



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

East Peckham, Kent



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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East Peckham, Kent

CHURCH OF ST MICHAEL

by John E Vigar (Historian, author and broadcaster specialising in ecclesiastical architecture. Regional Development Manager, The Churches Conservation Trust)

INTRODUCTION

The old church of East Peckham stands on a rise which, while only moderately high, gives a magnificent view over the orchards and hop-gardens of the upper Medway valley. The name 'Peckham' probably comes from the Old English meaning a village by a hill. Many mediaeval churches on high ground are dedicated to St Michael, as appearances of the saint in early church history were invariably on hilltops. It is isolated and is said never to have been part of a village but to have served an area of scattered farms.

To the south-east and out of sight of the church, but surprisingly close, is Roydon Hall, a fine red brick mansion, many of whose residents over the centuries had connections with the church. The lane that skirts the churchyard to the west and south was once the main road, but in 1810 this was superseded by a turnpike road, the present Seven Mile Lane. By then a nucleated community had been established near the banks of the Medway and a new church was built there in the 1840s. This eventually led to the closure of St Michael's which was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in 1973. Since vesting a series of repairs have been carried out under the supervision successively of Anthony Swaine, Patricia Brock and Robert George.

Front cover: The chancel viewed from the west

*Left: The view from the high altar
(© Crown copyright. NMR.)*



EXTERIOR

The churchyard deserves a close look both for the view from it and for the high quality and antiquity of the headstones. To the west of the tower is a concrete capping that covers an early well which may have supplied weary travellers with drinking water. Until its accidental destruction by fire in 2005, an 18th-century stable stood outside the lychgate, providing stabling for those arriving at church on horseback.

The church consists of west tower, nave, chancel, south aisle and south chapel, together

with a south porch and north vestry. The main structures have separate gables and the view of them from the east is probably the most attractive view of the church, and is typical of churches in this part of Kent. Unfortunately the tower and part of the nave wall were encased with 'Roman cement' rendering in the 19th century. This may have preserved the stonework and reduced maintenance costs but all texture was lost and it is now impossible to see the architectural detail. The slate roofs also date from the 19th century.



The tower is surmounted by a small shingled spire with a weathervane of 1928. Confusingly it bears the date 1704 as it is an exact copy of the vane it replaced. The walls of the entire church are of Kentish ragstone quarried nearby. In the north wall of the chancel is a Norman window, the only visible reminder of the antiquity of the site of which the Domesday Survey says 'A church is there'. Most of the stonework of the other windows dates from the 19th-century restoration.

The fine south porch is early 16th century and may have been paid for partly by the will of Ralph Brokar who left 'six marks' to the church in 1507. The graffiti on its inner walls show that it has been used for a variety of different purposes over the centuries.



INTERIOR

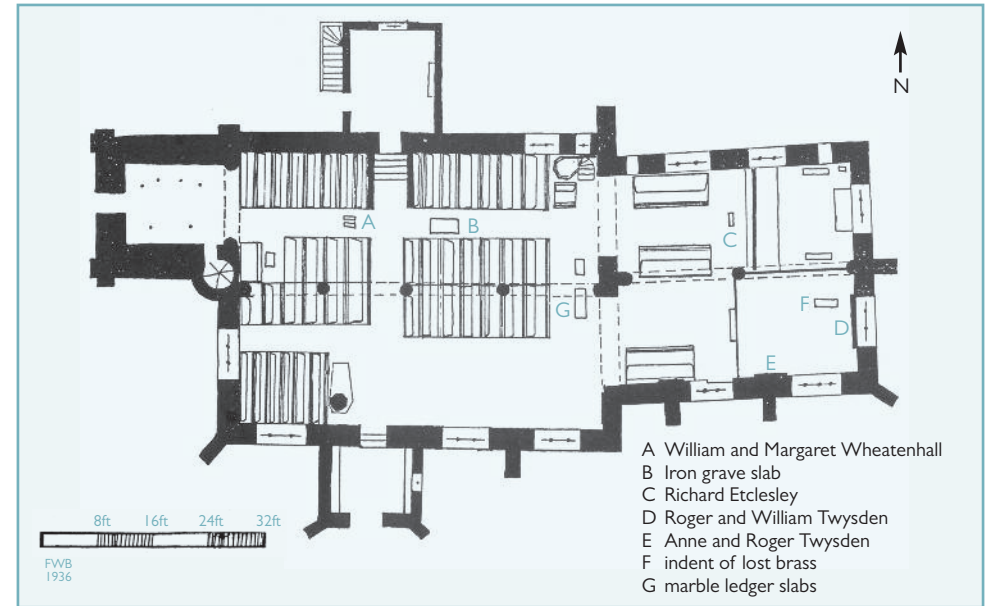
The interior of the church is surprisingly light and spacious. The nave arcade and the arches to chancel and south chapel are 13th century, whilst the arches separating chancel and chapel are 14th century. The nave and south aisle roofs, which are both of crown-post construction, are replacements of the 15th century. The chancel and chapel roofs are both 19th century, and of excellent quality. The pews were designed by the diocesan architect Joseph Clarke, as part of his wholesale restoration of the church in 1857. He also restored the nearby churches of Wateringbury and Nettlestead. Until an arson attack in 1994 the south aisle was fully pewed as well.

There are several monuments of note in the nave. In the central gangway is a cast iron slab with a plain cross. The Wealden iron industry produced many monuments of this type, but this one is a long way from the centre of production and must have cost an enormous amount to have carried here. West of this, dating from the first quarter of the 16th century is a small brass effigy of a man and lady. It has been suggested that it represents William and Margaret Wheatenhall. William was Sheriff of Kent in 1526 and lived in the valley below the church.

Over the door to the north vestry is a fine royal arms clearly dated 1740, bearing the arms of King George II (1727–60). The nearby Trust church of St Thomas à Becket, Capel, also displays a good royal arms of this period.

In front of the chancel arch are three well-carved black marble ledger slabs. The window above the pulpit dates from the 14th century and was designed to throw light onto the figures of Christ, Our Lady and St John, which stood on the rood beam high above the chancel arch. This beam and its figures would have been destroyed at the Reformation, and the Victorians later made use of the light coming through this window when deciding where to place their solid pulpit.

The chancel has an intense 19th-century feeling, enhanced by the fine floor tiles, those around the altar being supplied by the renowned firm of Minton and Co. The altar with its panelling is early 20th century and was built as a war memorial. The east window is a memorial to



- A William and Margaret Wheatenhall
- B Iron grave slab
- C Richard Etclesley
- D Roger and William Twysden
- E Anne and Roger Twysden
- F indent of lost brass
- G marble ledger slabs

William Cook, a London merchant who bought Roydon Hall in 1835. In front of the altar rails is a small brass inscription to Richard Etclesley. He was rector of this church for 14 years until his death in 1426, and was originally commemorated by a large memorial brass which has since been lost. He left a gilt chalice to the church.

The ledger slabs in the centre of the chancel are to the Henham family. They were lay rectors of the church taking the greater tithes produced in the parish. This meant that they were responsible for the maintenance of the chancel, and also that they could claim a place of burial in this much sought after position within the church. A variety of hop is named after the family.

On the north wall of the chancel is a mediaeval bracket, and standing on it the base of a mediaeval statue that was probably destroyed at the Reformation.

The south chapel is of much interest. It would have started life as a chantry chapel where masses were said for the souls of departed benefactors. After the abolition of chantries in the 16th century it became the private pew for the occupants of Roydon Hall, many of whom are commemorated here.

The earliest memorial is the indent of a long-lost brass set into the unrestored floor. Because this area of the church was privately owned it was not given a new floor as part of the 19th-century restoration, and is still enclosed by its rustic wooden screen which is probably three hundred years old. In 1557 Thomas Roydon, who gave his name to the nearby mansion, requested burial here. His daughter Elizabeth married William Twysden and for the next three hundred years Roydon Hall was one of the two Kentish seats of this family.

The most notable memorial in the chapel is to Roger and William Twysden. It is made of marble and stands under the east window, and takes the form of two inscription panels under two deeply scrolled volutes. Sir Roger's diaries, recording his struggles during the Civil War, may be read in the volumes of *Archaeologia Cantiana*. A staunch supporter of all the ancient laws of England, he was imprisoned and fined heavily at a time when our laws were being challenged and rewritten to suit the changes of the period.

On the south wall of the chapel is a tablet to Anne (d.1592) and Roger Twysden (d.1603) who 'although they were borne in the same day, yet they died severally'.

The oval tablet to Elizabeth Cholmeley carries three very finely carved coats of arms. Near it can be seen another mediaeval bracket that would originally have supported a statue.

The eastern parts of the church contain some interesting stained glass. That in the tracery of the south chapel window is by the Irish stained glass artist Michael O'Connor (1801–67). This window, destroyed in the Second World War, was a memorial to William Cook. The east window of the chapel contains a fine three-light depiction of the Ascension. Designed by the renowned firm of

John Hardman and Co., it is a memorial to Mary Cook (d.1862). The east window of the chancel, showing scenes from the life of Christ, is also by Hardman. To the north of the altar, in the tiny Norman window is *The Good Shepherd* by Clayton and Bell, in memory of a former Vicar.

High on the west wall of the chapel is a single hatchment, carried at the funeral of Sir William Jervis Twysden in 1834. It was his death that caused Roydon Hall to be sold to William Cook.

In the south aisle is a small 13th-century piscina (or drain) where the priest would have washed



his hands before Mass. It is not in its original position, having been moved when this aisle was widened in the 15th century. The small sun in the tracery of a south aisle window dates from this enlargement of the church. The font probably also dates from this period, and is a surprisingly plain piece for this area of Kent where well-carved fonts of this date are common.

In the tower is a ring of six bells which is still rung on occasions, most notably at the annual service held here to commemorate the feast day of the church's patron saint, St Michael, which

falls on 29 September. Formerly there was a ring of bells cast by Robert Catlin of London in 1747. Of these only the fifth survives. All the others have been recast at different times at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry – the treble in 1825, the second and third in 1785, the fourth in 1890 and the tenor in 1812. The bell frame is of interest: it was probably constructed in 1747 but reuses much earlier timber.



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 335 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF

St Mary, Burham
5 miles NW of Maidstone off A229

St Thomas à Becket, Capel
4 miles E of Tonbridge off B2017

St Benedict, Paddlesworth
1 mile W of Snodland off A228

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Right: The east end of the chancel and south chapel (© Crown copyright. NMR.)

Back cover: The shingled spire, with replacement weathervane (© Crown copyright. NMR.)

