The Shield of St Michael is on the top of the east window in the Hervey de Stanton chapel. It was made in the late fourteenth century: the three ‘suns’ on the corners of the shield represent the Trinity, and the one in the middle represents God. Legend has it that St Michael carried it in all his battles with the powers of darkness. It was originally in the tower and relocated to here in 1963. The Royal Stuart arms, now placed below it, was made for the east window in the Chancel but installed here following the creation of the Beamont window. Both of these designs are originals and were reset and releaded by George Pace (1915–75). The carved heads at each end of the high window arches are likely to be the images of the stonemasons and artisans who built Michaelhouse.

MICHAELHOUSE – more recent events. From 1546–1908 Michaelhouse was a parish church for local residents, supported by Trinity clergy for much of this time. In 1908 the church was united with the neighbouring parish of St Mary the Great where it remains. In 1963 Michaelhouse was redesigned internally to be used as the parish hall for Great St Mary’s – a design which may not have been viewed favourably now not least because a false ceiling was installed which hid from view all the stained glass windows and arches! By the 1990s the whole building became in need of significant repair and it was agreed that the Church should be adapted for use by the wider community. The £1.3m for the restoration was raised by the parish. It took five years to achieve the relevant authorisations for the work to go ahead, then two years to draw up the plans and undertake the work.

Michaelhouse has become a trendsetter and remains one of very few ‘conversions’ where services, including weddings, baptisms and funerals, are still performed.

JOHN FISHER (1469–1535) matriculated from Michaelhouse in 1483 and by 1491 he had been elected a fellow of the college. He became Master of the college in 1497, Vice Chancellor in 1501 and close advisor to Lady Margaret Beaufort. Throughout his ministry his opposition to King Henry VIII’s ‘great matter’ (the divorce of Katherine of Aragon), and subsequent proclamation of the Royal Supremacy, tested his loyalties and ultimately cost his life. He died on the block on Tower Hill on June 22, 1535 and was made a saint in 1939. He is an awe-inspiring Alumnus.

The early years. St Michael’s is the oldest college chapel in Cambridge and it is likely that there would have been a church on this site from the eleventh century. St Michael’s Church was built in the Decorated Style, the gothic architecture of the early fourteenth century, and it has been little altered or renovated externally since. The Bell Tower, was where the four seventeenth-century bells were located. They were removed in the mid twentieth century and now there is no public access to the tower.

In 1323 the Lord Chancellor and Chief Justice, Hervey de Stanton, bought the ‘living and the right to appoint clergy’ from Dera de Madingley, a local noblewoman. He had amassed enormous wealth from the tithes (taxes) he collected from the ‘livings’ he bought and land he inherited. In 1324, he founded a new Cambridge college, Michaelhouse, which was the first residential college to be formed after Peterhouse.

In the same year King Edward II granted patent letters to found the ‘College of the Holy and undivided Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord, St Michael the Archangel and All Saints’ (full name). John Hotham, Bishop of Ely, granted the
appropriation of St Michael’s church to the new foundation of Michaelhouse, and Hervey de Stanton ordered the complete rebuilding of the church. It was not completed by the time of his death in 1327 and his executors were charged with the completion of the building. Significant in its design is that the Chancel predominates in size over the nave (today’s café space) to meet collegiate requirements at that time; this became the model for other Cambridge and Oxford college chapels.

The Master and the Fellows were all clergy and were required to serve as priests in the parish; the scholars in minor orders were expected to become ordained within the first year of their admission to the college. These ordained priests, who later became affiliated to Trinity, nonetheless continued to serve in the small parish until the mid-eighteenth century.

In 1546, when King Henry VIII carried out his dissolution of the monasteries, Michaelhouse and King’s Hall were included in this movement. Trinity College was built in their place and is now the ‘Lay Rector’ of Michaelhouse, an ongoing relationship.

The High Altar, in the Chancel and dedicated to St Michael, was where the Sunday Eucharist was celebrated. In the fourteenth century it would have been adorned with gifts by parishioners. Collegemembers worshipped in the Chancel on Sundays; the parish congregation would have worshipped in the nave. On weekdays the Chancel would have accommodated university debates, college sermons and lectures – an inspiring setting for philosophical debates.

The Chancel choir stalls date back to the reign of Edward IV and were made from twelve oaks from Walden for the Chapel in King’s Hall. When King’s Hall was demolished in 1550 to make way for the new chapel of Trinity College the stalls were moved here for use by the scholars of Trinity College who worshipped at St Michael’s until 1565. Some of the stalls have simple, carved misericords (from the Latin ‘misericordia’ meaning ‘act of mercy’) for those standing during services throughout the night; they could rest against the ledge on them.

Destruction! On Boxing Day in 1643 the gothic images in the Chancel and the Chapel were destroyed by local iconoclasts and ‘Reformers’ led by William Dowsing, boasting ‘we break down the diverse pictures’. Original stained glass was also destroyed during this period – glorious works in stone and glass now forever lost.

On November 11th 1849, ‘just as the Sunday congregation was assembling for morning service’, fire destroyed the roof in the chancel and caused considerable damage. The rebuilding and restoration was completed under the supervision of Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811–78) and the church was reopened on October 18th 1850. During the restoration the Chancel ceiling was boarded to a form corresponding to the side roofs as can be seen today. Frederick Leach, who had painted the reredos, decorated the roof, as a thank offering to God; he was not paid for it. It must have been a daunting piece of work.

The Beamont Memorial Window behind the reredos, was a gift from the parishioners in memory of the Reverend William Beamont who died suddenly in office aged forty. His death ‘spread on every side a feeling of intense grief’. As with the reredos, the window was designed by George Gilbert Scott Junior and tells the biblical stories of St Michael and the Angels.

The Hervey de Stanton Chapel is named after the Founder of Michaelhouse. He probably never worked in any of the parishes he held; he would have appointed other clergy and curates, to exercise the ‘cure of souls’ on his behalf enabling him to further his career as a London lawyer. His tenure as Lord Chief Justice was short; King Edward II was overthrown, and he fled from the capital; de Stanton (his protégé), gave up his tenure of office and fled to York. He died a year later (1327) and his body was brought to Michaelhouse and buried.
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