

Church of St Peter

Parish/Benefice: St Peter's St Albans

Diocese: St Albans

Address: St Peters Street, St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL1 3HG

Local Planning Authority: St Albans City and District Council

Heritage category: Listed building Grade II*

Statement of Significance

Description and setting

St Peter's church is a parish church in the Church of England and the only parish church within the medieval boundary of St Albans. The church occupies a prominent, elevated position in St Peter's Street with a west-facing frontage onto the northern end of St Peters Street of some 140 metres. St Peter's Street is the busy high street of St Albans connecting St Peter's at its northern end to the precinct of St Albans Cathedral which is approximately one kilometre away and close to its southern end. St Peter's is an historic church located within an historic churchyard and adjacent to several associated historical buildings including Ivy House (the house reputedly built by and for Edward Strong¹), the old Vicarage and the Pemberton Almshouses. The church and churchyard are significant elements of the historic townscape and public realm. The churchyard, which is no longer open for burials, is recognised as a valuable, multi-faceted, green oasis close to the city centre. With its elevated position on a gently inclining hill, and its imposing brick clock and bell tower dressed with stone and flint and four pinnacles, the church is an important landmark in the St Albans's skyline from many viewpoints including the town centre (Figures 1, 2 and 3). The bell tower which is 60 metres in height contains ten bells and has a ringing chamber, with an unusually large collection of peal boards the earliest of which dates from 1767.

Church history and heritage value

According to Matthew Paris St Peter's was founded in 948AD by Abbot Ulsinus as one of three 'gateway' churches serving pilgrims visiting the shrine of St Alban as well as the growing town population. Being highly visible from the town centre and with its south entrance overlooking the historic marketplace, St Peter's has always been a more integral part of the town centre than the other two churches at the historic entrances to the town. Nothing remains of the Saxon building and no records exist of St Peter's for nearly 200 years after its foundation. In the C13 an anchoress is known to have resided in the churchyard and another in the church in the C15. It was during the 13th century that the church assumed the form which it retained until the early 19th century - a cruciform building with a central tower. A little medieval work remains (C13 doorways and C15 arcades) and the tower is said to be a rebuilding using bond red brick following the collapse of the previous one in 1801. The remainder of the church was virtually rebuilt in 1893-5 by Lord Grimthorpe as a Victorian Gothic church. It is constructed of flint and limestone dressings with slate roofs. At this time the nave was lengthened to the

¹ G P McSweeney, G.P. and Smith, J.T. 2004-5. "Town Houses designed for Entertainment?", Hertfordshire Archaeology & History, Vol. 14, 143

west by a bay, the north aisle was widened by 1.2m, and the chancel also lengthened. In the early 1980s, a setback, single-storey red brick extension was completed creating a Transept on the northern side of the church. This Transept contains the Octagon room (a medium sized function/meeting room), a small kitchen, a Choir Vestry, a small library/meeting room, lavatories and two small offices (Figure 4).

The heritage value of St Peter's church lies principally in its 1,000 year continuous use as a parish church in St Albans and its linkage to pilgrimages to St Albans; its strong, imposing presence in the town centre of St Albans; the medieval elements of the church's structure, the remodelling in the late C19 by Lord Grimthorpe and various fittings; and the linkage of the church and churchyard to various historical figures and events of interest.

St Peter's church was first designated as a Listed Building on the 8th May 1950 (List Entry Number: 1103057). It was listed for the following principal reasons.

*"It is a large and imposing town church with medieval work of the C13 and C15, and remodelled in the 1890s by Lord Grimthorpe. It has a number of fittings of interest, including monuments and stained glass by several well-known makers; the memorial to Edward Strong is especially noteworthy. It has very strong townscape value. Its relationship, through the Grimthorpe restoration, to the Abbey of St Alban's (now Cathedral)."*²

Among the fittings of interest include monuments and stained glass by several well-known makers including Francois Capronnier. The memorial to Edward Strong, master-mason of St Paul's Cathedral, is especially noteworthy. The most recent addition to the church is the magnificent Mander pipe organ which helps maintain a proud musical tradition and is frequently used during the biennial St Albans International Organ Festival. Pews constructed mainly of pine currently provide seating in the nave whereas chairs are provided in the lady-chapel and chancel. These pews and other furniture have been investigated and their significance assessed by Dr Charles Tracy, Church Furniture Specialist³. The pews in the centre of the nave are of standard later-Gothic design and are described as providing an impressive frontispiece to the congregational space". However, "the pews' aesthetic value is minimal in comparison with those installed in other churches" and evidently "little or no traditional craftsmanship was expended in their manufacture". Plain pews, principally on the north nave aisle, are assessed as possessing "little art-historical significance".

Quite apart from the above, St Peter's church has been direct witness to many notable historical events including the following. In the Great Revolt of 1381 rioters burned the Vicar of St Peter's books leading to Richard II and a judge visiting St Albans to try and execute many of the townspeople. Papistic allusions in the church's windows, works of art and graves were wantonly destroyed by St Peter's vicar in 1643 just prior to the Commonwealth period. During the Civil War in June 1645 there is documentary evidence that, on more than one occasion, captured cavaliers being marched to London or Bristol spent one of more days and nights in the safe custody of St Peter's church⁴. The Wars of the Rose's Battles of St Albans of 1455 and 1461 took place along St Peters Street and beyond. Some of those who died in these battles are buried in the churchyard and there is also a persistent local belief that along the north wall of the churchyard a mass grave exists of common people from both battles⁵.

The church and churchyard are within the St Albans Conservation Area as designated under the Civic Amenities Act 1967 in 1969. No Article 4 Direction has been made under the Town

² <https://historicengland.org.uk/listings/the-list/list-entry/1103057>

³ Tracy, C. 2014. The Victorian nave chancel and other furniture. A significance assessment. St Peter's Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire

⁴ Morgan, W. C. 1898. St Peter's Church, St Albans. Trans St. Albans & Herts Arch & Archaeol Soc, New Series I (pt. 2), 208

⁵ Burley, P., Elliott, M. and Watson, H. 2007. The Battles of St Albans. Penn and Sword Books, Burnley

and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 further restricting development. The churchyard has many historical characters associated with it. Dr Nathaniel Cotton who died in 1788 and who was an early proponent of clinical psychology is buried here as were many Foundling Hospital babies between 1756 and 1760. The large churchyard has recently received attention to enhance its heritage, educational and environmental values. A Big Lottery Grant recently facilitated new exterior church signage and churchyard visitor interpretation panels. The Garden of Hope, which lies within the churchyard, has been enhanced by the church by the installation of a high quality, metallic Memorial Sculpture.

Archaeological significance

It is almost certain that there are buried archaeological remains in St Peter's church and churchyard, possibly including evidence of the Saxon and Norman church. However, so far very little has been investigated and revealed to indicate their significance. There is no explicit mention of any of these remains in the City and District Council's 2007 archaeological strategy for the historic centre of St Albans which includes the precinct of St Peter's ⁶. An exception to the evidence available is the archaeological investigation undertaken in St Peter's church in 2001 ⁷ in which one nave column and its foundation was investigated. This revealed an earlier floor and an early wall foundation, possibly of the Saxon church, but no significant finds. Another exception is an archaeological investigation undertaken in the churchyard in 2003 during the excavation of a trench next to 78 Cock Lane which is occupied by the Verger. The trench was excavated to rectify damp affecting the Verger's house and revealed no significant finds ⁸.

Cultural and social significance

In addition to its Christian worship and spiritual significance, the church has many functions, including outreach, which support the cultural and social life of its congregations and the wider community making it of strong cultural and social significance in St Albans and beyond. An important part of the social and spiritual life of the church is its home groups which have grown in recent years. As well as making contributions to national charities, St Peter's lends financial and other support to various local charities which have an important local role in supporting the vulnerable and needy. They include Rennie Grove Hospice, Open Door (for the homeless) and the Living Room (an addiction recovery centre). The Church has connections with a number of nursing homes and charities including Strathmore Residential Home, Davis Court and Beaumonds sheltered housing, Grove House Hospice and Camphill Village Trust which runs workshops and retail outlets within the Parish. Our Vicar is an ex-officio Trustee of the Church Lands Trust, the United Almshouses Trust, the Aid in Sickness Charity and the Cross Keys charity, and is also Patron of St Paul's Church in St Albans.

The annual St Albans Pilgrimage procession begins at St Peter's and passes through the town centre to the Cathedral for the noon Eucharist. This event is a major spectacle in the cultural calendar of St Albans and involves a huge procession participated in by thousands of local people and tourists. Another annual procession – the blessing of the farmer's market in St Peter's Street by the Vicar of St Peter's - commences and finishes at St Peter's. St Peter's has a strong musical tradition and its choirs perform at services, weddings and festivals. The church is also a popular venue for a variety of lunchtime recitals and evening concerts which draw in relatively large numbers of classical music-lovers from far and wide. There are regular concerts by a range of different performers including chamber choirs, orchestras and individual recitalists. St Peter's is also one of the venues for the biennial St Albans International Organ Festival and Competitions. The church and its community provide a wide range of social

⁶ https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/Images/P_CA_ArchaeologyStrategy.pdf

⁷ Saunders, C. 2001. An Archaeological Investigation of St Peter's Church February 2001. Report for the Michael Dales Partnership and St Peter's Church, St Albans

⁸ Saunders, C. 2003. An Archaeological Observation in St Peter's Churchyard, St Albans. Report for Michael Dales Partnership and St Peter's Church

activities for children and youths including a well-attended Messy Church (1-4 and 1-11 yrs); a midweek activity gathering (0-4 years), The Core (9-14 yrs) and Youth Café (15-18 yrs). The church is busy centre for many other activities and groups and is regularly busy with bookings for various types of events. The churchyard is the site of a Storytelling Circle and an occasional outdoor Forest Church for all ages engaging with the turning of the seasons as well as various festivals and fairs which link to St Albans Food and Drinks Festival and St Albans Literary Festival.

Figure 1 St Peter's church looking towards the north-east



Figure 2 St Peter's prominent location at the northern end of St Peter's Street



Figure 3 St Peter's as an imposing feature of the busy city's townscape



Figure 4 Ground floor plan of St Peter's church

