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**St Peter's Church, St Albans,
Hertfordshire**

**The Victorian nave chancel and other furniture.
A significance assessment**

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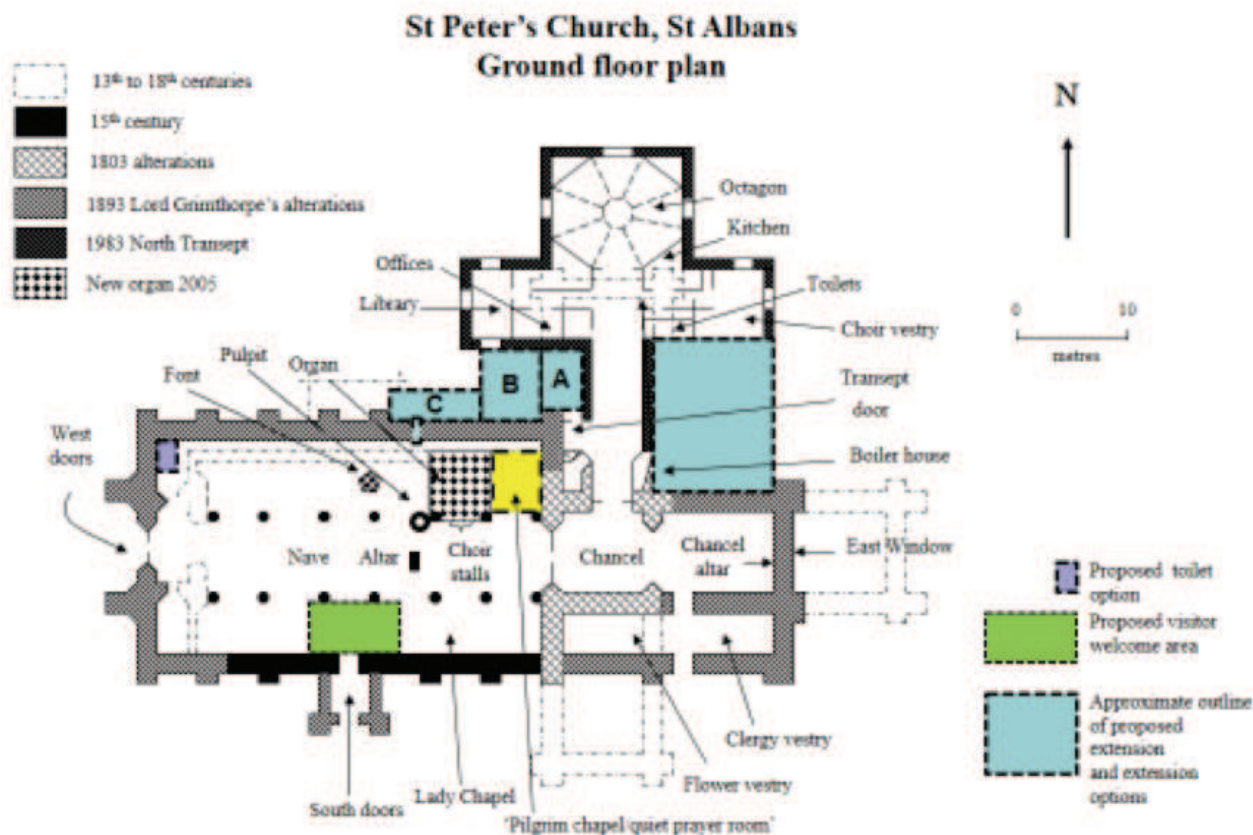


St Peter's Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire. View of nave from east. Author.

INTRODUCTION

Although the origins of the present building reach back to the 13th century, the only extant medieval component is the fine Perpendicular nave arcades, and, reputedly, the tracery designs of the south nave windows. The western bay was added by Lord Grimthorpe. In all other respects, the building is post-medieval, the invention from 1894-95 of the city's late-19th-century amateur architect.

On the south side, the church is already encrusted with a 20th-century service complex, and further improvements are now proposed adjacent to this (see plan). Within the building, there are also aspirations to reorder all or part of the space presently occupied by the nave pewing, although pending the findings of this report, any definitive decisions in this respect are on hold. At the east end of the nave, in addition to the recently installed concert organ on the south side, a nave retro-choir-stall arrangement is envisaged. During the week, building on the tradition to principally dedicate the church's spacious nave for Sunday worship and other public events, the chancel is to be reserved for minor services.



THE NAVE PEWS

Today there remain twenty-eight 11ft long Victorian Gothic-style pews on both sides of the central nave. They provide an impressive frontispiece to the congregational space. Mixed in amongst them are a further five shorter benches, 6ft in length, directly abutting the arcade piers, where the longer ones would otherwise impinge on the pew blocks. Laterally, there is one walkway cutting through the seating in line with the north door, which now leads directly across to the Victorian font in the south aisle. One might assume that the original tally of pews has been more or less retained, but it is important to take into account the few surviving early-20th-century photographic images of the nave from the west end, which show that, in the first place, there were many more, extending eastwards all the way to one bay short of the chancel screen. The pew-ends with prominently moulded top rails, are flanked by buttresses, and contain two framed panels behind. They all follow the same pattern, repeated on the pew fronts and backs.

By contrast with the present remaining more or less solid blocks of nave seating, the side aisle pew configurations appear relatively depleted. However, on the south side, there are still fourteen remaining full-length Gothic benches either *in situ*,

rearranged, or set aside. In fact the original full set is almost certainly still preserved on this side, in spite of the evident reordering in recent times at the east end to create a childrens' corner. On the north side, there are the remains of six secondary short plain pine unmoulded benches, which formerly probably ran up as far as the south door (bottom Fig. p. 5). They appear not to have usurped the traditional style pews further east on this side in the Lady Chapel (bottom Fig., p. 6). To return to the plain pews, a full length version of this pattern is now used as part of the childrens' corner at the back of the south aisle. At the moment it is difficult to say from whence it emanated, as it would have been too long for use in the north aisle.¹ It seems likely that the plain pews at the west end of the north aisle replaced the Victorian benches, when Lord Grimthorpe rebuilt the north nave aisle. Their style is of a kind familiar from the contemporary catalogues of church furnishing workshops, such as Jones and Willis of Birmingham.²



St Peter's Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire. View of nave pews from east.

Author.

¹ At St Peter's, the south nave aisle is noticeably wider than the north nave aisle. Whilst the side pews on the south side are 6 ft in length, those on the north side are only 6 ft.

² G. Brandwood and T. Cooper, in T. Cooper and S. Brown, *Pews, Benches & Chairs* (2011), 307-21.



St Peter's Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire. Detail of south nave aisle pews facing south east. Author.



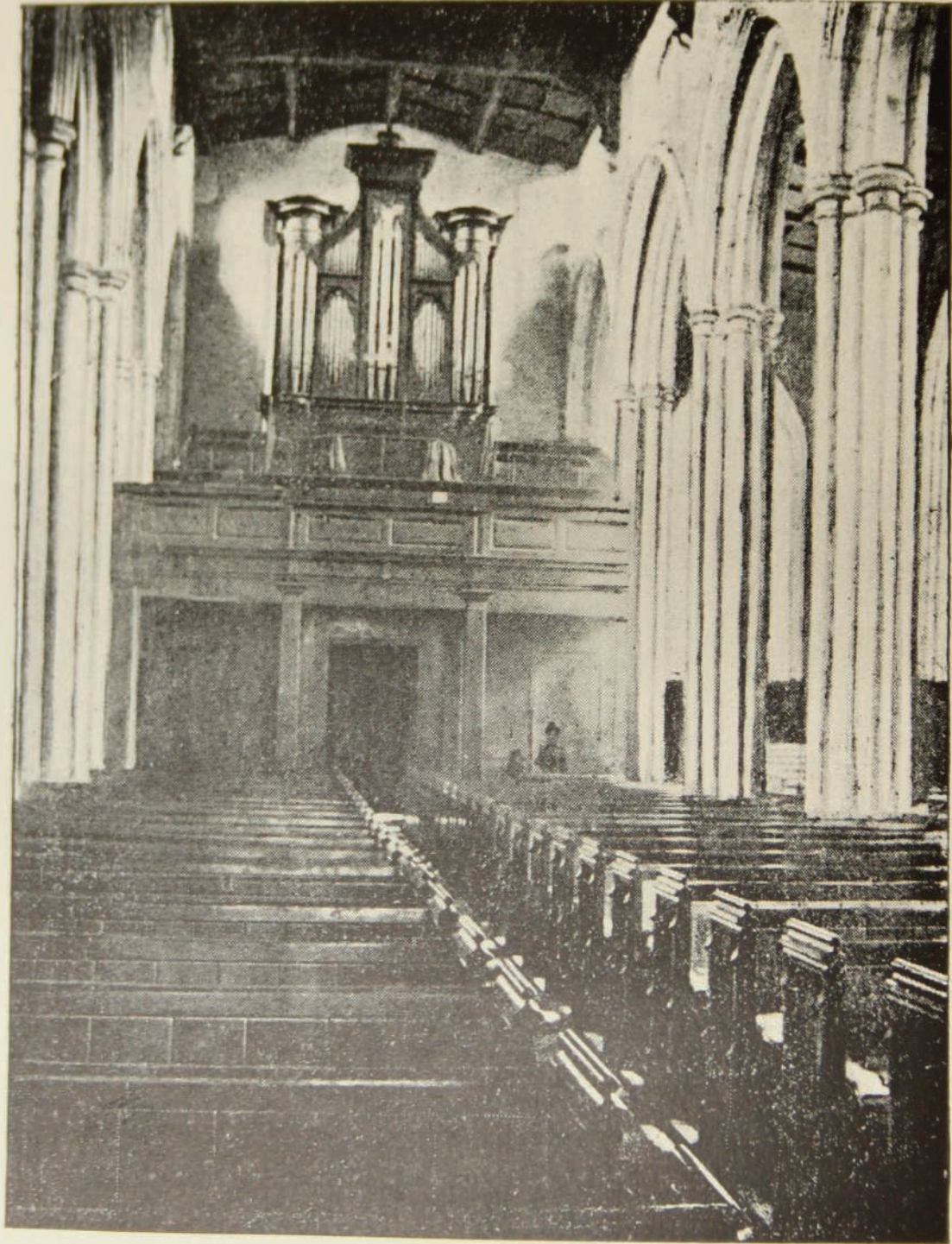
St Peter's Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire. View of north nave aisle plain pews looking west. Author.

***St Peter's Church, St Albans,
Hertfordshire (right). View of north nave
aisle looking west, c. 1950s, by which time
the earlier pews in the Lady Chapel had
been replaced by chairs. Hertfordshire
Archives and Local Studies (HALS)
DP93/29/65.***



***St Peter's Church, St Albans,
Hertfordshire (below). Undated view of nave
from west end with the original complement
of pews, reaching as far as the chancel
screen. The benches in the N.E. nave aisle
appear to have been of the original nave
pattern. HALS D/P93/29/65.***





INTERIOR OF ST. PETER'S CHURCH, BEFORE THE ALTERATIONS OF 1893,
SHOWING THE WESTERN GALLERY AND ORGAN.

Carey Morgan (1897/98), opposite p. 153. HALS D/P93/29/63. I am grateful to HALS for allowing their material to be reproduced in this report.

Styles and materials

The dignified period veneer of the ‘Midlands’ medieval-style pews at St Peter’s is one thing, but the choice of pine, an inferior medium, rather than the traditional oak, coupled with a display of second-rate joinery, is another. Cumulatively, these characteristics let these benches down. By the standards of most Victorian pews they fall short. The style suggests a mid-19th-century provenance, and they must have been inherited by Lord Grimthorpe.

The references to late-Perpendicular architectural detailing are pleasant enough, but it is noticeable that any attempt at carved non-architectural decoration is avoided inevitably lending a somewhat institutional flavour. The chief disappointment is the minimal timber scantling, predicating that economy, on the part of both client and manufacturer, was uppermost on this commission. Aesthetically, none of this is helped by the lack of a plinth, an indispensable adjunct to the historical model, and, incidentally, by the unfortunate contrast with the Grimthorpe’s concrete floor. The latter’s merely skeletal specification, preserved with the Faculty documents of 1893, provides virtually no details of the architect’s intentions regarding interior fittings, and failing to mention the pews.³

Dating the Victorian pews

In a useful article of 1899 on the history of the pre-restoration St Peter’s, Carey Morgan discusses the architect’s decision to move the organ to the east end.⁴ Crucially, he illustrates a view of the nave from the east ‘before the alteration of 1893’, which, in spite of the poor quality of the reproduction, still manages to evidence unequivocally that the extant pews must be pre-Grimthorpe.⁵ It has already been suggested that, from their manufacture and medium, the furniture must date from an unidentified mid-19th-century reordering of the nave. Grimthorpe’s reticence over the furnishings might suggest that he had not as yet decided whether or not to replace them. Unfortunately, there is no mention of a mid-19th-century nave reordering in the folder, ‘Faculties for alterations 1802-1931’, in the Hertfordshire Archives.⁶ It only remains to suggest a date for their manufacture on stylistic grounds.

In discussing the parochial benching of George Gilbert Scott, the doyen of English mid-Victorian architects, Suzanna Branfoot recorded evidence for the manufacture of pews in the mid-19th century, in this part of England and elsewhere.⁷ Undoubtedly, more examples could be cited. Scott was a trail blazer, and his attitude

³ HALS, DSA 2/1/285.

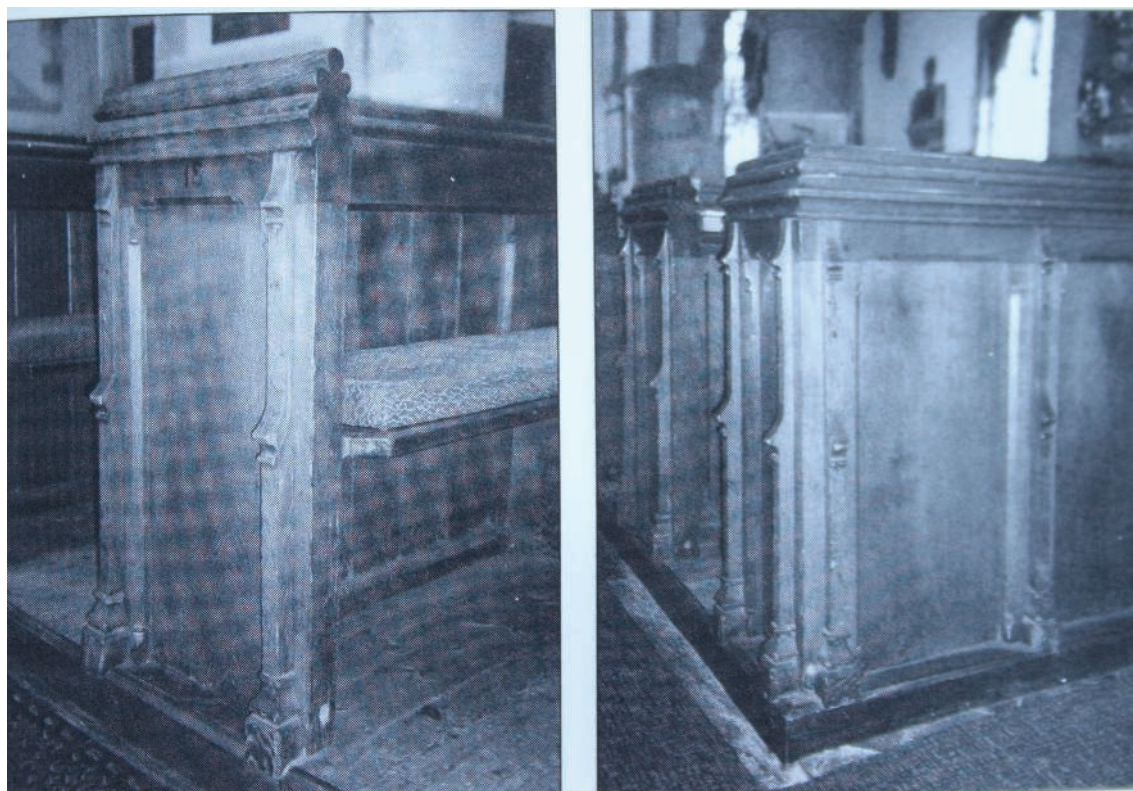
⁴ W. Carey Morgan, ‘St Peter’s Church, St Albans’, *St Albans & Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society Trans* ((1897/98), vol. I, Pt II, 125-73.

⁵ *Ibid.*, opposite p. 153, and illustrated above.

⁶ HALS, 93/6/14.

⁷ S. Branfoot, ‘*The same fashion as the present ancient seats*’, Cooper and Brown (2011), 257-66.

was ‘that if new were needed, old benches from churches of similar period or nearby be used as models with consideration given to period styles, and particularly to local



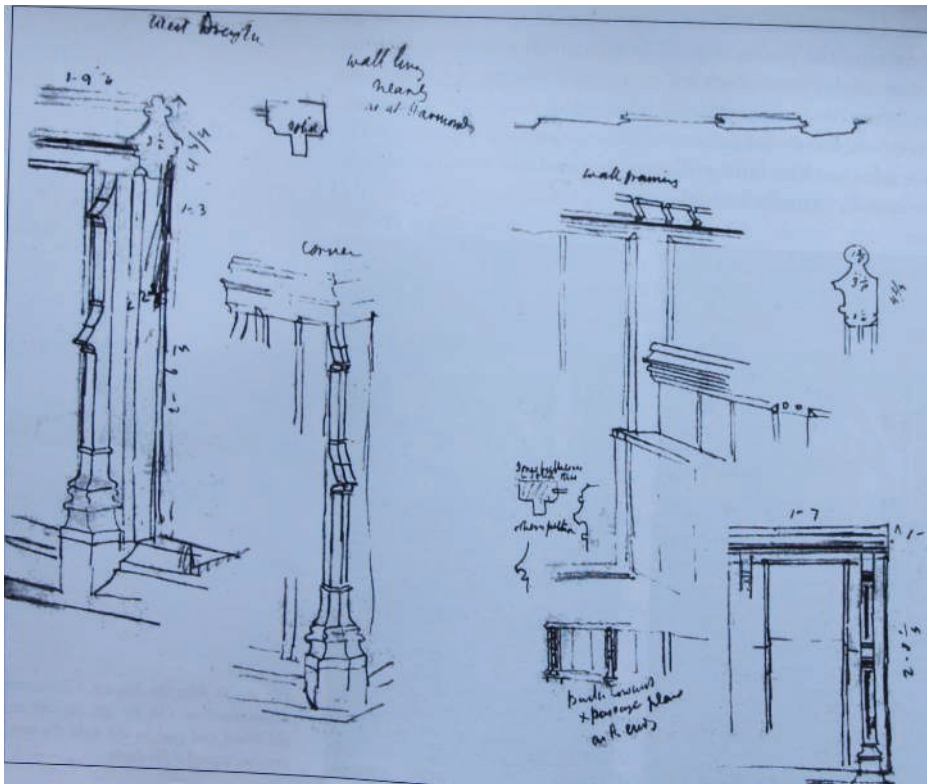
Iver Church, Buckinghamshire. Details of bench end and bench front. Note the same details, as Scott’s drawing of buttresses (below), moulded capping rails and grooved planked on the seat backs. Essentially the same was followed at St Peter’s, St Albans but in pine. After Branfoot, Fig. 5, Cooper and Brown, p. 261.

styles and craftsmanship’. She points out that his preferred medium of oak was more extensive than pine, but that some of the clergy approved his conservationist stance on this matter, and insisted on its use. In 1847 he recorded medieval examples of the somewhat arbitrarily termed ‘Midlands style’ on medieval pews at Harmondsworth and West Drayton, which he used for his reseating of Iver Church in Buckinghamshire the following year.⁸ Both the drawings and the pews broadly resemble the style of the benches at St Peter’s at St Albans. This is not the only evidence for an interest being taken in recording the pews in this style, as can be seen in the publication of the working drawings of a medieval pew at Steeple Aston Oxfordshire by the Oxford Architectural Society in 1843.⁹ The Incorporated Church Building Society, which started in 1818, offered grants towards new parochial pewing schemes, and was also influential in promoting working drawings of well designed

⁸ The ‘Midlands style’ of pew was coined by Howard and Crossley with illustrated examples ranging through Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire to Essex. See F. E. Howard and F. H. Crossley, *English Church Woodwork* (London 1917), 288-89.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

medieval pews. These would have been useful to architects, who would doubtless have passed them on to a chosen joinery workshop.



G.G. Scott notebook 23, 1847. Sketches from St Mary, Harmondsworth and St Martin, West Drayton. After Branfoot, Fig. 4, in Cooper and Brown, p. 260. Note the similarities in the style with St Peter's.

Pew rents

In order to prevent overcrowding, and guarantee an adequate number of ‘free seats’ for those who could not afford pew rents, the ICBS’s main priorities were to encourage the introduction of good quality pewing in the many newly planted urban churches springing up throughout England. At the other end of the socio/economic scale, in the long established historic churches like St Peter’s, on average a majority of up to 96% of the nave seating was habitually rented, so it is unlikely that, in those cases, the Society would have been involved.¹⁰

Both sets of pews at St Peter’s are numbered, as, noticeably, they also were at Iver, and commonly at this period in Victorian England. At St Peter’s, on the north side the central block is numbered evenly from back to front, starting with 2, 4, 6 etc. This originally continued up to the chancel screen, and then headed back down the south side with the number 96 at the south-west end. Allowing for the loss of a single pew on each side, between 72 and 68 on the south side and 26 and 30 on the north side, the extant conformation alone must have amounted to thirty pews. This means that the total number of pews in the nave, including those since removed at the east end, was forty-eight. Allowing for a capacity of eight persons per pew, this would have provided an estimated total capacity of approximately three hundred and eighty seats. If one were to include the still surviving pews in the south aisle, and the now

¹⁰ Ibid., 47. Table 4.

lost benches the north side, one could add another one hundred and forty-two seats, bringing to the total to over five hundred. This dwarfs my earlier estimate for the total pew capacity in the monumental parish church at Haddenham, in Buckinghamshire (274).

There can be no doubt that St Peter's used the pew rent system, so it is regrettable that there is no trace of any surviving vestry accounts to provide more information. In the case of the plainer benches in the north aisle, they are also inscribed, but mostly with odd, rather than even, numbers. As already mentioned, these benches must have been inserted by Grimthorpe in the 1890s into his rebuilt north aisle. As on the main pews, apart from their numbering, they are supplied with brass umbrella holders and probably a drip tray below. Although these pews are unembellished and utilitarian, their profile was not unfashionable. They mimicked a certain strain of early vernacular British pew-ends which was adapted by furniture designers and published in the joinery workshop catalogues.¹¹ At St Peter's, a few free seats must have been provided, perhaps at the east end of the north nave aisle.

¹¹ G. Brandwood, *Victorian Church Seating: Variations upon a theme*, Cooper and Brown, 284-85, *passim*.

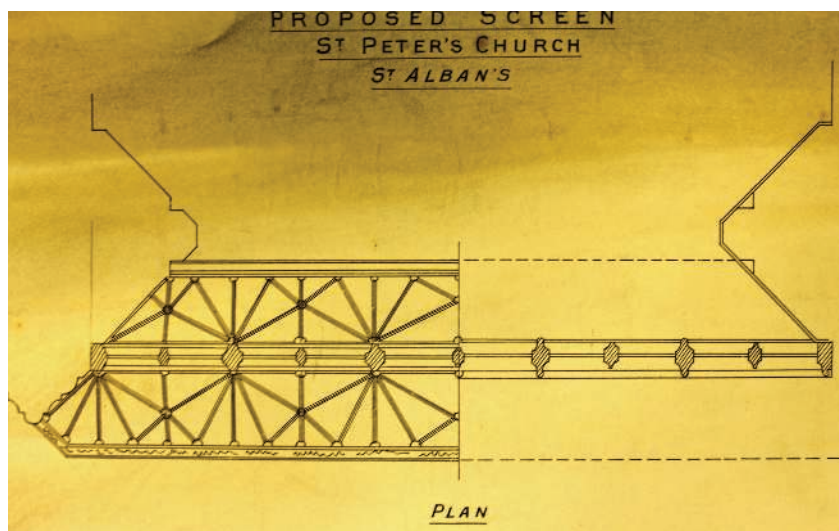
THE CHANCEL SCREEN



St Peter's, St Albans. Chancel screen. Temple Moore 1903. Author.



St Peter's, St Albans. Temple Moore's original proposal for the rood screen. The RIBA Library Drawings and Archives Collections, Collections, V&A Museum, P. 1069/20.



St Peter's, St Albans. Temple Moore's original plan view of the rood screen. The RIBA Library Drawings and Archives Collections, V&A Museum, P. 1069/20.

Pevsner and Cherry's crisp comment on this screen, 'correct without originality', is somewhat harsh, because the design shows an appreciation of the magnificence of East Anglian screens, some of the best in England. On both sides, it supports a series of fan vaults under the cornice putatively supporting a loft above. Temple Moore rarely designed a full-blown rood loft, an exception being Lakenham in Norfolk, and the design for St Peter's is more typical, except that there would have been the rood figures suspended above, a crucial liturgical component of the early 20th-century Anglo-Catholic revival.¹²

Stylistically, an instructive comparison, is the mutilated Suffolk screen at Rumburgh (see below), with its delicate six-light tracery. Brandwood tells us that Moore was a great advocate of screens. In 1907, the architect stated in a lecture to the Architectural Association: 'It is curious ... the prejudice one frequently meets against a Screen.¹³ It is certainly not the case that a properly designed oak Rood Screen, of the type suitable for a parish church, obstructs any necessary view, though many people seem to think so'.¹⁴ Although, in medieval terms, the handling of the tracery is ambitious, St Peter's screen lacks the aesthetic impact of the grandest of this architect's designs, such as Lound in Suffolk. It is interesting to note that the final version is much lighter and more delicate than the original proposal.

It goes without saying that the screen would look inappropriate placed anywhere else within St Peter's. Given the growing appreciation of this architect's place in English ecclesiology, it would be a mistake to move it, as, in any case, it provides a fine *aperçu* from the west end. Unfortunately, the possibility of finding a home for it in another church with a chancel opening of the appropriate size could be difficult.

¹² G. Brandwood, *Temple Moore. An architect of the late Gothic revival* (Stamford 1997), Fig. 145..

¹³ Brandwood, 152-54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.



St Michael and St Felix, Rumburgh, Suffolk. Rood Screen. Author.

THE OAK SCREEN IN THE EASTERN BAY OF THE LADY CHAPEL



St Peter's, St Albans. Lady Chapel screen from north. Author.

This oak screen, inscribed 'In memory of Alice Nicholls died 6th July 1948', was probably always intended for a parclose on the south side of the chapel. It is uncertain as to whether it was intended in the first place to be one of a pair. At the moment there is a proposal to move it to the south side of the retro-choir.

Whilst it is well enough put together and appropriate to its setting, its meagre scantling and run of the mill carving lets it down, particularly in with context of Temple Moore's early-20th-century chancel screen, and, most probably, his choir-stalls and organ screen since removed (see below).



St Peter's, St Albans. Detail of chancel choir-stalls and organ. ? the work of Temple Moore. Early 20th-century. *HALS*, D/P93/29/63.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The nave furniture at St Peter's, in St Albans, represents a significant portion of a substantial undated mid-19th-century reordering of a historic nave. Although we have no record of the post-medieval arrangements in this part of the church, it is most likely that the nave would have been fitted out principally as a preaching space, with a mixture of ancient parochial and Georgian box pews, long since departed.
2. The surviving pews, mostly in the centre of the nave, are of a standard late- Gothic design, commonly found in the English Midlands.¹⁵ They were probably installed around 1850, and would have been supplied by a large commercial workshop.
3. The pews' aesthetic value is minimal by comparison with those installed in churches, such as Harmondsworth, Middlesex, under the direction of the conservation minded architect George Gilbert Scott. In their manufacture, little or no traditional craftsmanship was expended.
4. The plain pews, principally in the north nave aisle, must have been introduced by the architect, Lord Grimthorpe, when he rebuilt the north nave aisle. They are also of little art-historical significance.
5. However one may feel about the chancel screen, it is to the design of a distinguished British Gothic-Revival architect. To attempt to remove it would inevitably be controversial.
6. The 1950s oak screen on the south side of the former Lady Chapel provides a fitting aesthetic complement to a church, even though it is of little art-historical significance.

¹⁵ See F. E. Howard and F. H. Crossley, *English Church Woodwork* (London 1917), 303.

