

Parish Church of St Peter, St Albans

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

(June 2021 update)

This statement of significance is amplified in the church's Conservation Management Plan.

Description and setting

St Peter's is a parish church in the Church of England and the only parish church within the medieval boundary of St Albans. The church is located at the Northern end of the city centre. It is the city centre church of St Albans in a parish which extends well to the South-East of the city. The church occupies a commanding, elevated position in St Peter's Street (Figure 1) It has a West-facing frontage onto the Northern end of St Peters Street of some 120 metres and a South-facing frontage of some 27 metres



Figure 1 A view to the North of St Peter's Street leading to St Peter's church

which protrudes Westwards forcing the line of St Peter's Street to divert a little towards the West.

St Peter's Street is the broad, busy, tree-lined 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 (Figure 2).

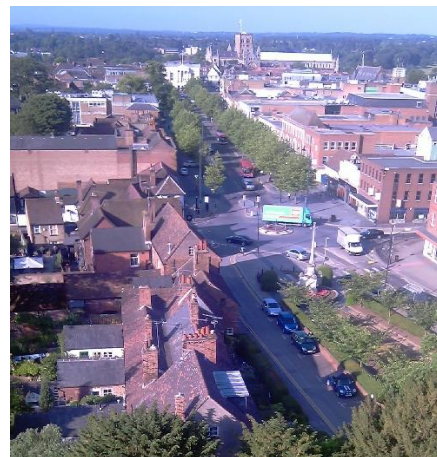


Figure 2 View from St Peter's tower along St Peter's Street to St Albans Abbey

St Peter's is an historic church (Figure 3) located within an historic, medieval churchyard and adjacent to several associated historical buildings including Ivy House (the house reputedly built by and for Edward Strong ¹), the old Vicarage and the Pemberton Alms-houses. The church and churchyard are significant elements of the historic and contemporary

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

townscape and public realm. The churchyard, which is no longer open for burials, is



Figure 3 St Peter's church

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 in stone and flint and four pinnacles, the church is an important landmark in the St Albans skyline from many viewpoints including the town centre (Figures 1). 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.

The history of the church

According to Abbey's chronicler, Matthew Paris, St Peter's was founded in 948AD by the Saxon Abbot Wulsin (also known as 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 13th and 15th centuries anchoresses are known to have resided in the churchyard. There was a great deal of rebuilding at St Peter's between 1335 and 1349 but little is known about the fabric of the Norman church. It was during the late 13th and early 14th century that the church assumed the form which it retained until the early 19th century - a cruciform building with a central tower. The church has a colourful history as it is believed in St Albans that soldiers from the two Wars of the Roses (1445 and 1461) are

buried in the churchyard following successive battles in the town. Then in the Civil War in 1645 prisoners being marched to London and Bristol were twice confined overnight in the church. Many generations of townsfolk are buried in St Peter's as revealed by the monuments inside and outside the church. There is a documented record of celebration when, for example, the Spanish Armada was defeated, and the bells of St Peter's rang out over the town. However, there is also a record of great suffering in, for example, the lists of burials in various plagues.

Hardly any archaeological evidence exists for St Peter's church and its churchyard. A little medieval work remains (a 13th doorway and 15th century nave arcades), and the tower is said to be a rebuilding using bond red brick following the collapse of the belfry in 1801. Several structures in the churchyard are documented historically including a Charnel chapel, the remains of the wall of which are believed to be incorporated in the lower courses of the churchyard wall in the South-West corner of the churchyard.

The church suffered two ruthless 'restorations' in the 19th century: one in 1803 and the other in 1893. The first followed the collapse of the belfry into the church and led to the demolition of the North and South transepts and a dramatic shortening of the chancel. The church fell into disrepair during the latter part of the 19th century. It was then that Lord Grimthorpe, who controversially restored parts of St Albans Abbey, decided to restore St Peter's church at his own expense. He virtually rebuilt the church in 1893-5 and as a Victorian Gothic-style church. The nave was lengthened to the West by a bay, the North aisle was widened by 1.2m to the North, and the chancel was lengthened again. Lord Grimthorpe also installed a large rose window at the West end of the church, like the one that he installed in St Albans Abbey. He also laid a concrete floor in St Peter's and made various other alterations including the introduction of some plain pine pews.

During the early 1980s, a setback, single-storey red brick extension was completed creating a Northern extension over the underground remains of the former North transept. This extension 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).

Description of the church building and interior today

The Victorian Gothic-style church building is aligned approximately from North-West to South-East and consists of a seven bay, aisled nave with lowered North and South aisles. There are two main porches and entrances, one South and one West. The pinnacled, crossing tower is above the chancel and contains a bellringing chamber and a belfry. There are two vestries on the South side and a Northern extension described above. Otherwise, the church of today is without its historic transepts and cruciform shape.

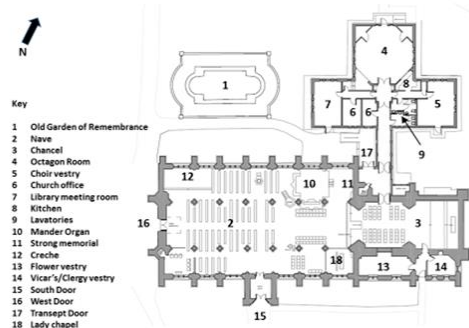


Figure 4 Ground floor plan of St Peter's

The churchyard is approximately four acres in size and is crossed by various footpaths. There is a small car parking area on the South side of the churchyard.

The condition of the fabric of the church is generally very good and there is an annual programme of maintenance to address the inevitable minor repairs, and the occasional more major repair, when they become necessary. The principal structural issue is that the base of the 15th century nave columns is degenerating and crumbling. It is believed that the constituents of the rather unattractive concrete floor are interacting with the material in the columns causing this damage, along with some mechanical wear. The church's architect has recommended replacing this concrete floor in his 2018 Quinquennial Inspection report.

With its seven-bay nave arcade, the nave is impressive from either near the West door (Figure 5) or from the opposite direction from the threshold into the chancel. Above the oak



Figure 5 The nave arcade during an Advent service

panelling, the nave walls and stonework of the arcades are plastered and painted. There are six large ledger stones embedded in the concrete floor of the nave, in the central aisle between the pews. The Lady chapel at the North end of the South aisle dates from at least 1621 and has one triangular window on its East wall. The chapel also has three windows which are the remaining 15th century windows in the church. They are colourful stained-glass windows by Capronnier of Brussels (168-72). On the South side of the South door, there are three further stained-glass windows by Capronnier. The West wall of the nave has a large Gothic revival rose window installed by Lord Grimthorpe. There are a further six stained glass windows along the North wall of the nave. The one closest to the West end is a large Gothic revival example designed by Skeat.

The final window in this sequence, in the bay North of the Mander organ, is a fine, large Gothic revival, decorated window in Pre-Raphaelite style. This is the Mead window and commemorates the husband and two sons of Mrs Mead who were killed in World War 1.

The chancel is entered through a Perpendicular-style screen of 1905 by Temple Moore. The chancel walls are also oak panelled. The chancel also has Gothic revival-stained glass windows.

The South vestries (i.e., a 'clergy' vestry and

‘flower’ vestry) were completely refurbished during 2020 and a mezzanine floor for storage purposes fitted to the latter vestry.

On the North wall of the chancel, double doors lead to a tile-floored corridor with three-quarter length glazing to parish rooms, choir vestry, lavatories, a kitchen, the choir vestry, and the Octagon room.

The nave has 34 long Victorian Gothic-style pews on both sides of a central aisle and a further 20 pews in the North and South aisles. All but the 6 plain pews in the South aisle date from the mid-1850s whereas the plain pews were almost certainly fitted by Lord Grimthorpe in 1893-5.

During various phases of rebuilding of the church, many memorials are known about from historical records have been lost. Even so there remain a relatively large number of wall plaques, slabs, and memorial stones. Two are of note: the Strong memorial (Figure 6) close



Figure 6 The massive memorial to Edward Strong and family

to the Mead window (Figure 7) and the Pemberton brass on the South wall of the nave. Edward Strong was a renowned stonemason who worked with Sir Christopher Wren on the building of St Paul’s Cathedral. Roger Pemberton was a private local man who funded the building of the Pemberton alms-houses opposite the church in St Peter’s Street.



Figure 7 The Mead window commemorating Mead family members killed in WW1

Significance assessment

This section provides a summary only of the significance assessment. Relative significance is gauged using a five-point scale following CBC guidance:

Exceptional – important at national to international levels

Considerable – important at regional level or sometimes higher

Some – usually of local value but possibly of regional significance

Local – of local value

Negative or intrusive – features that detract from the value of the site.

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 origins of the church’s structure, the remodelling in the late 19th century by Lord Grimthorpe which had negative aspects; various fittings; and the linkage of the church and churchyard to various historical figures and events of interest.

Statutory designations

St Peter’s church was first designated as a Listed Building on the 8th of 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 several fittings of interest, including monuments and stained glass by several well-known makers; the memorial to Edward Strong is especially noteworthy. It has extraordinarily strong townscape value. Its relationship, through the Grimthorpe restoration, to the Abbey of St Alban's (now Cathedral).”²

The church and churchyard are within the St Albans Conservation Area 3 ‘Three Parish Churches’. Area 3 includes the non-contiguous churches and churchyard of the three pilgrim churches of St Albans including St Peter’s. The Conservation Area is designated under the Civic Amenities Act 1967. No Article 4 Direction has been made under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995. This further restricts development.

The reasons for each significance below assessment is explained in more detail in the Conservation Management Plan for St Peter’s.

Townscape significance

The church has **exceptional townscape significance** in St Albans being at the heart of the city and a major landmark which dominates the view to the North in St Peter’s Street, St Albans main shopping street.

Social, religious and community significance

The church has stood for more than a millennium, throughout the remarkable development of St Albans, as a beacon of continuous Christian worship. It is also a symbol of civic identity and pride and the starting point of the annual spectacle which is the St Albans Pilgrimage which culminates at St Albans Abbey. The church is therefore of **considerable significance** in this regard. Whereas the North extension may be regarded as a feature of negative significance architecturally and aesthetically it has clearly been **locally significant** in social and community terms.

The significance of the church for our understanding of liturgy

The cruciform shape of St Peter’s – pictured shown in historical drawings and in its

underground form – is of **exceptional significance** to our understanding of medieval liturgy. Illustrations of the church interior in the 18th and 19th centuries, together with some photographic evidence, and the existence today of the 400-year-old Lady chapel is of **some significance** in our understanding of post-medieval liturgy. The Victorian scheme is, arguably, of **considerable significance** in understanding liturgical developments of the 19th century.

Archaeological significance

Although little archaeological investigation has been undertaken in the church and churchyard, they are of potentially **considerable or exceptional significance**.

Architectural significance

Evidence of the early medieval church fabric is scanty, but the 13th century cruciform shape of the church can still be read and is of **exceptional significance**. The amateur architectural work of Lord Grimthorpe is of **considerable significance** although his concrete floor is now of **negative significance**. Arguably other features of the church building are of dubious significance and may be regarded as negative by some (e.g., the West end rose window). The North extension is of **negative significance** in architectural terms.

Historical significance

As one of the three pilgrim churches of St Albans established by the Saxon Abbot Wulsin, the church is of **exceptional significance**. Some extant monuments (e.g., the Strong memorial) are of **considerable historical significance**. The mid-19th century Victorian pews have **some significance** and arguably, for all their lack of artwork, the plain pews may also be of **some significance** because of their linkage to the Grimthorpe restoration. The Chancel screen by the distinguished British Gothic-Revival ecclesiastical architect, Temple Moore, is of **exceptional significance**.

Aesthetic significance

The aesthetic value of St Peter’s pews is assessed as minimal by comparison with those installed in other churches according to Tracy³. They appear to be of **local significance**

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

or possibly even **neutral or negative significance** in this regard. The concrete floor is of **negative significance** and, arguably the North extension is of **negative significance** (although, as noted above, it has been a feature of social and community, positive local significance).

Art historical significance

The plain pews are of **local or possibly even negative significance**. The Capronnier stained glass windows are of exceptional significance as is the Mead window and a stained-glass window by Webb near the Lady Chapel. Other stained-glass windows are of **considerable or local significance**, except the Rose window and the patchworked glass windows in the North aisle which may be of **some significance**. The Strong memorial is of **exceptional significance**.

Musical significance

The Mander organ is of **considerable significance**. As one of the few parish churches left in the UK where the Book of Common Prayer Choral mattins and Evensong are sung by robed choir men and boys each Sunday, St Peter's is of **considerable or exceptional significance**. The bells are of **some significance**.

Ecological significance

The church yard is of **local significance** (although this could change through further archaeological investigation). **Local significance** is also relevant to the wildlife (including bats) which use the churchyard. The trees are of **some significance** to the streetscape.

Other features of negative significance

The internal layout of the church lead to circulation problems (access to the lavatories and kitchen during services can be awkward) which are of **negative significance**. The shabby churchyard car park is a feature of **negative significance** given the sensitivity of the conservation area which it is in. Traffic and traffic noise disturbs the ambience of St Peter's, and the roundabout severs the church from the main part of St Peter's Street of which it was historically much more connected. These are features of **negative significance** along with street clutter in the vicinity of the church.