

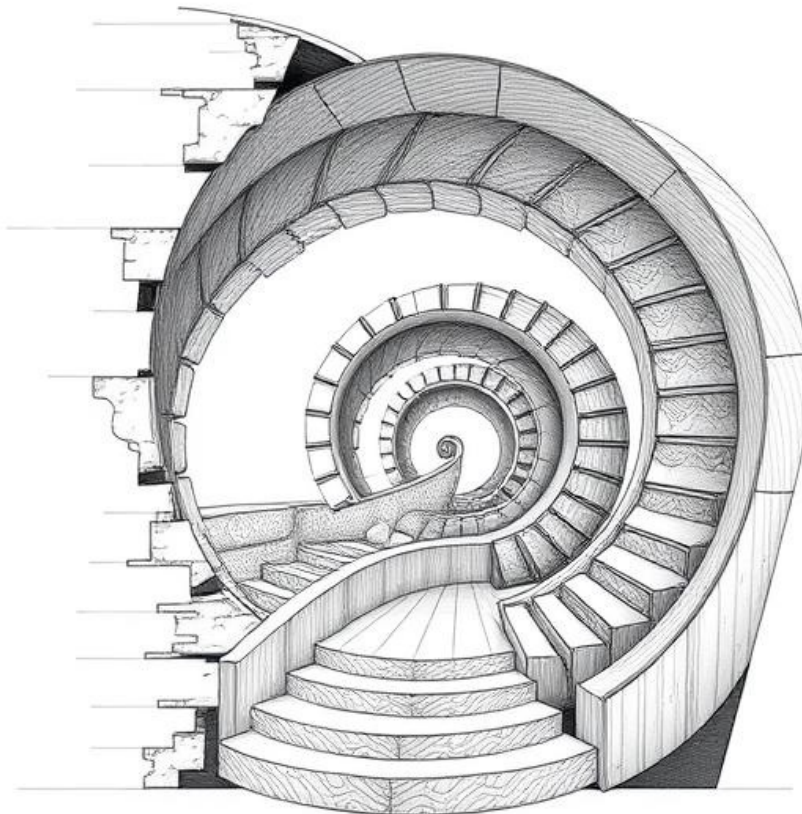
THE
Tower
STORIES



FRIENDS OF
ST. MICHAEL'S
CHURCH

WINDELSTÁN

Two part version



"tower with a winding staircase"

A musical work inspired by the church tower of
St Michael the Archangel, and the Wiltshire town of Mere

Words and music
Richard Nye

RIVERLIGHT
◆
EDITION

ASCENDING A WINDING STAIRCASE....

Standing on Castle Hill, overlooking the town for the first time, I had the strangest feeling that I had been here before... but I am sure I haven't. I quickly became lost in the view and looking back into Dorset, it felt like spying on a neighbour! But what a view it is. The tower of St. Michael's, majestic and bold, appears to watch over the town and all I could think of was how many blocks of stone did they use to build it? Music would have been played here I thought. A castle must have had music. What would they have played or sung? How many blocks of stone...? The two thoughts became jumbled up and a simple tune began to find its way into my head. The melodic idea stuck, and sitting back at home, still wondering how many blocks of stone made up the tower, those ideas started to become something more.

Being offered the post of Composer in Residence for Mere has been a wonderful opportunity and a privilege. For me, writing music is a compulsion and has been for a very long time. Putting ideas in order is part of the challenge, so to have a whole town and its surroundings as a focus was a real treat. I felt that if I could, I needed to create the words alongside the music. The two really had to go together. The melody had become firmly established and I worked to steer it to the best of my abilities, towards a folk-like theme. Initially this had varied time signatures creating an irregular feel. At the same time I returned to the blocks of stone.... the structure of the whole piece was starting to become a bit clearer. I wanted to focus on the tower, I wanted to give it an almost human-like character and build things from there. Telling a story from the viewpoint of the tower itself.

One bright September day I met up with Jane Borodale, Mere's Writer in Residence and together we explored the tower on our own, talking about creative processes and working to take as much as possible on board in that first real 'moment of engagement'. It was so helpful to talk with Jane as we explored the tower and how much of its history was hidden behind the walls. The graffiti, the intricate mechanisms keeping time, the bold majestic bells that gently moved on their iron frame, only to burst into life every fifteen minutes. With all that in mind and the wonderful two-day immersive introduction to Mere we had recently experienced, the first verse had begun writing itself.

The following months involved a number visits. I would often walk up and down the town, listening - the chatter of people, the shouts and cries of the children during playtime at school alongside the hum of the A303. I experienced the town in daylight and at night - in all weathers too! I spent time sitting in the museum reading quietly in a corner and then spending a morning sifting through countless photographs, looking at the people of Mere sharing their precious moments, from times now long gone.

It was however, up in the Parvis Room above the entrance to St Michael's, that I found myself connecting to the past in an unexpected and unplanned way. The remains of the old pennants (usually found on top of pinnacles) from the 19th century were propped against the wall and above them in cases, were some of the church records, including old parish magazines. I had only intended to 'get a feel' for this space, but as it turned out, I was to spend the rest of my afternoon there. I was looking at the bound volumes of parish magazines and began to recall my father (who is a clergyman) taking great care writing his magazine letter, which would be very much 'of the moment'. I wondered if the Vicar's letters in the magazines in front of me would follow a similar approach? They certainly did! As time passed in the Parvis Room that afternoon, I began to find myself in the Mere of 1910.

The bells were being replaced and one lady was upset that she had not been thanked properly with everyone else in church, for her contribution. The Vicar had put that right in one of his letters. I kept reading, discovering that groups would meet regularly for various things and I read on to experience the 'new' bells being introduced to the town for the first time. Picking up the next volume I then came across the moment Mere came face to face with the outbreak of the Great War and the aftermath that followed. It was quite a humbling and emotional experience reading those parish magazines, and how I could, if at all, bring these moments into the piece of music that lay in sketches on my piano at home?

Just after Christmas 2024, I sat with my wife having coffee and watching the world in Mere go by. The clock was chiming and I had begun to feel a very real sense of connection with the town. A few weeks previously, I had shared some of my ideas with the Tower Stories Committee and was happy that things seemed to be on the right track. Snippets of conversations, the walks through Mere and people watching, coffee in hand, were all helping to formulate things. However, my experience with the letters in the Parvis Room was niggling at me. I really wanted to find a way to include at the very least, an aspect of what I had read from the parish magazines.

Standing once more on Castle Hill and staring at the tower, my original melody echoed in my head. I had been playing around with some words that I had hoped would form a refrain, but without much success. I had a melody but the words weren't right. I kept thinking about the letters and staring at the tower recalling the picture of lightning near the church tower taken in 1906. Remembering that the tower was also struck in 1977 damaging the South West Pinnacle, I wondered if I could bring the resilience, determination, kindness and other attributes that I had read in the letters, into a refrain based around the tower? The fact that the tower had, over countless years endured contrasting and extreme weather conditions, both glorious and destructive, gave me the ideal figurative prompt I was searching for. Back at my piano I started to piece together some sketches that were to later form the basis of a refrain.

When working on pieces of music, things change quite a bit as they go on. The tricky bit is knowing when to stop and mark the work as 'finished'. I had pretty much done that and was gearing up to making some arrangements of the work when it was suggested that it would be great to stage the piece outside. This would present a different challenge but one I wanted to explore further. I had recently completed a number of film scores. It had been an intense few months with very tight deadlines. However, the idea of creating a backing track that could be used with various versions of the piece was quite exciting. It would also allow me to revisit my fascination with sound sample and field recording.

I booked a time with Kit to head up the tower and record each of the bells. The clock was stopped and I set up my little (but very clever) recorder on a stand just above the bell frame. The recorder has a microphone array that allows me to record in 'spatial mode', a setting that gives the listener an immersive audio experience. It didn't take long to do, playing each bell just once and waiting for the wonderful sound to die away before going on to the next one. Soon I was back at home extracting the bell audio from my little recorder and hearing them back. They sounded really good! A week later I returned to the tower, on my own this time and with a plan to record as many sounds as I could, starting at the tower door and working my way up.

I had a plan to create a 'tower instrument' that I could use in the backing track. First on my list was to record the sound of the key opening the door to the tower. Not as easy as I thought, but on the third attempt I was happy. Next, I wanted to record myself walking up the spiral staircase at 115 beats per minute. I thought this would be a fairly simple exercise, but having done it, I really don't recommend that you try this yourself! I balanced a visual metronome in one hand and my recorder in the other, headphones on my head.... each step sounded different and I wanted to get them all! After two failed attempts and a sore knee, I finally managed to get to the bell ringing door. That was a pretty tricky undertaking and I hoped that the rest of my recording session would not be quite so challenging. Recording the door of the ringing room opening was the next task. I discovered that opening it one way resulted in a sort of whining sound. I recorded it. Then it was on to the clock room where I recorded the pendulum, a cardboard square being dragged along the cogs of the chiming system and the same approach on the wheels of the ancient disused clock. On my way back I recorded the sound of the demonstration bell in the ringing room. I went back to the clock room and made a recording of the clock from above. I was quite pleased with the sounds I had but it didn't seem complete yet. I had the bells recorded, so didn't need to go back there – the only thing missing was from the very top of the tower, but how on earth was I going to get anything from up there? The wind would surely have an impact and what if anything would I be able to record? Then I remembered my visit to the Parvis Room.

The remains of three pennants had been rescued and stored there and I wondered if there was any way of getting a sound from them? Packing everything up I went back down the stairs, locked up the tower and collected the key to the Parvis Room. Once in front of the pennants I ran my finger gently across the cut-out numbers of the years that adorn each one. To my delight, each made a different and usable sound. I recorded each of the three that were in the room and made my way back home.

Hearing back the sounds in the comfort of my little studio was a lovely experience. I left the bells as they were, I wasn't going to change anything there. I lowered the pitch of the bell ringing room door whine and tuned it to D (the same key the bells are in). It only meant an adjustment of a tone but it seemed to work well. The resulting sound was more of a deep-sounding drone and perfect for what I wanted. I fed the audio of one of the weather vanes through a delay unit creating a 'ping pong' stereo effect that was also very useful. I added bits of reverberation (acoustic echo) to other sounds once, using a different sound as the reverberation 'source' which created some really interesting results. I tweaked my step walking a bit so that it was exactly in time with everything else and then started to assemble a track to fit with the choral element of the piece that was now all but complete. I decided to score the backing track using some traditional instrumental groups. The brass section I wrote at the end of the work, was scored to represent the town brass band playing in The Square.

The final moment of the piece returns to the tower and the bells, which I have incorporated into the last section, allowing the tower its own voice alongside those of the people of Mere, as the piece draws to a close.

Richard Nye – Composer in Residence, Mere - March 2025

The 'Riverlight Edition' is the original, published setting of the score produced by the composer for the first performance in June 2025. It was used again for the professional recording session that took place at St Michael's Church, Mere in December 2025.

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WINDELSTÁN

Old English for a tower with a winding staircase

Stone on stone and higher still,
 Built through fire, born from hill.
 Name by name on wall and door,
 As time is counted evermore,
 Time is counted evermore,
 Counted evermore.

*For I dream through the sunlight,
 Sleep in the breeze,
 As mist falls in street light's glow.
 I call from my tower,
 Angel in flight,
 Four points to the heavens show,
 This is Mere.*

Face by face as pictures hold,
 Life in moments, stories told.
 Rivers flow and mark their way,
 As children laugh and play,
 As children laugh and play.

*For I cheer through the thunder,
 I smile at the rain,
 I point to the stars in the sky and I sing,
 ...and I sing,*

This is Mere.

(fanfare)

(optional solo but then taken up by all Voice 1 singers)

Stone on stone and higher still,
 Built through fire, born from hill.
 Name by name on wall and door,
 Time is counted evermore.

(Joined by Voice 2)

*For I dream through the sunlight,
 Smile at the rain,
 I sleep through the breezes,
 No day's the same.
 For I dream through the sunlight,
 Gaze at the sky,
 I sing through the thunder,
 as life goes on by!*

*Bells ring true,
 A call to you,
 Bells ring clear,
 For this is Mere!*

*Let the bells let the bells ring true,
 Let the bells call you!*

WINDELSTÁN

"tower with a winding staircase"

Words and music
Richard Nye

Steadily building

♩=115

Voice One

Voice Two

Steadily building

♩=115

Piano

10 **A**

Voice 1

Voice 2

Pno.

Stone on stone

Stone on stone, stone on stone. Stone on stone

19 **B**

Voice 1

Voice 2

Pno.

Stone on stone and stone on stone. and high-er, high-er still.

stone on stone. Stone on stone stone on stone. Stone on stone stone on

C

28 *mf* *mp* *p*

Voice 1 Stone on stone and high-er still, Built through fi-re, born from

Voice 2 stone. through fi-re, born from

Pno. *mp* *p*

D

36 *mf* *mp*

Voice 1 hill. Name by name on wall and door, as time is coun-ted

Voice 2 hill. coun-ted

Pno. *mf* *mp*

E

43 *mf*

Voice 1 e - ver more, — Time is coun-ted e - ver - more, -

Voice 2 e - ver more, —

Pno. **E**

49 *mf* 2 *f* *mf* **F**

Voice 1
Coun - ted e - ver - more. For I dream through the

Voice 2
Coun - ted e - ver - more.

Pno. *mf* 2 *f* *mp* **F**

54

Voice 1
sun - light, Sleep in the breeze, As mist falls in

Voice 2
mp Sleep in the breeze, *p* in

Pno. *mf*

58 **G** *mf* *f* *mf* *f* **G**

Voice 1
street light's glow. I call from my to - wer,

Voice 2
street light's glow. I call from my to - wer,

Pno. *mf* *mp* *f* **G**

63 *mf* *mp* **H** *p*

Voice 1 An - gel in flight, Four points to the hea - vens show, this is

Voice 2 *mf* *mp*
Four points to the hea - vens show, **H**

Pno. *mf* *mp* *p*

69

Voice 1 Mere. _____

Voice 2 *p* *p*
Stone on stone stone on stone. Stone on stone and stone on stone.

Pno. *mp*

I 77 *mf* *mf* *p* *mf*

Voice 1 Face by face as pic-tures hold, Life in mo-ments, sto-ries told. Ri - vers flow and

Voice 2 *mf* *p*
Life in mo-ments, sto-ries told. **I**

Pno. *p* *mf* *mp* *p* *dolce*

87 **J**

Voice 1 *f* *mf*
 mark their way, as chil - dren laugh and play, as chil - dren laugh and play.

Voice 2 *f* *mf*
 chil - dren laugh and play_ play_ as chil - dren laugh and play.

Pno. *f* *mf* *mf*

96 **K**

Voice 1 *f*
 For I cheer through the thun - der, I smile at the rain,

Voice 2 *f*
 For I cheer through the thun - der, I smile at the rain,

Pno. *f*

K

104 **L**

Voice 1 *mf* *ff*
 I point to the stars in the sky and I sing, and I sing, this is

Voice 2 *mf* *ff*
 I point to the stars in the sky and I sing, and I sing, this is

Pno. *mf*

L

Quicker
♩=120 **M**

113

Voice 1
Mere! _____ this is Mere!

Voice 2
Mere! _____ this is Mere! _____ this is

Quicker
♩=120 **M**
Boldly
ff

Pno.

N (Possible solo)
mf with a sense of longing

121

Voice 1
Stone on stone and high-er still, Built through fi-re, born from hill.

Voice 2
Mere. _____

N
sempre p

Pno.

O **P**
(Tutti) mp

129

Voice 1
Name by name on wall and door, Time is coun-ted e-ver more. Stone on

Voice 2
_____ *mf* For I dream through the

O **P**

Pno.

138

Voice 1
stone and high-er still, Built through fi - re, born from hill.

Voice 2
sun-light, Smile at the rain, I sleep through the bree-zes, No day's thesame. For I

Pno.

mf

145

Voice 1
Name by name on wall and door, Time is coun - ted e - ver-

Voice 2
dream through the sun-light, gaze at the sky, I sing through the thun-der, as life goes on

Pno.

Q

152

Voice 1
more. Bells ring true, A call call to

Voice 2
by! For I dream through the sun-light, Smile at the rain, I sleep through the bree-zes,

Pno.

R

mf

159

f **S** *mf*

Voice 1
you, Let the bells, let the bells ring clear, For this

Voice 2
mf
No day's the same. For I dream through the sun-light, gaze at the sky, I sing through the

Pno.

166

T *f*

Voice 1
is Mere! Let the bells, let the bells ring true, let the

Voice 2
thun-der, as life goes on by! Let the bells, let the bells ring true, let the

Pno.

173

U *f*

Voice 1
bells, let the bells call you! Let the bells let the bells ring clear, Let the

Voice 2
bells, let the bells call you! Let the bells ring clear,

Pno.

181 **V**

Voice 1 *f* *mf*
bells, let the bells call you! Let the bells, ring clear, for we are

Voice 2 *f* *mf*
let the bells call you! Let the bells ring clear, for we are

Pno. *f* *mf*

189 **W** *f*

Slower ♩=70

Voice 1 *f*
we are Mere! Let the bells, the bells__ ring true, Let the bells

Voice 2 *f*
we are Mere! the bells__ ring true, Let the bells

Pno. *f*

196 **X** *ff* **Rall.....**

Voice 1 *ff*
call you! call you!

Voice 2 *ff*
call you! call you!

Pno. *sff*