



A BRIEF HISTORY

Roger Green, Heritage Officer

Standing proudly at the head of the Market Hill, St Peter's has never been a true parish church. In mediaeval documents it is called "The Chappel of St. Peter", in effect a chapel of ease to the church of St. Gregory. In 1667 any distinct parish of St. Peter, for rating purposes was repudiated by the Recorder and Justices of the Borough. St. Peter's is one of three medieval churches in Sudbury. It is built mainly of flint, but incorporates bricks, tiles and brown pebbles in its masonry. A previous church was mentioned in a deed dated 1180, but the present building was probably commenced during the 14th century, funded by the local guilds and townsfolk.

Perhaps the finest aspect of the building externally is the superb Tower. During the period 1460 to 1485 money was given for the founding of new bells. In a will dated 1376 reference is made to hanging the great bell in St. Peter's chapel. This may refer to the present building. Angle buttresses support the tower at each of the four corners and the whole is crowned by an embattled parapet with creatures and angels at the four corners and at the centre of each face. The first clock was made by Henry Pleasant, the local bell founder, in 1701. The present four-faced clock uses the mechanism installed by Messrs. Gillett and Bland of Croydon in 1874, the third clock to be installed in the tower. It is now driven electrically. In the eighteenth century a spire was erected to cap the tower. In 1750 this spire appears in Gainsborough's famous portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Andrewes. It was later replaced by a copper and timber spire in 1810. This was removed in 1968, returning the tower to its mediaeval appearance. At the time of the removal the tower itself was unsafe and an appeal for funds in order to strengthen it was launched. The greater part of the cost of this work was met by Mr. C. W. Worters a butcher from Sudbury. As a result the tower was reinforced by two concrete ring beams.

The tower is supported on three internal arches. These may, in the first instance, have formed an external passageway running north - south. In the final stages of building the decision was made to include the tower within the church by extending the aisles, making a spacious processional route for guild and civic use within the building. There was, at one time, a gallery under the tower. Some of the gallery supports are still visible. The construction of the gallery is mentioned in the minutes of a vestry meeting of September 1777. In the 1820s this west gallery was hugely extended eastwards, occupying a major portion of both the north and south aisles. These aisle galleries survived for only 30 years.



All the galleries were removed in the mid 19th century. The tower arches are 'decorated' by many signatures and other marks - the graffiti of previous generations who occupied the gallery.

The font has a 15th century marble bowl for which the sum of forty shillings was donated by Thomas Sybeton (chaplain) in 1456. Thomas Martin, the Suffolk antiquary, relates that in 1654, during the civil war, John Cook, Mayor of Sudbury, had this bowl removed from the church and used as a drinking trough for horses. When his horses refused to use it, it was set up as a trough for hogs. The font was later restored on a new base.

The nave roof is unusual in being of arch-braced cambered tie beam construction, the sides being filled with groined wood coving. It was restored in 1685 and again in the 1850s, when it was painted. The clerestory windows, oddly, do not align with the arches below. The capitals of the Nave columns differ from north to south side and this difference is repeated in the demi-columns of the chancel arch.

There would have been a huge rood screen crossing the entire building at the point of the chancel steps. The staircase for this is still visible outside the church, as are communicating passages which ran through the pillars. This screen would doubtless have been much of a pattern with the fine Tudor Parclose Screens in the Choir. The panels which now stand at the chancel steps were probably part of the rood screen, although their decoration is much later and the work of Gainborough Dupont (a relative of Sudbury's most famous son). In January 1643 the notorious William Dowsing, acting on orders from the parliament, records that "at St. Peter's Church we brake down a picture of God the Father, two crucifixes and pictures of Christ, about an hundred in all; and gave orders to take down a cross off the steeple and divers angels, twenty at least, on the roof of the church." It is probable that these angels were not part of an earlier 'angel roof' but were exterior features of the building.

Work to Construct the building probably began with the chancel which 'weeps'. It is not aligned with the rest of building. This was probably caused by the presence of other buildings close to the church at the time of construction. The same reason may give rise to the odd angle of the north-west corner of the building. The Chancel ceiling is quite magnificent, flat pitched, ceiled and panelled. Along the ridge are small but detailed bosses depicting angels carrying a book, a shield and a cross. Other bosses take the form of faces, flowers and leaves.



The stained glass in the church is not ancient but dates from the nineteenth century and is mostly the work of Messrs. Hardman of Birmingham. The east window was installed 1856 -7 as part of the two nineteenth century re-decorations of the building. In mid century major work was designed and supervised by the well-respected William Butterfield. Butterfield criticised the new east window, which led to the creation of the more flowing design for the west window. In 1847 the east window had been blocked below the transom, the work being carried out under the direction of A. Sprague of Colchester. During this reconstruction the piscina and sedilla in the sanctuary were 'rediscovered'. They may have been covered in the seventeenth century. The other windows were added gradually, but in 1882 Rev. T. Lingard Green invited Messrs. Hardman to prepare a scheme to complete the stained glass in all the windows. The scheme was never turned into reality.

Butterfield also created a new high altar with reredos and two new tall candlesticks as well as installing a new pulpit and font cover. The ceilings were painted and other decoration was done in a style favoured by the anglo-catholic movement in which the rector, Rev. Canon J. W. M. Molyneaux was involved. Several leading anglo-catholics, including John Keble, preached in St. Peter's. A memorial window to the canon can be found in the north aisle, adjacent to the organ. One of his most controversial acts centred on selling the church pews. They were removed during the night of 30th March 1859 to be sold on the Market Hill the following morning. An injunction was obtained by parishioners in order to prevent the sale.

The auctioneer received it on the rostrum, declaring that he was too busy to read it then and putting it in his pocket to read after the sale. Butterfield replaced the pews with simple rush-seated ladder-backed chairs that were intended to be removed to the sides when not in use.

On a previous occasion, in March 1863 the Canon forbade a peal of bells celebrating the marriage of the Prince of Wales in the season of lent. The bell ringers, undeterred, gained access to the tower by ladders and stayed ringing the bells all day, refreshed by copious supplies of food and ale hauled up through the tower window.

During the Butterfield restoration the area now under the organ was made available as a vestry. Previously it was probably a burial vault and some authorities consider that it may have been used to re-bury bodies disturbed during the original construction of the church.



A further redecoration took place in 1897, under the direction of G. F. Bodley. Again, following anglo-catholic taste, the chancel was heavily painted and decorated in strong dark colours, highlighted with gold. Most of Bodley's decoration was removed between February and April 1964. Remains can be seen on the chancel arch and high up above the rood canopy. Bodley also designed the present very fine highly decorated reredos.

There is a memorial window in the north-west corner of the church celebrating the 1902 peace in the South African War. Jameson, whose gave his name to the Jameson Raid, lived for a while at Greyfriars, in Friars Street. This window also contains one of the best versions of the Sudbury Borough Coat of Arms, granted in 1576.

The South Chapel was refurbished in 1903. The present altar and reredos were given anonymously in 1907, a fine tribute to the woodcarver's art.

To the south side of the church is a two storey entrance porch. The use to which the upper room was put is a mystery owing to the narrowness of the stairs which lead to it. Over the door to the staircase is a wittily carved angel with forked beard. It must have been intended that the porch should be stone vaulted. Supports for the vaulting are still visible. The niches and sundial were added in the course of nineteenth century restoration. 'St Peter's can boast a fine collection of examples of the Green Man. Possibly the rarest is to be found above the exterior arch to the South Porch. From the painfully squashed head emerge two hares, running in opposite directions and from whose mouths extend the more usual foliate additions.

In March 1971 worship was transferred to St Gregory's Church. The Church was declared redundant following the announcement of redundancy in the London Gazette on 30th March 1972. At times during the period 1968 - 1976 the future of the building was insecure, but in 1975 the first Festival of Sudbury took place, mainly staged in St Peter's, under the dynamic leadership of Anthony Moore. Heating and lighting all had to be temporarily imported because the existing services were either dangerous or non-existent. The Festival committee, having been charged with the task of finding a permanent use for the building, reported back to a public meeting in 1976. So came into being the Friends of St. Peter, a registered charity, with the two aims of preserving the building and providing facilities in the interest of social welfare for the recreation and leisure time occupation of the inhabitants of Sudbury and district. The first president was Sir John Betjeman. The first chairman and in many ways the inspiration for the use of St. Peter's was Anthony Moore. His infectious enthusiasm and energetic leadership led to major achievement and later he became the second president. Ownership of the building was transferred on 29th May, 1976 to the body now known as the Churches Conservation Trust with the Friends acting as local agents.



The Friends of St. Peter worked to install new electric wiring, lighting and heating systems, staging, tables and seating. Subsequently, due to the ravages of use, the heating system and staging have both needed replacing. In 1980 a major section of the wooden flooring to the south of the nave was re-laid. In 1978 the Rotary Club of Sudbury presented new curtains, woven from Sudbury Silk, for the chancel arch. In that year, after much fund raising, two new bells were cast at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry and added to the existing eight. A new bell frame was made and the new ring of ten was re-consecrated at an impressive service on 8th October 1978, with a concert following, given by the Scholars from Kings College Cambridge. The oldest bells date from 1470 and were made by Kebyll of London.

In 1980 two pictures of Moses and Aaron, by Robert Cardinal, thought to have been lost and dating from about 1730, were discovered in the church. Originally they were probably part of a reredos, but were taken down in 1854 and were then hung above the chancel arch until 1898, when Bodley's glorious angels (now painted over) replaced them in that position. The pictures were restored and since 1981 have hung over the North and South doors. In the same year a small kitchen was installed. This has, in turn, been upgraded twice to form the present facility. Referred to in many guide books, the historic Jacobean Preaching Cloth and Alderman's Pall are currently in safe keeping at the Ipswich museum.

The present organ was originally built by Lewis & Co. of Brixton in 1911 and dedicated on St. Peter's Day, June 29th that year. A leading spirit in the campaign to build a new organ in St. Peter's was E. E. Vinnicombe. He was organist at the church for nearly 50 years and is still remembered in the town. In 1980, Christopher Dearnley, organist of St Paul's Cathedral, played the organ, even though it was in a very poor state. As a result he inspired the Friends to raise funds towards its refurbishment. The first stage in this process was completed in 1987 when Christopher gave a recital, celebrating the return to life of the instrument. Mrs. Dora Vinnicombe, widow of the late organist attended this event.

In 1999 the organ enjoyed a major rebuild at a cost of over £100,000 with the aid of a most generous grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the remainder of the funding from the Friends of St. Peter. Two years earlier it had been found that the seven largest pipes were seriously affected by worm infestation.



In 1999 seven new pipes were made and installed, reputedly the first time pipes of this size had been constructed in this country for over 50 years. The first recital on the refurbished instrument was given in May by Dennis Townhill, Organist Emeritus, St. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh. The following year a recital was given by Stephen Cleobury, director of music at King's College, Cambridge, to mark the re-inauguration of the instrument and, at the same time, to 'echo' the opening recital on the instrument in 1911 by Dr. A. H. Mann, also of King's College. Sadly, following incautious removal of the protective covering in place during work on the roof, damage was caused to the instrument necessitating further restorative work in 2001.

The Friends arrange many events within the building . Through their stewardship and day to day management of the building they enable use for many events such as services, orchestral and other concerts, fashion shows, craft fairs, art exhibitions, horticultural shows, farmers' markets, historical and model railway exhibitions. There has even been a medieval banquet and a café operates out of the building on most days of the week when there are not events taking place.

At the same time the Churches Conservation Trust has spent many thousands of pounds in maintaining the fabric, notably in recent years the exterior of the south aisle together with the south porch, the east and west windows in the south aisle, the exterior of the north aisle and the eastern roof of the north aisle. All of which has enabled this beautiful and historic building to remain standing at the heart of the town.

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