

The Friends of Friendless Churches: The Old Church of St Peter, Wickham Bishops, Essex

by

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In celebration of the Working Agreement which came into force in 1993 between the Ancient Monuments Society and the Friends of Friendless Churches it is intended to include articles about the churches owned by the Friends in successive editions of the Transactions. The series began in Volume 39, 1995, with a piece on St John the Baptist church at Papworth St Agnes in Cambridgeshire and continued in Volume 40, 1996, with one on St Mary the Virgin, Llanfair Kilgeddin, Gwent. From two substantially nineteenth century churches we turn now to one of our oldest buildings, whose origins lie in the eleventh century.

The old church of St Peter, Wickham Bishops in Essex lies in fields to the west of the B1018 (Langford Road) (OS sheet 168: 825 107). Known variously as Wickham Episcopo, Bishops Wickham and, latterly, Wickham Bishops, the manor was recorded as belonging to the Bishops of London in the Domesday Book of 1086 and remained their property for centuries. The inhabitants were recorded then as five villeins, four bordars, four serfs and one freeman, the Bishop apparently staying in the Manor House which lay just south of the church on the site currently occupied by Wickham Hall. It seems likely that the old church was first constructed as a private chapel for the Bishops, an origin now posited by Professor Eric Fernie for another remarkable Norman church in Essex, at Copford, which was also held by the Bishop. Both churches were modest in architectural terms, Wickham more so than Copford, which is world famous for the quality of its twelfth-century wall paintings. The only visible painting at Wickham is much later and survives on the north and south

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walls of the chancel, that to the north being in the form of a diamond-shaped painted hatchment. Also like Copford, the materials are a mixture of flint rubble, boulder clay, pudding stone, septaria, pillaged Roman tile and brick, and the ferruginous material known as ferricrete, which sounds disconcertingly like a modern, proprietary product. All this would have been concealed under a lime render internally and externally. Such is the archaeological interest of the now naked exterior that we have not reinstated the lost plaster and have, in the recent repairs, applied only a light limewash, without replastering, to the interior, limewash being the traditional method of slowing down the processes of decay.

The plan form could hardly be simpler. A nave of thirty-nine feet by nineteen feet abuts the chancel of nineteen feet by thirteen feet, both of them substantially eleventh century. There is a south porch of the late fifteenth century, largely rebuilt in the eighteenth, and there was a short-lived southern vestry apparently built in the early nineteenth century, the site of which appears to be dictated by the external pier of red brick at the eastern end of the nave. A substantial timber-framed structure of indeterminate date supports the bellcote or towerlet at the west end, now reduced to a flat-topped stub. The small, octagonal, broach spire, all in timber, had largely collapsed before the Friends took over the building. The rubble patch west of the north-east window indicates the former north doorway, above which can be seen the remains of a twelfth-century window, but at the time of the RCHME inspection of October 1914, most surviving fenestration was of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries. Between then and the conveyance of the building to the Friends in the early nineteen-seventies, most of the tracery had collapsed and disappeared, leaving only the reveals in much softened and weathered clunch in the nave windows, and tracery heads in early nineteenth-century limestone, no doubt dating from the last restoration before the building was abandoned. Part of the fifteenth-century rood loft staircase and door surround survives within the north wall, although one of the columns to the door architrave has long been missing. Both the nave and chancel roofs used to be disguised internally by a plaster barrel vault, long since collapsed to reveal timbers, in the case of the chancel, of the late fifteenth century (dated to *c.* 1475 by Cecil Hewett).

All of the fittings had gone by the time that the Friends came on to the scene. The mid-fifteenth-century font, the holy water stoup and the parish chest are all now in the Victorian church (see below). No evidence remains of the floor slab to Thomas Browing STP of 1696, the fifteenth-century indent for a lost brass and the coffin lid of the thirteenth century, all lying loose on the chancel floor at the time of the RCHME inspection, nor of the fine fifteenth-century door, which we have had to replace with an approximate timber substitute in order to prevent illegal entry. Essex County Record Office contains two boxes of pottery, window glass and worked stone labelled as 'found at Wickham Bishops old church', apparently collected by the Reverend Thomas Gibbons, who was the incumbent between 1899 and 1907. The finds included an elaborate, small bronze key. Gibbons (later confusingly referred to as Dixon) carried out rudimentary repairs to the church and used the remains of a seventeenth-century monument with the word 'resurgam' as the altar

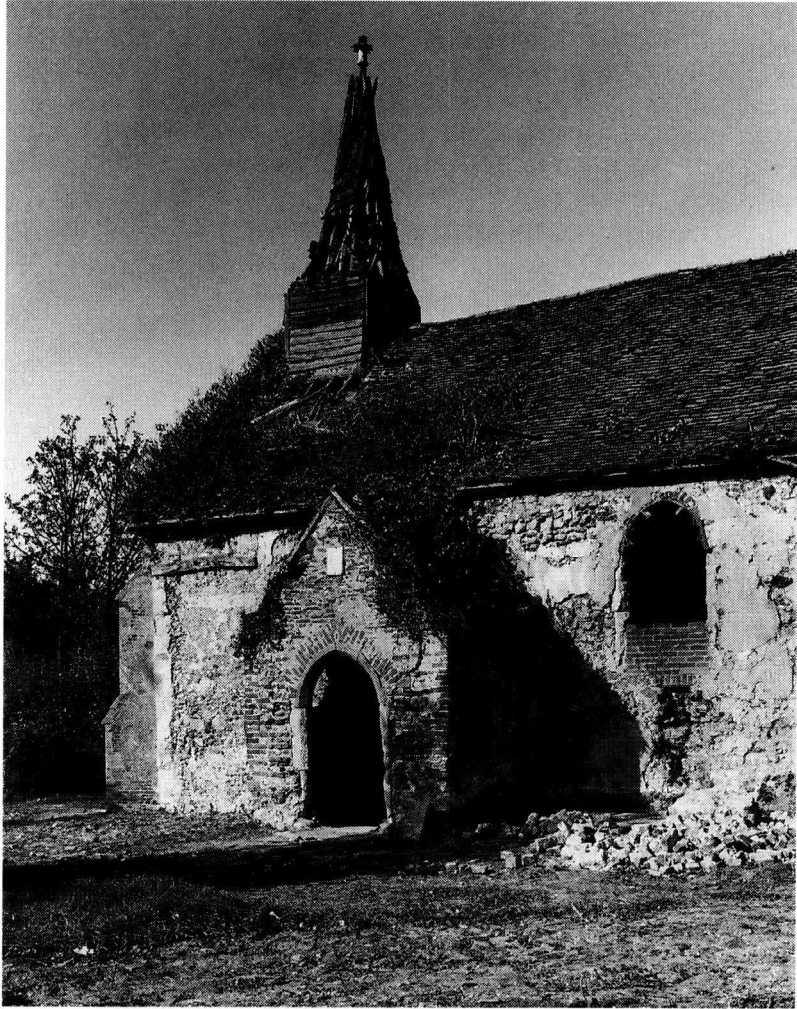


Fig. 1
St Peter, Wickham
Bishops
View from the south
in October 1972,
prior to the church's
being vested with
the Friends
Christopher Dalton

slab for a simple Gothic altar table which he introduced. In the years of abandonment the altar was stolen and the slab smashed, although the Friends plan to reassemble it from its existing three pieces and place it within the chancel. Other parts of the old church are still to be found – a local resident remembers wooden fittings being taken out in the early twentieth century to construct a chicken house at a nearby cottage.

The history of St Peter's has been enlivened by a long succession of highly individual incumbents. Among them was Robert Blackwell, rector from 1480 to 1482, who managed to be summonsed three times in his two short years for 'encroaching on the Lord's waste', by digging a pit near his rectory in the king's highway, and for stealing a bull. The longer-serving John Holmes, in office from

1568 until 1600, appeared in T. W. David's list of 'The ignorant and unpreaching ministers of Essex'. Robert Billio, at Wickham for the last two years of the Interregnum, until 1660, was renowned for his ability to preach sermons six days a week, which led to the expression 'to go like billy-o'. Thomas Browning, rector from 1660 to 1689, was given the sleepy benefice of St Peter's having been virtually bankrupted by fines levied in 1647 because of his staunch royalism. The Reverend Thomas Leigh, rector in 1825, apparently was so enraged by the refusal of a local Quaker, Thomas Smith, to remove his hat during parish meetings in the nave that he built the (now demolished) vestry so that the meetings would not be held henceforth in God's house but in this separate, unconsecrated, room. A more sober claim to fame was that of Reverend Philip Morant who became one of the most famous of all Essex historians from his base at Wickham.

By the mid-nineteenth century, St Peter's was in such a poor state and in such an inconvenient position in relation to the post-medieval development of the village that the decision was taken to abandon it in favour of a new church (dedicated to St Bartholomew), constructed in the centre of the village to the design of Ewan Christian, architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Despite the efforts of the Reverend Gibbons, the story in the century thereafter was one of slow decline and abuse by vandalism, theft and the elements (Fig. 1). Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, founder of the Friends, was first alerted to its plight in 1959. In 1962 there was the first threat to demolish it under the faculty procedure, a move that was not pursued and was overtaken ten years later by a similar proposal to demolish under a Draft Redundancy Scheme issued by the Church Commissioners, the building having been formally declared redundant in June 1970, 120 years after its effective disuse had begun. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, outraged at the thought of a 900 years old building being bulldozed, opposed the Scheme on behalf of the Friends and proposed that the building should be vested with the Redundant Churches Fund, of which he was the first Chairman. The Church Commissioners decided against this, buttressed in their refusal by the concurrence of the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches. Rather than countenance demolition, Ivor then launched an appeal to members to take St Peter's into the direct care of the Friends. This was successful and a 999 year lease was granted on 1st January 1975. Gradually over the next decade, the building was returned to a presentable and safe condition, largely from the internal resources of the Friends, English Heritage having refused a grant in 1985 (Fig. 2). The file contains one tantalising reference to a letter of 1973 from Stanley Kubrick, seeking to use the church in its semi-ruinous state for the filming of *Barry Lyndon*, starring Ryan O'Neal. Apparently that request, and the generous fee that would have been offered, lapsed.

The repairs were supervised by the architect Laurence King. The decision to refenestrate the chancel, using new natural stone and the rather dead but vandal-proof 'meshlite' was probably not a decision we would have endorsed in the nineteen-nineties, although generally speaking the repairs were workmanlike and respectful, and they were rewarded by the listing of St Peter's in the most recent resurvey of the area as Grade II*. Throughout the years of disuse, the battles against demolition



Fig. 2

St Peter, Wickham Bishops

View from the south following the principal programme of repairs by the Friends

(seriously proposed in 1962 and 1972), and during the period of repair, the support of the Joly de Lotbinière family, who have owned the adjacent St Peter's Cottage for the last thirty-five years, has been unwavering and vital.

The most recent phase in the history of St Peter's began in August 1994, when the Friends were approached by the young stained glass artist Benjamin Finn, who was enthused by the idea of re-siting his studio within the church after a programme of gentle and self-effacing repair and conversion. He had hitherto worked in two garden sheds, which clearly were inadequate. As he explained to us - 'I work best in isolation and seclusion and need a prayerful and sympathetic atmosphere'. As a member of the Greek Orthodox community at Tolleshunt Knights, also centred on a redundant Anglican church in Essex, he seemed to the Executive Committee an ideal tenant, who would come to the building with an appropriate respect for its sacred nature. The Committee approved the proposal in principle in November 1994 and thereafter consecutive permissions were sought and obtained from the local planning authority, the Diocese, the Church Commissioners and the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches. The bulk of the £18,900 required to carry out the work was supplied by Ben, supplemented by grants of £5,260 from Essex County Council and £2,000 from Maldon District Council, both of which had given earlier

grants to St Peter's in the nineteen-eighties.

The keynote for the works required was reticence and, where possible, reversibility. There were to be no sub-divisions, horizontal or vertical, and no changes at all in the chancel. In the nave the bare earth was covered by a new suspended timber floor, inserted so as to preserve the surviving brick sleeper walls to what seems to have been a large pulpit enclosure. The walls were repointed where necessary and a limewash applied internally, both for their protection and to reduce the dust, which would be damaging to the stained glass process. All existing plaster was consolidated and retained under a slurry coat of lime mortar, and no new plaster was added. Apart from heating and lighting, and the new small-scale kiln, the only other work of alteration was the re-glazing of the nave windows. This presented perhaps the most acute conservation dilemma and the consensus that emerged was the result of careful deliberation with English Heritage, Essex County Council and Maldon District Council. The decision was taken to keep all existing stonework, including the early and weathered clunch reveals and the later stubs of nineteenth-century limestone tracery. The new leaded glazing is inserted in much the same way as it would have been in the eighteenth century, had designers of that

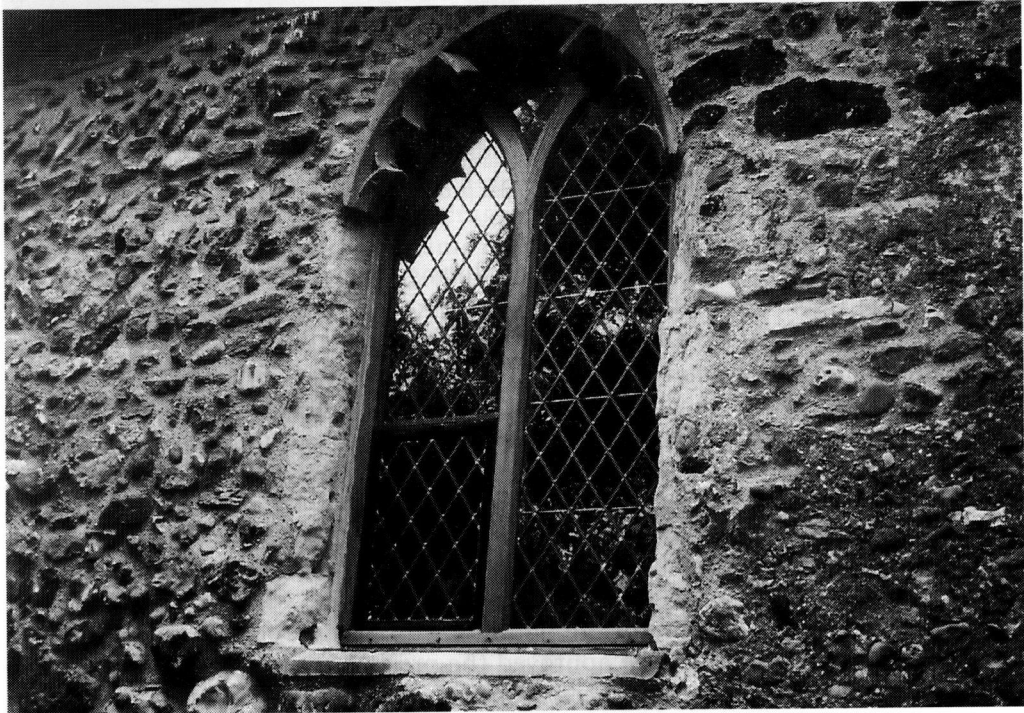


Fig. 3

St Peter, Wickham Bishops

One of the windows reglazed in 1996.

Note how the clunch reveals and the tracery stubs have been retained



Fig. 4

St Peter, Wickham Bishops

Ben Finn at work in the interior in September 1996

period been given the same brief. The glass is rebated into simple oak tracery of Y-section, fitted just behind the external face of the remains of the masonry tracery (Fig. 3). The westernmost window on the south side was reglazed without any mullions because of Ben's need for uninterrupted light at that point, so he could mount a glass easel on the sill, against which to judge the colour tones of the glass he was preparing (Fig. 4).

We are very pleased with the quality of the work executed by Middleton Restoration of Sawtry, the contractors under the supervision of the architects Julian Limentani, surveyor to Peterborough Cathedral, and Matthew Thomas, of the Marshall Sisson practice. Following the repairs, begun in January and finished in May 1996 the church was visited on the 12th June by the Redundant Churches Committee of the Church Commissioners, and we believe that they too were pleased by what they saw.

Benjamin Finn, born in 1964, has already attained a considerable standing in his field (Fig. 5). He won the Caroline Swash Stained Glass Fellowship Award at the Central School of Art and Design in London in 1990-1, and his glass 'The Spirit of God Moved over the Face of the Waters' appears as the frontispiece to Sarah Brown's *Stained Glass: an illustrated history*, published by Studio Editions in 1992.



Fig. 5
 'Two Angels watching the
 Crucifixion'
 A detail of a stained glass panel by
 Ben Finn in a private collection

His 'Head of Christ' is on long-term loan to the stained glass museum at Ely Cathedral. Current commissions include windows for the church of St Andrew at Letcombe Regis and the hospital chapel of St Nicholas at Harbledown.

It is a source of great satisfaction to know, not only that the Friends have saved St Peter's from certain demolition, but that we and Ben Finn have now been able to give it a new life as a cradle for artistic talent. In effect, St Peter's is now back in use as a place of worship, through the medium of religious art.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE:

Currie, Sir Mordaunt, 'Wickham Bishops, a social history of the parish', (1966), 3-8 (unpublished, copy held in Essex County Record Office).

Essex Archaeology and History, 12, (1980), 75-7.

Essex Countryside, (August 1969), 17, no. 151, 30-1.

Essex County Council, Dixon and Clark papers.

Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *The Monuments of Central and Southwest Essex*, (1923), 258-9. This entry is based upon more extensive manuscript notes of the investigator's 1914 visit, which are retained at the National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon, together with notes and photographs of 1962 and 1970.

Stained Glass, the magazine of the British Society of Master Glass Painters, (August 1992), contains a profile of Benjamin Finn.