.19
18. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.337; two of them are mentioned by Charyte: Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327

The evidence suggests, therefore, that by the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the surviving deeds begin, there were no houses in the parish and that the tithes of the garden grounds were even then becoming insufficient for the support of the vicar. Two bequests were made during the fourteenth century to a guild in the church which argues some parochial activity but there can have been very little.¹⁹ The Black Death may have contributed to the decay of the church, although it continued to be identified in deeds for some time. Land *iuxta ecclesiam Sancti Michelis* is mentioned in the late fourteenth-century rental of Lord Grey.²⁰ At about the same time a canon from Leicester Abbey took up residence in St Michael's church as an anchorite, a circumstance which might also serve to confirm that the parish was no longer viable.²¹ In 1427 one of two gardens in 'St Michael's Croft' was said to extend from the way leading from the church,²² and as late as 1450 a piece of land in the parish was indicated to be opposite the church itself.²³ That is the last surviving mention of the church, though the name of the parish appeared in deeds for at least another half-century. The last reference seems to be in 1516 when William Wigston acquired a piece of land there as part of the endowment of his hospital.²⁴ In Charyte's Rental at the end of the fifteenth century it was said that during the vacancy of the vicarage of St Peter's the emoluments of St Michael's belonged and should belong, not to the bishop of Lincoln, but to the abbey.²⁵ This special arrangement seems to argue that the church was already dependent upon, if it had not been absorbed by, St Peter's. The accommodation with the bishop may also look back to the earliest days of the parish, or at least to the earl's or the abbey's acquisition of the church. The parish subsequently became part of St Peter's, which itself was amalgamated with that of All Saints in 1591. The churchyard was said to be in St Peter's parish in 1591, and in 1606 the last mention of St Michael's refers to two acres of pasture lately in that parish but by then in All Saints'.²⁶

C. J. Billson believed that the church stood 'near the present Vauxhall St and Causeway Lane',²⁷ but it must in fact have been further to the north-west. Among the land sold by the borough to its town clerk, William Dethick, in 1591 was 'a parcel of ground or croft called St Michael's Churchyard', then in the tenure of Robert Pilkington.²⁸ The deed of sale was printed in full by Throsby and belonged in 1791 to his friend Thomas Copley, who was then the owner of the ground, originally granted with other Crown and Duchy lands when the town was incorporated by Queen Elizabeth I in 1589.²⁹ Nichols added a note to his account of St Michael's to the effect that part of the ground described in Dethick's deed had recently been sold to the parish of All Saints as

19. *VCH Leics*, 4, p.389; the most recent review of what was known of the church is given here

20. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.201

21. *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, ed. J.R. Lumby, 2, p.126. Rolls Series, 92. London: HMSO, 1895

22. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.417

23. Thompson 1933, as n.5, p.351

24. Thompson 1933, as n.5, p.387

25. Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327

26. Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327

27. Billson 1920, as n.7, p.78

28. Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327; *Records of the Borough of Leicester: being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Leicester, 1509-1603*, edited by M. Bateson, p.277. London: Cambridge University Press, 1905

29. J. Throsby, *The history and antiquities of the ancient town of Leicester*, p.102n. Leicester: privately published, 1791.

an extension to its churchyard.³⁰ St Michael's must therefore have stood very near to All Saints'. Thomas Copley paid a feefarm rent to the borough for this land in 1771 and 1791.³¹ It was then called the Vineyard and later gave its name to Vine Street. The churchyard of St Michael's must have extended over the area from Vine Street towards the original graveyard of All Saints' if part of it later became an extension to that of All Saints'. One might look for the church somewhere to the west of Vine Street, south of Elbow Lane. In 1956 nine skeletons were excavated in Vine Street.³² It is tempting to suggest that they came from the churchyard of St Michael's.³³

Clergy of St Michael's

William, priest, *c.* 1200

Alexander, chaplain, *c.* 1200³⁴

William Eyton, vicar, 1221, 1222

Henry de St Martin, vicar, 1233, 1244

Nicholas, vicar, 1236³⁵

Thomas, late chaplain, 1378/9³⁶

30. Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327 n.7

31. *Records of the Borough of Leicester: 1689–1835: the Chamberlains' Accounts*, edited by G. A. Chinnery, pp.212, 264. Leicester: University Press, 1967; other owners can be traced in the borough rentals from 1688 to 1834: Chinnery 1967, pp.13, 71, 119, 166, 316, 379

32. 'Leicestershire notes: archaeology in Leicestershire, 1956–1957', *TLAHS*, 33 (1957), p.60; report at Leicestershire Museums. The report is brief and offers little opinion as to the date of the skeletons, which were lying east/west, on the east side of Vine Street and about 15 yards from its junction with Elbow Lane. Others were observed in the ground nearby.

33. There are other references to St Michael's, both to church and parish, especially in the borough records and in Thompson 1933, as n.5. I am grateful to my husband, Dr G. H. Martin, for his ready help in the preparation of this article.

34. Both named in Bateson 1899, as n.2, pp.9–10

35. All named in A. Hamilton Thompson, *The Abbey of St Mary of the Meadows, Leicester*, p.168. Leicester: Backus for the Leicestershire Archaeological Society, 1949; where two dates are given, the earlier is from Nichols 1815, as n.11, p.327

36. Bateson 1901, as n.4, p.176