**Church History**

The present church is the third church building on the site, the first chapel dating back to at least 1458. In 1857 the wealthy and energetic Rev. Henry Worsley was appointed to the living. He considered that the chapel was "the very worst in the Diocese, singularly unsuited to its sacred purpose", and the vicarage, Lowborough House, "a bad one and sited at an inconvenient distance from the chapel and the people".

Worsley, aided by Lord Churchill, set about a complicated series of land exchanges and purchases to acquire a large plot at the junction of Lower End and Witney Lane. Several cottages had to be demolished and the village blacksmith persuaded to move to a new site next to the Baptist chapel with an acre of land attached given by Lord Churchill. On the plot at the top of Witney Lane, Worsley had built a new church, together with a vicarage, coachman's house and gardener's house, the latter three of which have since been sold. The total cost of re-building was £4,600 of which Worsley himself contributed £2000 and a further £1745 was raised through grants. Lord Churchill gave the stone and the residue was raised locally.

The eminent Ecclesiastical Gothic Revival architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott designed both the chapel and the vicarage, though the plans for the church were reviewed by G.E. Street, another important Victorian architect, who suggested several improvements. The builder was James Thomas of Abingdon. The memorandum of agreement states that he was to complete the church to Scott's satisfaction by 15 September 1859, with financial penalties for delays. Perhaps the timetable was too ambitious or the price too low, for poor James Thomas ended up bankrupt! The new church was consecrated by the Bishop of Oxford on 19 October 1860.

**The Building**

St. Michael and All Angels, Leafield is Scott's only important church in the county outside Oxford. Its spire dominates the skyline for miles around; originally reaching 145 ft  6 ins, it is now rather shorter. The severe winter of 1864-5 caused serious damage to the original spire, so was replaced by a smaller tower of lighter dimensions. This too did not prove totally resistant to Leafield weather and during the major rebuilding of the spire in 1934 it was again shortened; the changed gradient towards the top of the spire is still apparent.

The design of the church is based on the early English style of the thirteenth century, the style advocated by the Ecclesiological movement for smaller country churches. The building is massive, striking but austere, the whole enhanced by picturesque setting. The interior was originally very plain, its most striking feature being the way Scott emphasised the sacred nature of the chancel by making it a lantern between four arches beneath the tower. The chancel pier capitals have naturalistic flower and leaf carving; Scott instructed the masons to copy directly from local nature and the inclusion of large chestnut leaves is particularly appropriate for a church with many mature horse chestnuts in the churchyard.

Colour was added to the interior later. The arcades separating the nave from the aisles have sheet metal scrolls with edifying texts painted on them and a more elaborate sheet metal scroll with painted texts decorates the north wall of the chancel. These were the work of Mrs Worsley, the vicar's wife, and must have been a splendid sight when the paint was fresh and the gilding undimmed by time. Other decoration was added by Rev. James Gibb, vicar 1870-5, a talented artist. He was responsible for the painted plaster work at the east end, which was subsequently damaged by damp but finally restored in the 1990's, the richly-decorated ceiling of the lantern and the decoration of the organ pipes. The glass in the west window, made in by Wailes and Strang of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, was a gift from Rev. and Mrs. Worsley.

Few changes have been made in the twentieth century. The lychgate was erected in 1920 as a war memorial for the 1st World War and the Lady Chapel was re-dedicated as a memorial to the dead of the 2nd World War. Fortunately the modern passion for re-ordering has not been allowed to mar the interior, though considerable effort has been expended on conservation and restoration. Were Rev. Worsley to step into the church today, he would find it much as he remembered it.

Recent Work

Project St Michael carried out survey and repair work on the tower and spire during 2015.  Pictures copyright Project St Michael.

[](http://www.leafieldvillage.co.uk/history/church/st-michels-spire-view-of-village-to-west/)[](http://www.leafieldvillage.co.uk/history/church/st-michaels-spire-work-2/)[](http://www.leafieldvillage.co.uk/history/church/dcim100gopro/)[](http://www.leafieldvillage.co.uk/history/church/st-michaels-spire-view/)