

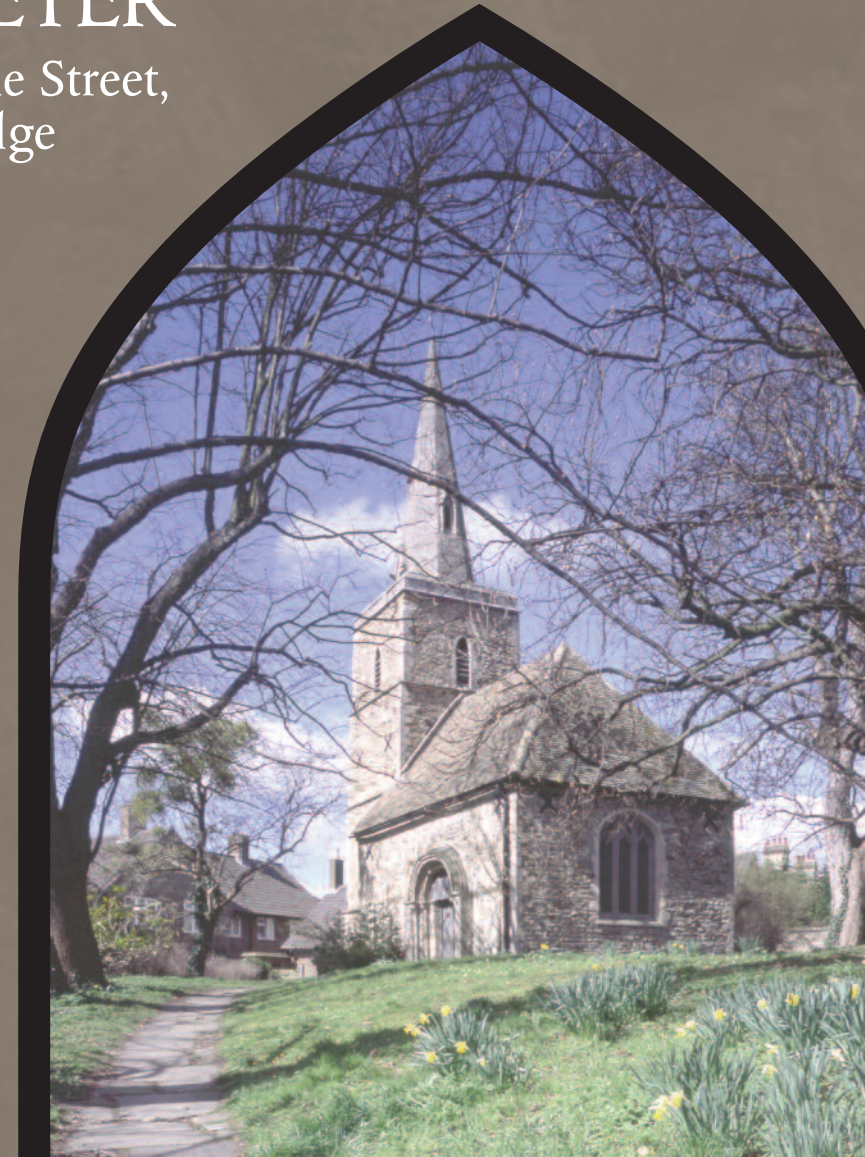


THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# CHURCH OF ST PETER

off Castle Street,  
Cambridge



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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*off Castle Street, Cambridge*

# CHURCH OF ST PETER

*by Lawrence Butler (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, formerly Head of the Department of Archaeology, Leeds University, and archaeological consultant to Lincoln, Sheffield and Wakefield cathedrals)*

## INTRODUCTION

The church and churchyard of St Peter offer an oasis of calm amid the rush of commuter traffic along Castle Street leading to Huntingdon and Histon roads and the steady throb of orbital traffic on Northampton Street. The mature limes and horse chestnuts provide a green island closely surrounded by housing, though the names of Honey Hill and Pound Green recall a more rural past. During the spring and early summer it is a colourful haven of wild flowers. This church has always been set in a poor neighbourhood and Castle End has a definite country feel to it. The domestic architecture, whether of the 17th century on either side of Northampton Street, or of more recent building in local style and materials in Honey Hill, all contribute to this rural atmosphere, unlike the grander buildings of the colleges in the centre of the city. In the middle years of the 20th century St Peter's was known as the Children's Church, and more recently it has been supported by a loyal band of friends and helpers who have cherished the tranquillity of this building – the smallest medieval church in Cambridge. The church is open daily for prayer and quiet contemplation in a local ecumenical partnership with clergy of the parish of The Ascension.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-east  
(S Cole)*

*Left: Interior looking east (S Cole)*

*View of exterior in 1851, showing the church and churchyard headstones, Rock & Co. engraving (Cambridge and County Folk Museum)*

## HISTORY

The churchyard lies at the south-west corner of the Roman town of *Duroloponis* and artefacts of the Roman period have occasionally been found near the church. Roman tiles have been reused in the external walls of the nave. The Roman town stood on a natural gravel-capped outcrop of chalk overlooking the river Granta, partly on the high ground and partly on its southern slope of clay or gault. The town's boundary was along Pound Hill on the west, at Mount Pleasant on the north-west, along Northampton Street and Chesterton Lane to the south and along the steep edge of the later castle grounds to the east. In the post-Roman period this area, then known as *Grantacaestir*, was abandoned; the monks of Ely came here in 695 searching for a stone coffin in which to bury St Etheldreda.

From the 9th century the Saxon town of *Grantebrycge* was growing on both sides of the river: its bridge stood close to the present Magdalene Bridge or Great Bridge. An Anglo-Saxon burial ground was found in the castle bailey, presumably adjoining a minster church. Other burials, not certainly Christian, were found in St Peter's churchyard.

The Normans drastically changed this northern area of Cambridge; they also changed its name to the current spelling. A major earthwork castle was founded by William the Conqueror in 1068 with its mound a vantage point over all the town and much of the surrounding countryside. Then or soon afterwards three churches were built: St Giles, St Peter and All Saints-by-the-Castle.

St Giles had a large parish and a wealthier church, but the other two were much smaller parishes and poorer churches. When St Giles became the focus for a monastery in or before 1092, it may have continued the practices of the previous Saxon minster church. This priory of canons following the rule of St Augustine was refounded in 1112 at Barnwell, a mile (1.6km) to the east, where there was more space for a monastic house upon the town's common fields. The priory was given six churches in Cambridge and the three churches close to the castle were among them. Whenever lists of the 16 churches in Cambridge were compiled for the medieval bishops of Ely, St Peter's was always one of the poorest.

However, by 1350 the church had reached its greatest size, with a nave and chancel, a south aisle, a south porch and a west tower with spire. At this time also, perhaps because of the Black Death of 1349 and subsequent plagues, All Saints' fell into ruin; its parish was amalgamated with St Peter's. There are a few more surviving records. In 1448 a gild of St Peter and St Paul was established in the church. In 1461 the mayor of Cambridge, the two town bailiffs and seven other citizens incurred the displeasure of the Bishop of Ely; they had taken Henry Akenborough of Worcester diocese, who had claimed sanctuary in St Peter's churchyard, and imprisoned him in the town's Tollbooth. The bishop's official ordered them to return Henry and his goods to St Peter's churchyard or else



face excommunication. In 1503 Hugh Webster of Cambridge left £6 to make three stained glass windows on the north side of the church – these were to show specific saints and the donor's family. Thirty years later John Huyme asked to be buried in St Salvator's chapel in the churchyard: it is not clear whether this was a separate structure or refers to the south aisle. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538 Barnwell Priory was closed down and the patronage of its churches soon passed to the bishops of Ely.

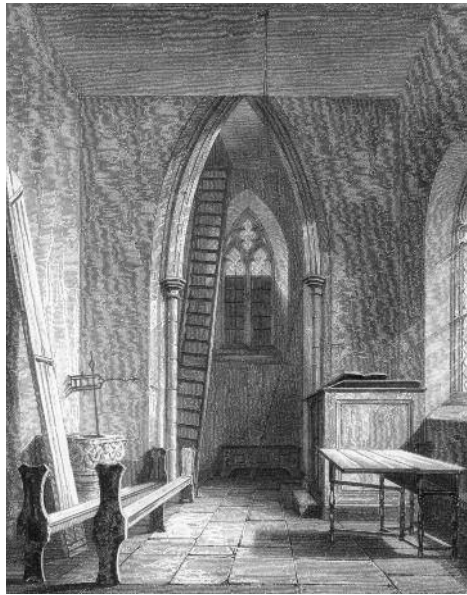
The bishop retained the vicar's income and appointed curates, many of whom were fellows of Cambridge colleges, often holding office for less than a year, which was a common local practice. This was the situation from 1540 to 1685. After that date St Peter's was formally linked to St Giles, whose vicar provided the services. However the parish officers continued to be appointed and the registers (dating from 1586) were maintained separately.

Local and episcopal records now provide increased information about the church's

contents. The vestry books indicate a modest provision of ritual items – only a single set of communion vessels, a large Bible, two Books of Common Prayer and two books of sermons. After 1640 there is a slight increase with three new plates and two flagons, all in pewter. Cushions on which to rest the Bible in the pulpit are first mentioned in 1619. Twenty years later bishop Matthew Wren ordered the pulpit to be placed on the south side of the nave and for the communion table to be raised on a step at the east end of the chancel. These moves were part of archbishop Laud's drive to enhance the liturgy and ritual of the Anglican Church. His efforts were soon overturned when Parliament took command in Cambridge. William Dowling, the enforcer of Puritan orthodoxy, wrote in his journal:

*'At St Peter's parish December 30 [1643] we brake downe ten popish pictures; we took three popish inscriptions for prayers to be made for their soules, and burnt the rayles, diged up the steps, and they are to be levelled on Wednesday.'*





*Left: View of interior in 1837, looking west, John Le Keux engraving (Cambridge University Library)*

*Right: The 13th-century south door (S Cole)*

The inscriptions for prayers and some of the pictures were probably in the three stained glass windows donated by Hugh Webster in 1503. This left the church interior plain and unadorned. In 1650 it was recommended for demolition and for its parish to be amalgamated with that of St Giles, only 100 yards (91 metres) away across Castle Street.

After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 the communion rails were replaced and a screen was erected between the nave and chancel with the royal arms of James II on top of it. A new pulpit was installed, so that in 1720 it was described as 'a very decent church' and in 1743 it was still in reasonable repair. However later churchwardens and the vicars of St Giles gradually neglected the fabric of St Peter's so that in 1772 Revd William Cole, rector of Milton, observed that 'This church is now a ruin, with no roof or peice of glass about it; and has been suffered to lye thus these 15 or 16 years.' This situation prompted appeals for funds to repair the church. The Bishop of Ely, Dr Edmund Keene, was supportive, heading a subscription list and offering furniture recently removed from his palace chapel, Ely Place, in London. The architect James Essex was less enthusiastic and in 1780 reported 'that they were going to pull down the walls of this church to mend the roads to the Castle Hill by the Backway'.

However in 1781 the fabric was repaired but the church was reduced to one-third of its previous size. The south aisle had already been

demolished because, after the Reformation, its chapels were no longer needed. The church was now maintained as a vestry room or chapel but still suffered from periods of neglect. Early last century its fine Norman font was briefly transferred to St Giles by a vicar eager to beautify his recently rebuilt church. Only in the period 1940–60, when Revd Paul Mayer Osborn used this church for Sunday School and related services, did it have a specific purpose and appropriate furniture as the 'Children's Church'. Its final resurrection was under the inspiration of Jim Ede (1895–1990), the creator of Kettle's Yard Gallery who loved the view across the churchyard, 'an exquisite sight like a Samuel Palmer painting'. He took the lead in repairing the bulging walls, paving the uneven floor and introducing suitable seating. It was hoped to transfer the church to the Cambridge Preservation Society, which already cared for Stourbridge Chapel, but instead in 1973 it passed to the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. This has ensured that a much reduced medieval church, whose tower and spire have been a feature of the Cambridge skyline for more than 600 years, joins the very impressive Victorian church of All Saints in Jesus Lane under the care of The Trust.

## EXTERIOR

When approached from Castle Street in the south-east corner of the churchyard, it is obvious that St Peter's stands on a grassy knoll. There are only a few memorials remaining in the churchyard. Hidden among the bushes is an early 19th-century table tomb. Other headstones lie in the grass or are now reused face down in the pathway. The church has two main elements: the tower capped by a spire and a nave showing two periods of construction.

The tower is built from neatly laid unworked flint with occasional stones and Roman tiles placed lengthways. There are stone quoins at the corners and the tower is divided into four receding stages, each separated by a Barnack limestone string course. The spire, built of carefully finished limestone blocks and decorative window openings, was erected in the 14th century. The windows in the tower also date from the 14th century.

The western section of the nave is the surviving part of the medieval nave, built of flint rubble, interspersed with Roman tile and Northamptonshire limestone. Barnack stone is used at the two western corners. The uneven texture indicates frequent repair and the removal of windows. The eastern part of the nave (just east of the two doorways) belongs to the late-18th-century rebuilding and uses larger stones with smooth external faces. The design respects the medieval work and its later date is not immediately apparent until one examines the hipped and tiled roof. This is laid on two



courses of brick. The roof-ridge is terminated by a metal finial with St Peter's keys. The east window appears to be an early-19th-century replacement under an earlier arch, though the grotesque corbel head above the apex of the window is an antiquarian insertion. Iron tie-bars in a cross shape are a prominent feature of the nave and tower and indicate periodic concerns about the stability of the walls.

A blocked doorway in the north wall with a semicircular arch and plain supports probably belongs to the mid-12th century. The south doorway is clearly early-13th-century work. The semicircular head has two orders of roll mouldings. The doorway is flanked by two plain round colonettes, their capitals decorated with waterleaf and simple foliage. Both doorways were deliberately preserved when the church was rebuilt in 1781. The wooden shaft that has replaced a column on the right-hand side of the south doorway was probably inserted then, as it is mentioned in 1809 and illustrated in 1812.

An interesting feature is the weathervane on the top of the spire. It displays the initials 'A P'. It was originally at Peterhouse, where it commemorated the generosity of Andrew Perne, Master 1554–89 and Dean of Ely 1557–89. He was known as



'the weathercock dean' because he carefully cultivated the support of whichever religious or political faction was in power at the time, switching from traditional Catholicism to extreme Puritanism and then to moderate Protestantism. His initials 'AP' occasioned the wags of the time to say that they stood for 'A Protestant, A Puritan or A Papist'. Supporters could stress that Perne's ability to cultivate the dominant political party ensured that Cambridge University survived the Tudor period with increased wealth and influence. In 1770 the weathervane on the college's Perne Library was blown down in a storm. William Cole (1714–82), the antiquarian rector of Milton, obtained the vane and placed it on his rectory barn. In 1782 Cole gave it to this church: 'I was glad to transfer it from my barn's end to a place more proper for it'. Perhaps he thought that these initials 'A P' could also stand for the 'Apostle Peter'.

## INTERIOR

The interior is completely plain with whitewashed walls, a stone-flagged floor and a simple boarded late-18th-century ceiling.

The font is the oldest and most prominent object within the church. Like the blocked north doorway it is a valuable link to the mid-12th-century structure. The square bowl is decorated with four mermen, each hand grasping one end of their divided tails. This creates a looped effect, similar to the scallop design so characteristic of Norman architecture. Mermen and mermaids grasping one end of divided tails are a fairly common motif in French Romanesque churches but rare in this country. However, a similar font survives at Anstey (Hertfordshire) though there the tail fins are cruder. The association of these fabled sea creatures with immersion in water makes them an appropriate choice for a font holding baptismal water.

Fixed to the tower wall near the font are two memorial tablets to members of the Smith family (1696, 1759). High above in the tower is the late-medieval bell frame of East Anglian high-sided type; it is unusual for having one of its three foundation beams forked to give greater support. The frame now holds only one bell, cast in 1603 by Richard Bowler of Colchester. The metal chandelier was designed in 1987 by the Revd Francis Woolley in memory of Helen Maure, a loyal member of the church, who lived to the age of 99.

Below left: Detail of stained glass in the east window by FR Leach (S Cole)

Below right: Memorial stone to Jim Ede (1895–1990) (S Cole)



The stained glass in the east window is by a local late Victorian artist, Frederick Richard Leach. It has floral patterns and the three roundels refer to Christ (Alpha and Omega, Star of David, Chi-Rho Cross). A similar background design of 1877–78 is found in the west windows of St Michael's church, Trinity Street, now The Michaelhouse Centre, opposite Gonville and Caius College. The austere stone altar, the pavement and much of the interior owes its restrained appearance to Jim Ede, the founder of the adjacent Kettle's Yard Art Gallery. From 1957 until his death in 1990 he cared for the church, instigated the repairs to underpin the north wall and eventually ensured its transfer to the Redundant Churches Fund. It is entirely fitting that beside the altar is a memorial stone to him, inscribed with the last two lines of a sonnet by Edmund Spenser:

*'So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,  
Love is the lesson the Lord us taught'.*

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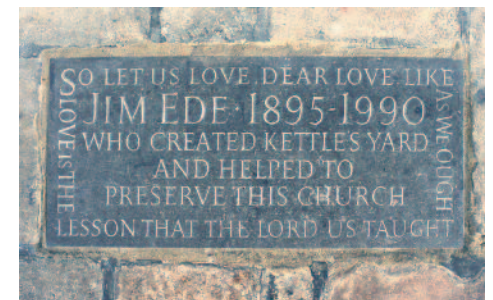
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# THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

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