

# Church of St Mary the Virgin, Ashwell

## Statement of Significance

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Adam Menuge



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# Church of St Mary the Virgin, Ashwell

## Statement of Significance

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St Mary's Church, Mill St, Ashwell, Baldock, Hertfordshire, SG7 5LY

County: Hertfordshire  
Local Planning Authority: North Hertfordshire District Council  
Church of England diocese: St Albans  
Civil & ecclesiastical parish: Ashwell  
National Grid Reference: TL 26710 39779 (from NHLE)

Church listed Grade I (UID 162177)  
Lychgate & adjoining churchyard wall listed Grade II (UID 162178)  
Both in Ashwell Conservation Area

### Introduction

This statement of significance has been prepared for Ashwell Parochial Church Council and the PCC's architect, Iain Frearson of Freeland Rees Roberts Architects, Cambridge. It sets out an evaluation of the significance of the church as a whole, but gives special attention to an examination of the north-west quadrant of the church, more particularly the north side of the west tower and the west end of the north nave aisle. The statement of significance is followed by the detailed report on which it is based, the result of a thorough investigation of the exterior and interior of the church and a review of primary and secondary documentary and visual sources. This longer report should be referred to by anyone wishing to examine the basis for the conclusions set out in the statement of significance. In the preparation of this report I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from the incumbent, Revd Robert Evens, from Mike Taffs and David Richard, Churchwardens, from Mike Eaton, Treasurer to the PCC, and from volunteers at the church; from Iain Frearson; from the staff of Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford; and from Maggie Goodall of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Photographs are by the author unless credited otherwise.

### Historical background

Ashwell has been a settlement since at least Saxon times, its name being interpreted as derived from the Anglo-Saxon for a *wylla*, or spring, surrounded by ash trees. The 'well' is the source of the River Rhee, one of the headwaters of the Cam, which emerges where the chalk strata to the south dip beneath alluvial deposits to the north. Wells were not only of practical benefit for nearby inhabitants, providing a pure and reliable water source; they were also frequently venerated in the pre-Christian era and subsequently, a practice which is sometimes continuous with the establishment of Christian religious sites.<sup>1</sup> Immediately south of the settlement the ancient route-way known here as Ashwell Street passes from roughly east to west, though its course westward has been erased. This may be a suggestion of early settlements following roughly the same alignment. Ashwell conforms to a well-known pattern of settlements established along the spring-line at the foot of porous geological strata, and the parish is relatively elongated from north to south, taking in elevated chalkland to the south, and low-lying land to the north (where it forms the northernmost tip of Hertfordshire), thus providing lands of varied characteristics and productive capacities. The lands were farmed principally in open fields prior to enclosure pursuant to an Act of Parliament of 1862.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London: J. M. Dent, 1989), pp. 84-91.



Fig. 1. Extract from the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map, Hertfordshire sheet 4.9, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, revised 1897, published 1898, showing St Mary's Church (red) in relation to the surrounding settlement. The River Rhee rises at the Spring Head. The main spine of the settlement is formed by the High Street, running from upper right to lower left. Ashwell Street (marked 'Ashwell ...') runs parallel a little to the south-south-east, past the chalk pit bottom right. The likely medieval market place is shaded pink. (Cambridge University Library)

The Manor of Ashwell belonged to the Crown in the late Saxon period and was granted to the Abbots of Westminster by Edward the Confessor in 1066.<sup>2</sup> Ashwell's borough status, which was recorded in Domesday Book (1086), may have originated about the same time, together with a market, first recorded in 1211.<sup>3</sup> Modern visitors probably judge Ashwell to be a large village, but it would have been considered a town for much of its history; indeed during the

<sup>2</sup> 'Parishes: Ashwell', in *A History of the County of Hertford: Volume 3*, ed. William Page (London, 1912), pp. 199-209: British History Online <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol3/pp199-209>> [consulted 1 May 2016]. Henceforth VCH.

<sup>3</sup> *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*, ed. by Ann Williams & G. H. Martin (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 375. Just five Hertfordshire towns are accorded borough status, formally or by implication. St Albans, Hertford and Ashwell are described as *burhs*, while Berkhamstead and Stanstead Abbots counted burgesses among their inhabitants. Cheshunt, home to a number of merchants, seems also to have been functioning as a market centre, and like other substantial settlements, such as Hemel, Hitchin and Ware, may also have exercised a 'manorial' market function without borough status. See Tom Williamson, 'Urban origins: location, topography and the documentary record', in *A County of Small Towns: The development of Hertfordshire's urban landscape to 1800*, ed. by Terry Slater and Nigel Goose (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2008), p. 30, and Mark Bailey, 'The economy of towns and markets', *ibid.*, p. 46. In the same work David Short argues on morphological grounds for the Saxon origin of Ashwell's market ('Ashwell: an example of Anglo-Saxon town planning', *ibid.*, pp. 159-72).

Middle Ages it was one of Hertfordshire's leading towns. The wealth and status of the town, coupled with the interest in the parish of successive Abbots of Westminster, are reflected in the scale and magnificence of its church.<sup>4</sup> Figures for Ashwell's population and wealth are unavailable for the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which many more Hertfordshire settlements achieved urban status, but using the 1524/5 Lay Subsidy returns Nigel Goose has estimated that at the end of the Middle Ages Ashwell ranked equal third among Hertfordshire towns, behind St Albans (roughly four times the size of its nearest rival) and Hitchin (which was only marginally larger than Ashwell), and equal with Bishops Stortford.<sup>5</sup> The town's fortunes fell steadily in the post-medieval period, a casualty of 'economic rationalisation' as other nearby towns, especially Baldock and Royston, asserted their own claims to notice, and it was omitted from lists of Hertfordshire market towns published by Smith (1588), Blome (1673) and Adams (1680-1700). By population Goose ranks it just 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> among the county's towns by 1663, and a lowly 20<sup>th</sup> (out of 22) in 1801 – a 'headlong fall'.<sup>6</sup> Although it was described unequivocally as a town by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century antiquaries Henry Chauncy and Thomas Cox in 1700 and 1720 respectively<sup>7</sup> the market appears to have ceased to operate before 1792;<sup>8</sup> it was active again during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though for how long is unclear.<sup>9</sup> Early trade directories provide subordinate references to Ashwell at best, another indication that its urban credentials were by now considered suspect.<sup>10</sup> By 1839 one of the leading trade directories described Ashwell as a mere 'village'.<sup>11</sup> Even at the high-point of its urban career Ashwell's economy, in keeping with those of many medieval towns, retained a substantial agricultural component.

### The church and churchyard

St Mary's Church occupies a large churchyard on the north side of the historic centre of Ashwell, where it stands at an altitude of about 160 feet above sea level. It lies immediately north of the probable market place of the medieval town, now largely infilled and obscured by later development; indeed the south-west corner of the churchyard itself appears to have been encroached upon by a series of properties fronting Hodwell. The west side of the churchyard is bounded by Mill St which links Ashwell with the former watermill on the River Rhee and with agricultural land to the north. In this direction the land falls sharply towards the river before rising again. To the east it descends more gently in the direction of the former rectory, which occupies a well-wooded setting. Westwards the ground is more or less level for some distance and of more open aspect. There is a narrow level area extending northwards, too, before the chalk strata rise to the surface and the land begins to climb steadily. The narrow terrace north of the church is large enough to accommodate the medieval market place. The site of the church may be associated with the lordship of the nearby manor of The Bury (or Ashwell Bury), one of a number of medieval manors in Ashwell. A church at Ashwell can be traced back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when it is mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon will. Historians and archaeologists

<sup>4</sup> Westminster retained its interest in Ashwell until the Reformation, when the Abbey was dissolved. Ashwell passed to the short-lived Bishopric of Westminster and thence, in 1550, to the Bishops of London. Since 1868 the manor has been vested in the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (VCH).

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Goose, 'Urban growth and economic development in early modern Hertfordshire', in Slater and Goose (2008), table 5.2.

<sup>6</sup> Goose, 'Urban Growth', pp. 113-18 and tables 5.5-7: quotation p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Goose, 'Urban Growth', pp. 104-5.

<sup>8</sup> VCH.

<sup>9</sup> Craven & Co.'s *Commercial Directory of Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire* (Nottingham: Craven & Co., 1854), notes: 'A small market is held every Thursday, for corn and cattle' (p. 372).

<sup>10</sup> Ashwell appears under Royston in Peter Barfoot & John Wilkes, *The Universal British Directory*, 5 vols (London: J. Wilkes, and Champante & Whitrow, 1793-98; facsimile reprint, Castle Rising: Michael Winton, 1993), vol. 4, p. 343. It is omitted altogether in *Holden's Annual Directory*, 3 vols (London: W. Holden, 1811; facsimile reprint, Norwich: Michael Winton, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> *Pigot & Co.'s Royal National and Commercial Directory of the Counties of Essex, Herts and Middlesex* (London & Manchester: J. Pigot & Co., 1839; facsimile reprint, Castle Rising: Michael Winton, 1994), p. 95. In this reference Ashwell is described in the entry for Baldock.

have speculated that this church may have had the status of a minster, serving as a focal point for a much more extensive Christian community than the present parish.<sup>12</sup>

The church is by some margin the largest and most prominent building in central Ashwell, its tower and spike visible for many miles around. It has a conventional orientation and consists of a west tower, a clerestoried nave with north and south aisles and north and south porches, the last with an upper storey, and a chancel. There was originally a further structure, probably a vestry or sacristy, against the north side of the easternmost chancel bay. A later, probably post-medieval, structure against the north side of the tower has also disappeared. Both had gone by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the first large-scale maps appear. The only modern alteration to the footprint of the church has been the construction of a semi-sunken boiler house in the re-entrant of the north aisle and the west bay of the chancel.

The church is built primarily of clunch, most of it ashlar, with which much of the exterior and the whole of the interior is faced. The clunch was doubtless got from nearby chalk quarries, several of which formerly operated on the rising ground to the south of Ashwell. Flint occurs principally on the lower stage of the tower, and in smaller areas elsewhere. A series of large blocks of limestone (probably Barnack) occur just above the plinth along much of the south elevation. Some other limestones occur in connection with repairs, as do quantities of brick and flint. The brick ranges in date from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these repairs reflect the vulnerability of clunch, which is particularly prone to weathering. A photograph dated 1903, and another published in 1911, show the masonry of the church in poor repair.<sup>13</sup> A major conservation scheme around 1930 made extensive use of cement render in conjunction with dummy mortar joints and joints implied by inserted pieces of tile. These repairs are deteriorating in some areas and continue to trap moisture, resulting in considerable damage to the underlying clunch and adversely affecting the graffiti in the tower.

The churchyard may be conceived as an irregular quadrilateral, in the south-west corner of which domestic plots have intruded. It contains numerous headstones and a few more elaborate monuments, notably the group of Sale family monuments close to the south side of the tower. There are entrances at both ends of the Mill St boundary, the south one being dignified with the lychgate, the north one with a kissing gate. Church Lane, a narrow street running north from the High St and continuing past the junction with Hodwell, leads to a south churchyard entrance, and there is another in the south-east corner opening off Hodwell. A private gate opens eastwards to the former Rectory.

### **Ecclesiastical administration**

From at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century until 1845 Ashwell formed a Vicarage of the Huntingdon Archdeaconry (Hitchin Division) in the extensive Diocese of Lincoln; thereafter it became part of Baldock Deanery within the Archdeaconry of St Albans, in Rochester Diocese. In 1867 it was made a Rectory and in 1878 the St Albans Archdeaconry was transferred to the new Diocese of St Albans. In recent years the parish has formed part of the United Benefice of St Mary's Ashwell, St Nicholas Hinxworth and St Vincent's Newnham.

### **Heritage designations**

The church was designated a Grade I listed building in 1968 (see Appendix 2). In addition the lychgate and adjoining churchyard wall fronting Mill St are listed Grade II in a combined designation. The whole of the churchyard should be regarded as forming the curtilage of the church, and therefore liable to be subject to the same planning controls. The church and churchyard lie also within the Ashwell Conservation Area. The designation of the conservation

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<sup>12</sup> Williamson (2008), p. 34. Idem, *The Origins of Hertfordshire* (Hatfield: Hertfordshire Publications, 2010), pp. 139-40.

<sup>13</sup> The 1903 photograph is in the Historic England Archive, Swindon (England's Places, 2076\_001). The other appears in Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (henceforth RCHME), *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Hertfordshire* (London: HMSO, 1911), facing p. 16.

area reflects the outstanding historical integrity and aesthetic appeal of the surrounding settlement and associated streets and spaces. The other buildings in the conservation area include many of timber-framed construction dating from the Middle Ages onwards, brick buildings of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century and later date,<sup>14</sup> and numbers of modest clay-bat buildings and boundary walls (some of the latter of chalk cob) mostly dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the timber-framed structures are plastered; all those built of clay-bat or cob are plastered or limewashed, except where their upkeep has been neglected. The earlier roofs are mainly thatched or of plain tiles whereas 19<sup>th</sup>-century and later roofs, including the nave and chancel of the church, are more often of slate. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century thatch was much more extensively used.

### Research materials

The materials available to study the history, evolution and current state of the church are numerous, and they have only been examined selectively for present purposes. Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford, holds parish records, including churchwardens' accounts,<sup>15</sup> and the former diocesan archive of St Albans. Their collection also includes routine local history sources for Ashwell, such as historic maps, the tithe and enclosure awards, and various original and engraved views. Of special importance for the preparation of this report has been the collection of pencil, pen-and-ink and watercolour sketches made by Charlotte Morice in the 1830s and 1840s, and lithographs based on a small number of them.<sup>16</sup> Successive repairs are documented in material relating to the career of the architect William Weir, held by the SPAB. Brief historical notes on the church are included in the standard county histories, including the 1912 *Victoria County History* coverage of Ashwell, and there are more or less detailed architectural descriptions of the church in the 1911 Hertfordshire inventory of the Royal Commission and the two editions of the 'Pevsner' *Buildings of England* volume for the county.<sup>17</sup> An interpretation of the structural evolution of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century church, informed by the RCHME's analysis, appeared in the same year, 1911.<sup>18</sup> A detailed inventory of the sculpture, monuments, other fixtures and fittings and portable property of the church was completed by NADFAS volunteers in 2009, and contains much detailed information.<sup>19</sup> The most recent Quinquennial Report dates from 2014.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The earliest wholly brick-built building in Ashwell is probably the Merchant Taylor's School, facing the church on the other side of Mill Street, which dates from 1681.

<sup>15</sup> The Churchwardens' Accounts at the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (henceforth HALS) cover the years 1562-72, 1576-84, 1588-1649, 1652-74, 1679-84, 1687-1741, 1743-7 and 1861-1915. Those for 1747 and before form DP/7/5/1 with the exception of 1669-74 and 1687-98, which are in DP/7/5/2A-B. The accounts covering 1562-1603 are transcribed in Anthony Palmer, ed., *Tudor Churchwardens' Accounts*, Hertfordshire Record Publications 1 (Hertford: Hertfordshire Record Society, 1985), pp. 3-52 (notes pp. 195-8). The accounts from 1861 are in DP/7/5/3.

<sup>16</sup> HALS, D/EX 916/1.

<sup>17</sup> RCHME (1911), pp. 38-40; Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), pp. 40-42; 2nd edn, rev. Bridget Cherry (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977). A new edition is in preparation.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Millard, 'The Church of St Mary, Ashwell, Herts.: Its Structural Development', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (11 November 1911), pp. 17-21.

<sup>19</sup> National Association of Decorative & Fine Art Societies (NADFAS), 'Parish of St Mary the Virgin, Ashwell: Record of Church Furnishings, vol. 1', unpublished bound report (2009) held by Ashwell Parochial Church Council. Descriptions are grouped under Memorials, Metalwork, Stonework, Woodwork, Textiles, Paintings, etc., Library, Windows and Miscellaneous. The report is unpaginated and references are therefore to the inventory number for the item concerned.

<sup>20</sup> Iain Frearson, 'Quinquennial Inspection Report: The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Ashwell, Hertfordshire, in the Diocese of St Albans' (2014).

## Chronology

Source in brackets or footnote; CW = Churchwardens' Accounts; FRRA= Freeland Rees Roberts Architects; SPAB = SPAB Archive)

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| c. 980                   | First mention of a church at Ashwell.                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 1066                     | Edward the Confessor grants Manor of Ashwell, with right of patronage, to Westminster Abbey.                                                                                                                       |
| c. 1340                  | Present church begun. <sup>21</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1348-9                   | Maximum intensity of Plague or Black Death.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 1361                     | Great Storm may inflict damage on half-built church                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1368                     | Chancel said to be completed.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 1381                     | Whole church said to be complete.                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> century | Church largely refenestrated; north and south porches added; timber rood screen and parclose screen to Lady Chapel installed.                                                                                      |
| 1539                     | Westminster Abbey dissolved. Manor of Ashwell passes to Westminster Diocese.                                                                                                                                       |
| 1550                     | Ownership of Manor of Ashwell passes to London Diocese (Old St Paul's).                                                                                                                                            |
| 1562                     | Surviving churchwardens' accounts commence.                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 1576-7                   | Schoolmaster's chamber glazed (CW).                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1627                     | Pulpit installed (inscription).                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1707                     | Repairs to south aisle roof (inscription on tie-beam).                                                                                                                                                             |
| 1746                     | Leadworks to north aisle (dated rainwater head).                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1764                     | Further repairs to south aisle roof (inscription on tie-beam).                                                                                                                                                     |
| 1819                     | Re-roofing of nave (inscribed date on king-post).                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 1820                     | R. B. Harraden view of church.                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 1826                     | James Harraden view of church published (copy in church).                                                                                                                                                          |
| 1830-50                  | Charlotte Morice sketches of church.                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 1831-40                  | John Buckler drawings of church.                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1845                     | Parish of Ashwell, hitherto part of Lincoln Diocese, transferred to Rochester Diocese.                                                                                                                             |
| 1850-55                  | Unspecified alterations to chancel.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 1858                     | South porch remodelled and vault inserted. Nave floor re-laid at about the same time.                                                                                                                              |
| 1867                     | Living, hitherto a Vicarage, made a Rectory.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1867-8                   | Interior re-ordered under the direction of James Shilcock, Architect. <sup>22</sup> Organ installed. Tower floor repaired (CW). William Wailes stained glass inserted in east window of Lady Chapel. <sup>23</sup> |
| 1868                     | Manor of Ashwell vested in Ecclesiastical Commissioners.                                                                                                                                                           |
| 1873                     | Restoration works by the builder George M. Bates, including the present chancel roof. <sup>24</sup>                                                                                                                |
| 1873-4                   | New gutter and leadwork to roof of Tower (CW).                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 1874-5                   | Lightning conductor fitted (CW).                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1878                     | Parish of Ashwell transferred to new St Albans Diocese.                                                                                                                                                            |
| 1881                     | Roof and/or drainage works (rainwater hopper on 1 <sup>st</sup> bay of south aisle). <sup>25</sup>                                                                                                                 |
| 1884-5                   | Repairs to windows. 'Colorg [Colouring] Church' (CW).                                                                                                                                                              |
| 1896                     | Present church clock installed by W. Potts of Leeds.                                                                                                                                                               |
| 1899                     | F. R. Leach and Sons repair stained glass window (CW). <sup>26</sup>                                                                                                                                               |

<sup>21</sup> RCHME (1910), p. 38; Pevsner (1953), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578.

<sup>23</sup> NADFAS (2009), no. 704, citing *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578.

<sup>24</sup> Incorporated Church Building Society records, Church of England Record Centre, ECE/11/4/35.

<sup>25</sup> The builder F. J. Bailey receives various payments in 1880-82 and was probably responsible for the work.

<sup>26</sup> Churchwardens' Accounts, HALS, DP/7/5/3. £13 10s 4d.

|         |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1902    | Milne & Hall, Architects, of London, working on church; builder F. J. Bailey of Ashwell; plumber J. T. Gibson (lead on spike).                                                                  |
| 1909    | William Weir's first report on the Church (SPAB).                                                                                                                                               |
| 1909-10 | Gilding and mending weather cock. Repairs to church spire (CW).                                                                                                                                 |
| 1910-11 | New stone mullion to window. 'Pd. [Paid] Rector', hence presumably in chancel (CW).                                                                                                             |
| 1911    | Architectural description published by RCHME.                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1912    | New lightning conductor (CW).                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1913    | Faculty for 'church warming' submitted; repairs to stoves figure frequently in previous years' Churchwardens' Accounts. F. J. Bailey 'repairing small tower'. 'H. Pack Heating of church' (CW). |
| 1913-14 | Repairing wall to churchyard. Repairing small tower (CW).                                                                                                                                       |
| 1920    | Drawings of lychgate published by Aymer Vallance.                                                                                                                                               |
| 1922    | Emergency repairs undertaken by A. R. Powys (SPAB).                                                                                                                                             |
| 1924-5  | William Weir active on north aisle and clerestorey (SPAB).                                                                                                                                      |
| c. 1925 | Boiler house built (present by 1927) (SPAB).                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1926    | Sir Charles Nicholson reported on the condition of the tower, but the SPAB urged the appointment of William Weir given his extended acquaintance with the church (SPAB)                         |
| 1928-30 | Tower repaired under the direction of William Weir, architect (SPAB)                                                                                                                            |
| 1930    | South porch roof re-leaded. <sup>27</sup>                                                                                                                                                       |
| 1937    | Fundraising appeal launched by Revd F. H. J. Newton (SPAB)                                                                                                                                      |
| 1938-9  | Further William Weir repairs (SPAB)                                                                                                                                                             |
| 1939    | Stone repairs to chancel by Ecclesiastical Commissioners under the direction of Caroe & Passmore, architects, attracts unfavourable notice                                                      |
| 1947-8  | Leading of spike renewed (dated lead on spike).                                                                                                                                                 |
| 1953    | Nikolaus Pevsner's first account of the church published (revised 1977).                                                                                                                        |
| 1963    | Specification for repairs by unknown architect. <sup>28</sup>                                                                                                                                   |
| 1968    | Church listed Grade I.                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 1975    | Fundraising appeal launched. <sup>29</sup>                                                                                                                                                      |
| 1983    | Specification for repairs prepared by Victor F. J. Farrar & Associates, Architects, focused on south side of nave and tower. <sup>30</sup>                                                      |
| 1991    | Leadworks to chancel roof (rainwater hopper).                                                                                                                                                   |
| 1999    | Faculty for rewiring and relighting. <sup>31</sup>                                                                                                                                              |
| 2005-7  | Masonry and internal plaster repairs directed by Caroe & Partners, Architects                                                                                                                   |
| 2009    | NADFAS inventory completed.                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2010    | Stone and leadwork repairs to the south side of the church directed by Iain Frearson of Freeland Rees Roberts Architects.                                                                       |
| 2012-13 | Repairs to the north side (Iain Frearson, FRRA).                                                                                                                                                |
| 2014    | Repairs to the chancel, including the east window (Iain Frearson, FRRA).                                                                                                                        |
| 2015    | Internal works in the chancel (Iain Frearson, FRRA).                                                                                                                                            |

<sup>27</sup> Mentioned in 'Extracts from a report on the church of St Mary the Virgin in Ashwell, Herts, prepared by the architects in September 1963 following the quinquennial inspection of that year', HALS, DP/7/6/8.

<sup>28</sup> HALS, DP/7/6/8.

<sup>29</sup> HALS, DP/7/6/11.

<sup>30</sup> HALS, DP/7/6/12.

<sup>31</sup> HALS, DS/F/1274/45.

# Significance

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Significance in the historic environment is generally understood as stemming from the range of heritage values which people attach to its various elements, including buildings and the sites they occupy, and the places of which they form part. A number of broadly similar approaches are in use. This statement reflects the heritage value types identified in English Heritage's *Conservation Principles*, namely evidential, historical, communal and aesthetic.<sup>32</sup>

Evidential value is concerned with the ability of physical fabric to hold information about a building's origins, evolution and use. This is especially valuable when buildings are poorly documented, but even when historical records are abundant it tends to provide an additional and complementary measure of understanding. St Mary's, Ashwell, like most parish churches, is relatively well documented but the surviving records are nevertheless patchy, especially for the medieval period. Much of the building's history is therefore deduced from an examination of the building fabric. Historical value concerns the ways in which the building or site illustrates past ways of life or embodies connections with historical events or people. Communal value reflects the ways in which the community of people who inhabit, use or otherwise experience the building (as part of their local environment, for example, or as a place to visit) feel about the contribution it makes to their lives. Finally aesthetic value captures the ways in which the form and appearance of the building provide sensory or intellectual stimulation or satisfaction.

## Statement of significance

St Mary's is a substantially complete example of a large 14<sup>th</sup>-century parish church consisting of a four-stage west tower, a nave with north and south aisles, and a chancel, formerly with an adjoining range, probably a vestry. Elements of the building's form reflect the influence of the pre-existing church on the site, some masonry from which has been incorporated in the present structure. Though much weathered and patched with consequential stone replacement and repairs, the building retains elements of a rich decorative scheme, particularly on the tower. The date of the 'Hertfordshire spike' rising from the top of the tower is unclear, but has generally been identified as later than the tower. The supporting structure within the tower, however, suggests that a precursor may have been intended from the outset. The church was augmented in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the addition of elaborate north and south porches, the latter with an upper chamber which was used (by the later 16<sup>th</sup> century at least) as a schoolroom, and by the provision of a timber-framed lychgate at what was probably the principal entrance to the churchyard on Mill Street. The nave and aisles were largely refenestrated in the same period and the surviving (re-set) parclose screen enclosing the Lady Chapel in the south aisle is of a similar date; likewise the slight remains of the rood screen.

Of particular importance among the medieval fabric of the church is the west tower, which remains largely the preserve of churchwardens, bell-ringers (or 'chimers', as they are described in the Churchwardens' Accounts) and bell-hangers rather than the wider congregation and public. The gallery in the thickness of the south wall is an unusual and attractive feature, resolving a structural conundrum facing the medieval builder. The tower retains a medieval bell-frame, which, while altered as most such features are, provides evidence of the engineering capability of medieval carpenters and retains a series of later elements, including the bells themselves, with casting dates of 1694, 1787, 1789, 1791, 1809 and 1817. All the bells are of local manufacture, five from Hertford and one from St Neots.

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<sup>32</sup> English Heritage, *Conservation Principles: policies and guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment* (London: English Heritage, 2008), pp. 27-32. A revised version of this document is currently in preparation by Historic England.

Above the belfry the timber-framed structure supporting the spike, and the spike itself, are further testament to the engineering skill of early carpenters.

The post-medieval history of the building is generally one of maintenance and repair prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the 1707 and 1764 repairs to the south aisle roof. More substantial alterations were mostly confined to the north elevation, where the presumed vestry was lost and a modest, probably timber structure against the north wall of the tower came and went before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the repairs to the church were relatively crude and introduced areas of brickwork to church elevations. The principal alteration on the south elevation concerned the south porch chamber, the south front of which was considerably altered during the 18<sup>th</sup> century; however, these changes were later reversed. In 1819 the nave roof was replaced in a manner that would have been entirely unacceptable after the 1840s, but which reflected the more prosaic and pragmatic approach of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century church administration.

More concerted and ideological attempts to restore the church were no doubt stimulated by the proliferation of antiquarian views produced in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as by the rapid progress of the Gothic Revival, much of the early impetus for which came from the Cambridge Camden Society (later the Ecclesiological Society). Under Revd H. W. Hodgson the chancel was renovated at some time between 1850 and 1855. Subsequently, in 1858, Hodgson's father paid for the re-Gothicisation of the south porch, in a campaign which also saw a vaulted ceiling inserted above the entry. The interior was re-ordered in 1868, under the direction of the Hitchin-based architect, James Shilcock, bench pews replacing the box pews depicted by Morice and Buckler. At about the same time a William Wailes stained glass window was inserted in the Lady Chapel and the nave floor was partially re-paved in York stone. The chancel roof was replaced in around 1873. But generally the church escaped the more aggressive interventions of church restorers, retaining its post-Reformation whitewashed interiors, though not its Royal Arms and Ten Commandments boards.

Twentieth-century repairs have been less than fully successful in maintaining the character of the church. Various methods have been employed, including the tile repairs advocated by William Weir, and a skilful but ultimately misguided policy of rendering the surface of damaged areas of stonework. These repairs, illustrative of different conservation philosophies, have some interest in their own right, but where their long-term effect is prejudicial to particularly significant elements of the church fabric (as in the case of the rendered repairs, which trap moisture and are thought to be causing deterioration of the most celebrated graffiti on the north wall of the tower) other considerations should prevail.

Among fixtures and fittings the parclose screen and what appears to be a remnant of the rood screen deserve special mention; also the 1627 pulpit which ushered in the era of the church as 'auditory chamber' for the reception of the spoken word, notably in sermons. Overall, it is for its architectural form rather than the quality and interest of its monuments, furniture and other fittings that the evidential value of St Mary's is chiefly apparent.

The historic value of the church relates to its associative or illustrative power. Writing in 1953, the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner described St Mary's as Hertfordshire's most ambitious parish church, but he was puzzled by its size.<sup>33</sup> Subsequent local history research suggests that its scale and elaboration express Ashwell's medieval urban status and ambitions; perhaps also the prestige of its medieval patron, Westminster Abbey. The most celebrated of the medieval graffiti, highlighted in Melvyn Bragg's popular account of the evolution of the English language, *The Adventure of English*,<sup>34</sup> almost uniquely link its creation to a turbulent period of human catastrophe in the period of the Black Death, and provide an

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<sup>33</sup> Pevsner (1953), p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 2003), p. 63.

imaginative insight into the human cost of the plague. It seems likely, moreover, that the catastrophic fall in population resulting from the Black Death interrupted work on the church and delayed its completion. An inscribed design representing (it is widely and plausibly believed) Old St Paul's Cathedral, which was badly damaged by fire in 1666 and subsequently demolished, may reflect the fact that from 1550 the Bishops of London were patrons of the living. St Mary's has not, unlike many parish churches, accumulated memorials to figures of great renown; instead the impression one receives is of a church made and nurtured by its community, a very great many of whom have left their mark in the form of inscriptions, both formal and informal (graffiti), some of the latter apparently performed with the materials of the individual's occupation, such as paint or redde. On a somewhat larger scale, Ashwell's 'Hertfordshire spike' links it with a substantial group of Hertfordshire churches which have a similar feature, conferring a sort of sub-regional identity on them, though Rowe and Williamson note that such 'spikes' have a wider distribution and are characteristic of South Cambridgeshire and North-West Essex as well as North and East Hertfordshire.<sup>35</sup>

The evidential and historic values enumerated above are not dissimilar from those informing the RCHME's summary of 1911, when they stated that 'The lofty W. tower of four stages, the untouched though rather dilapidated condition of the whole fabric, the Latin verses commemorating the Black Death, and the drawing of what is supposed to be old St Paul's, scratched on the wall of the tower, are features of peculiar interest'.<sup>36</sup> The same values are broadly reflected in the Grade I listing of the church and in the Grade II listing of the lychgate and churchyard wall, though it is worth noting that the list description for the church is devoid of reference to the interiors of the upper tower stages. Of the two structures bracketed together under a single listing, the lychgate has much greater significance, especially as derived from the evidential and aesthetic value sets, than the much altered churchyard wall. The wall, on the other hand, probably perpetuates a boundary dating from before the present church was built, perhaps pre-Conquest.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century St Mary's was attracting considerable notice from antiquarians and topographical artists, who found it an attractive subject for the study of medieval architecture, perhaps for the evocation of medieval piety and certainly for the application of a picturesque gaze. The figures include the local Charlotte Morice,<sup>37</sup> who produced a large and invaluable series of drawings, the Cambridge-based Harraden family of topographical artists (see Fig. 2), and John Buckler, a nationally significant architect-draughtsman and pioneer of the Gothic Revival. Their depictions identify a powerful appeal in the grandeur of the church and its massing of parts, in the survival of decorative and other detail (at this date much less impaired by weathering) and in its rural landscape setting. Some of the viewpoints adopted remain important today, while a minority appear to have been closed off by subsequent tree growth, especially to the north and north-east of the church. In most of these images it is the soaring quality of the church tower which dominates. This is occasionally visible in comparatively close views, where the contrast in scale between the church and the houses surrounding it is at once apparent, and more powerfully from the surrounding countryside, where the tower is typically seen 'floating' above a mass of foliage, almost divorced from the settlement which created it.

At close quarters the masonry of the church inevitably presents a somewhat patched appearance, and there remain substantial areas of decay to the facing stones. Some of the earlier repairs have not been well matched by stone type or colour, probably in an attempt to

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<sup>35</sup> Anne Rowe and Tom Williamson, *Hertfordshire: a landscape history* (Hatfield: Hertfordshire Publications, 2013), pp. 189-90.

<sup>36</sup> RCHME (1911), p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Morice (1810-91) was the daughter of Henry Morice (1777-1850), Vicar of Ashwell, and his wife Mary (1780-1852). She married Revd Thomas Ratcliffe, Rector of Fisherton Delamere in Wiltshire. Details from Henry Morice's memorial in the chancel.

reduce exposure to weathering. The use of renders and what appears to be a protective wash with an element of coloration have had an adverse impact on visual appreciation, as has the hybridisation of buttress forms (notably the treatment of the set-backs). The raw scar created by the inserted (and now blocked) doorway in the west wall of the north aisle is a rare jarring feature on the relatively inconspicuous north side of the tower, and the low, semi-sunken brick boiler house in the re-entrant of the chancel and north aisle, although well hidden from the principal views, has a small negative impact. As noted above, however, factors tending to impair aesthetic appreciation may reveal aspects of the development of the building, or of the building practices and conservation philosophies that have shaped it, and may in themselves therefore hold evidential or historic value.



Fig. 2. James Harraden view from the south-east, engraved by George Cooke and published in 1826.  
(Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

Inside the church, aesthetic value is felt most profoundly, perhaps, in the axial view through nave and chancel. This is a commonplace of church architecture, but at Ashwell the lightness of the plastered interior, illuminated by mostly plain glass, is striking, and is attractively diversified on sunlit days by the intricate shadows cast by window tracery and the parclose screen. This view is largely unimpaired by the low partitioning-off of the vestry, which also encloses the organ in the east end of the north aisle; similar enclosures have wisely been confined to the west ends of the aisles, where their impact is much reduced. Other important areas include the ground floor of the tower, which offers an unobstructed view of the remains of the vaulted ceiling and of the arcade serving the intramural gallery in the south wall.

The aesthetic appeal of Ashwell and its church have attracted admiring comment from many since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but few have captured it more eloquently than John Betjeman. In 1956 he summed it up thus:

The President of the Royal Academy [the architect Sir Albert Richardson] was asked on the wireless recently which he thought was the most beautiful village in England. He said Ashwell, Herts., and had no doubts about it. I was staying in that unregarded county this week, that land of satellite towns, main roads and aerodromes, planted mercilessly among gentle hills, watercress beds, white wooden bridges and red brick Georgian houses. So I went to Ashwell which is near nowhere, unless it be Baldock, and on the road to nothing, thank God. Sir Albert was quite right. We first saw its gigantic dark grey fourteenth-century church tower, crowned with a tapering lead fleche, rising from huge elms on chalky foothills looking over open corn land to the levels of Hunts and Cambs. The main street to the village wound with varying vistas of colour-washed cottages, white and orange and pink, half-timbered and grey-green local nineteenth-century brick. And here and there were gaps of orchard between the houses and views through veil beyond veil of elm tree rows of further pastoral quiet. There were lanes lined by thatched walls leading to the wooden mill and puritan chapels and to a big house built by Lutyens. The village was not a bit self-conscious like Broadway, Worcs., and on one corner we saw the best cottage garden I have ever seen, without even a path except the cobbles that led to the cottage, and across its roses and poppies we saw an old umber-washed corner house and above it, dominating all, this magnificent church tower. And the church inside, white and spacious and East Anglian, with arcades like a cathedral, clear glass everywhere, uneven floors and splendid chancel, was worthy of this best of English villages.<sup>38</sup>

A formal evaluation of community views has not formed part of the present work. Nevertheless there is ample evidence that St Mary's is valued by many – probably most – members of the local community. It is central to the lively Anglican community of Ashwell and, since the amalgamation of several neighbouring parishes into one ministry, of the neighbouring villages as well. There are regular church services and a children's church group meets in the south porch chamber. A music festival centred on the church has run for more than fifty years. The centrality of the church to the life of Ashwell over many centuries is reflected most obviously by the operation of a school in the upper part of the south porch, in the many bequests of furniture and furnishings, but also in the doors to the south entrance, pitted by countless impressions left by the nailing or pinning of parish notices. Elsewhere in the church the names and initials of churchwardens, building craftsmen (especially carpenters and plumbers), bell-hangers and others, are especially revealing. They are liberally distributed around the church, with particular concentrations in the west end of the nave, in most accessible parts of the tower (especially the ringing chamber) and on several roof timbers. Graffiti identifiably of this kind survive at Ashwell from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and include the more formal cast lettering in lead employed by plumbers, examples of which are displayed on the ground floor of the tower. Tourist visits are numerous by the standards of a parish church; they are encouraged by the setting of the church within a village of considerable historic character and charm, by the manifest attraction of a large and handsome church, by the fame of the medieval graffiti, and by the presence of the small Ashwell Museum nearby.

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<sup>38</sup> John Betjeman, in his 'City and Suburban' column, *The Spectator*, 13 July 1956, p. 12.

# Architectural report

## The fourteenth-century church

*In the following description of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century church, openings have two-centred arched heads unless stated otherwise.*

St Mary's Church is principally of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, though extended and extensively refenestrated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. As originally built between about 1340 and about 1380<sup>39</sup> it consisted of a west tower of four stages topped by a timber spire or 'spike', a six-bay nave with north and south aisles, both with a chapel at the east end, a three-bay chancel, and a structure, now lost, against the north wall of the easternmost bay of the chancel. This lost element has been variously interpreted as a sacristy or vestry, and as a chantry chapel, but appears likely to have been the former.

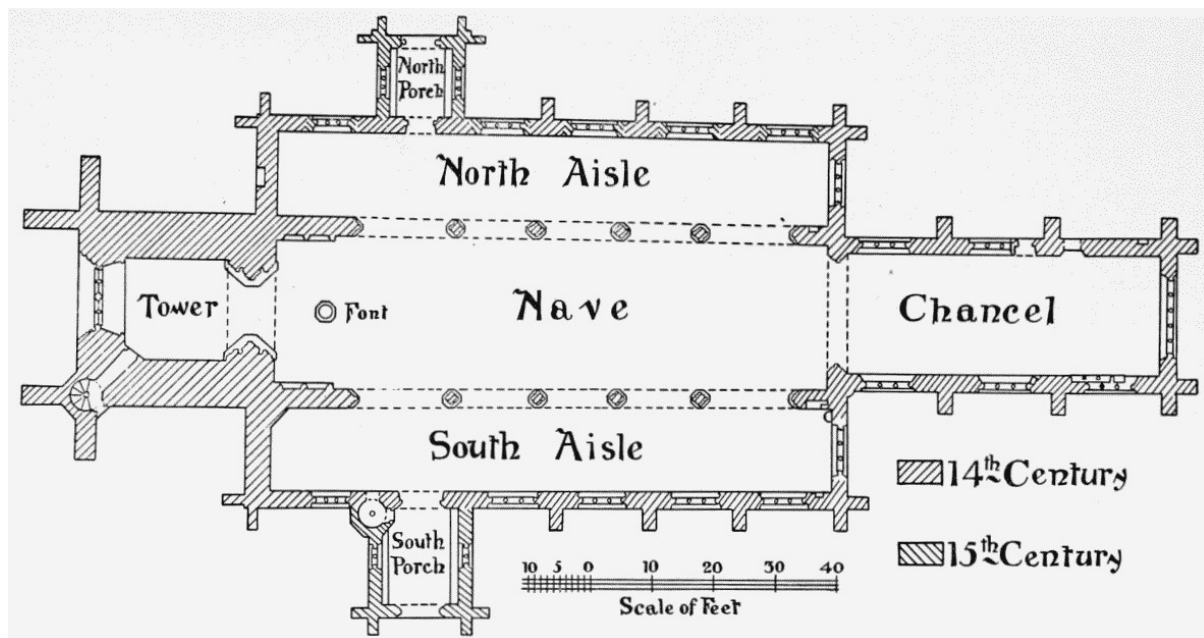


Fig. 3. Church plan from *Victoria County History*.

The church was constructed principally of clunch, probably sourced in local chalk strata<sup>40</sup> and dressed into ashlar blocks. Some clunch rubble was also used in the primary phase. The soft clunch has weathered badly, leading to the loss of much external decorative detail and a considerable quantity of stone replacement and repair. There are two main exceptions to the use of clunch. The first is the lowest stage of the tower, which is faced in flint (also derived from the chalk strata) but is of clunch internally. The second is the series of long limestone blocks laid just above plinth level in the chancel and aisles. These might appear to be re-used stones, or 'spolia', and if so probably from the previous church on the site.<sup>41</sup> Their consistent

<sup>39</sup> RCHME (1911), p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Chauncy, the historian of Hertfordshire, noted in 1700 that 'There is a Quarry of Stone in the Parish, which has been very useful for the building and repairing of the neighbouring churches' (Sir Henry Chauncy, *The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Bishops Stortford: J. M. Mullinger, 1826), vol. 1, p. 78.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Millard interpreted these as coffins or coffin slabs, i.e. the lids for stone coffins ('The Church of St Mary, Ashwell, Herts.: Its Structural Development', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (11 Nov. 1911), pp. 17-21 (p. 18)). No carving is apparent (it could be faced to the wall core) and few of the stones exhibit signs of the tapering form common among 14<sup>th</sup>-century and earlier slabs.

size and position at the base of the walls is consistent with a deliberately contrived stabilising course (a conclusion which does not, however, rule out re-use). A number of features unify the primary elements of the church structure. These include the pointed two-centred arched openings (rear-arches usually depressed two-centred), the form of window tracery where not subsequently replaced, and the use of stepped and shouldered buttresses, the former confined to the tower. There is in addition a decorative hierarchy of parts, with the prominent tower (and later the porches) receiving special emphasis, as well as the ritually pre-eminent east end of the chancel.

Two features in particular point to a commencement of building before 1350. The form of the west window in the lowest stage of the tower is late-Decorated, and inside the tower, on the north wall, one of the graffiti may have been written as early as 1350.<sup>42</sup> The RCHME account suggests that the earliest parts of the church are Bays 3 to 6 of the nave and the chancel arch, the latter a probable indication that the previous chancel was retained initially. To these may be added the first stage of the tower. They interpret the different treatment of the western end of the nave and the tower arch as an indication that they were completed *circa* 1360, followed, before 1380 on the evidence of fenestration and mouldings, by the upper stages of the tower, the clerestorey, aisles and chancel.<sup>43</sup> The hiatus in the nave, David Sherlock suggests, may have resulted from damage caused by the great storm of 1361.<sup>44</sup>

### The tower

The tower consists of four distinct stages topped by a timber spire of a type generally known as a 'Hertfordshire spike', and is roughly square on plan, with internal dimensions of approximately 5.03m north-south and 4.90m east-west. Angle buttresses project from the north-west and south-west corners and rise to the top of the third stage. The other two corners are buttressed by the return walls of the nave aisles, which clasp the tower, and by the blind masonry panels at the western ends of the nave arcades.

### Exterior

The four stages of the tower are apparent in Fig. 4. The first stage is the tallest. Unlike the others, it has external walls faced predominantly in flint rubble, with a small proportion of cobbles, rubble clunch and occasional pieces of Barnack limestone rubble. Clunch ashlar is employed for quoins and dressings, including the internal angles where the buttresses intersect with the walls, and to frame a series of put-log holes. These last are particularly apparent on the north and south elevations, but can also be distinguished on the west. The plinth, in what appears to be Barnack stone, consists of three elements: a lower chamfered course, a deep plain course in the position often embellished as a frieze in Perpendicular churches, and finally a moulded top course incorporating a deep ogee moulding. The plinth respects the angle buttresses and the south-west stair turret; it continues along the west return of the north aisle and its westernmost buttress, albeit in clunch on a base of flint rather than in limestone, but does not return into the south aisle. Overlying it, for the most part, is an irregular course of limestone blocks which extend into the buttresses where these have not been renewed. The north and south elevations of the first stage are blind but on the west there is large a window. This has four lights divided by a king-mullion and two mullions, and a hood-mould. The mullions and tracery have been much repaired, and part of one mullion is currently faced in timber. A weathering course marks the external division between the first and second stages, but this does not correspond with the internal floor level, the ringing chamber having a floor set substantially higher than this.

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<sup>42</sup> Sherlock (1978), 5. Another dates from 1361 (*ibid.*, pp. 5-6).

<sup>43</sup> The RCHME counts only the arcade bays, and therefore treats these two bays (one arcade bay plus one blind or buttress bay) as one (RCHME (1911), pp. 38-9).

<sup>44</sup> Sherlock (1979), pp. 5-6. A graffiti referring to the storm is on the north internal wall of the tower, beneath the 'plague' inscription.

The second stage is built uniformly in squared clunch and is let by a tall, slender cinquefoil-cusped lancet in each wall. These windows have hood-moulds and relieving arches, but the former have largely weathered away except on the east elevation, where there is a renewed example. The stage rises to a decorative frieze and another weathering course. The frieze is a deep band of lozenges and saltires filled with quatrefoil and trefoil cusping, now much decayed and only legible in small areas. The best preserved sections are on the east elevation. On the south and west elevations, facing the prevailing winds, it is now virtually indistinguishable. Nineteenth-century views show the decoration considerably more legible on all faces. The weathering course directly above is expressed in the form of crenellation, now largely made up of cement repairs.

The third stage, corresponding to the belfry, is built mostly in chequer-pattern masonry, with blocks of clunch alternation with squares of flints, though above the springing level of the large, paired belfry windows the masonry is uniformly of clunch. The chequer-work is also characteristic of areas, such as the buttresses, which have been extensively re-worked, and it is likely that the stage was originally more uniformly of clunch. The windows have linked hood-moulds; their upper parts are louvred, with cinquefoil-cusped lights surmounted by a quatrefoil and sunk spandrels; the lower parts, beneath a moulded transom, consist of blind trefoil-cusped lancets. At the top of the belfry stage there is a final weathering course.

The fourth stage is built in clunch rubble, with a two-light window in each face, and is topped by a coved cornice which has weathered badly and has largely been replaced. The windows, also renewed, each consist of two cinquefoil-cusped lights with a quatrefoil in the tympanum, and have a hood-mould. Clock-faces are placed on the east and west elevations, directly above the belfry windows. Above the fourth stage rises a parapet. This has been largely rebuilt, much of it in red brick. Substantially the same form, with upstanding merlons at each corner but no intervening crenellations, appears in several of Charlotte Morice's views and in the photograph published by RCHME in 1911,<sup>45</sup> though much of the fabric has probably been



Fig. 4. The west elevation of the tower

<sup>45</sup> RCHME (1911), facing p. 16.

renewed since that date. However, one of Morice's views, showing the church from the south-east, shows two intermediate merlons on the east elevation only, hinting at a more elaborate original form. John Buckler's 1837 view shows blind lancet panels – possibly flushwork – in the corner merlons and extending irregularly a little to each side, as though an originally continuous scheme survived only in part.<sup>46</sup> James Harraden's view from the south-east, published in 1826, gives support to this interpretation so far as the east elevation is concerned.<sup>47</sup>



Fig. 5 (left). The tower as depicted by John Buckler in 1837. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies; slightly cropped)



Fig. 6 (right). The spike, from the west.

The angle buttresses to the north-west and south-west corners of the tower appear to have had stepped set-backs at each stage, and an additional set-back within the first stage. The exceptions were the shoulders where the more elongated south-east and north-east buttresses are trimmed back to the same projection as the others for their upper two stages. This is the arrangement shown by John Buckler (Fig. 5). The 1911 photograph shows the south-west buttresses partly reconfigured with shouldered set-backs. Subsequent 20<sup>th</sup>-century work has added further shoulders and, where the stepped form has been maintained, new gabled copings have been employed. On the first stage, where the wall masonry is chiefly flint, clunch predominates in the buttresses.

The 'Hertfordshire spike' set on top of the tower is a lead-covered timber structure. Most of the lead is modern, and the striking pattern of rolled joints laid to a fall is recent, and does not appear in views from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, a similar pattern of more closely set

<sup>46</sup> John Buckler, 'South West View of Ashwell Church', sepia ink and wash drawing, signed 'J Buckler 1837' bottom left, included in extra-illustrated copy of Clutterbuck's *History* (HALS, DZ/119/10/488C).

<sup>47</sup> James Harraden, 'Ashwell Church', 'Drawn by J. Harraden', 'Engraved by George Cooke' and presented to John Morice Esq. of Upper Gower St (London: Nichols & Son, 1826), included in extra-illustrated copy of Clutterbuck's *History* (HALS, DZ/119/10/488A).

diagonal lines can be made out on R. B. Harraden's 1826 view. The spike has an upright octagonal base topped by a slender octagonal spire. Of particular interest is the decorative treatment crowning the base section, which takes the form of lead-covered timber. There is a frieze, each face of which contains three quatrefoils, and a moulded cornice topped by crenellations. At the junctions between the faces tall finials rise to tiny gabled copings. From the backs of the finials, which are the continuation of posts rising from the tower roof and forming the perimeter of the octagonal base, flying buttresses arch across to the (concealed) inclined timbers forming the tapering spire. These details suggest a medieval date, conceivably as early as the late 14<sup>th</sup> century but more probably 15<sup>th</sup>- or early 16<sup>th</sup>-century.

## Interior

### *First stage*

The interior of the first stage of the tower is lit by a large west window and by borrowed light from the nave via the tower arch; the only other windows in the first stage are small lancets lighting the stair which rises in the south-west angle. The west window is offset north of centre in order to accommodate the tower stair in the south-west corner. The four lights are divided by cavetto-moulded mullions. Inside, shafts with polygonal moulded bases and round moulded capitals are placed at the junction of the wall and splays, and there is a hood-mould to the rear arch, the latter having a reverse-ogee moulding. Opposite the window is the large tower arch opening on to the nave. The responds have a complex moulding, arranged in three elements, and consisting of chamfers, rebates, cavettos, waves and reverse ogees. The handling of the capital mouldings is uncertain, and the arch has a different arrangement of reverse ogee, rebate and wave mouldings.



Fig 7 (left). Remains of the vault, with the gallery arcade above, viewed from the north.

Fig. 8 (right). The chamfered wall-rib on the west wall, showing the return of the central ridge rib. Similar evidence survives on the east wall above the tower arch.

Internally the first stage originally had a vaulted ceiling which would have formed the floor of the ringing chamber in the second stage (Fig. 7). The vault was later removed but the corbelled springers for the chamfered vault ribs survive in the four corners of the tower and midway along the north and south walls. The corbels are carved in the form of human and grotesque heads. The returns for a central ridge rib can be made out on the east and west walls (Fig. 8). The evidence thus points to a sexpartite vault extending in two bays from east to west.

### *The stair and gallery*

The lowest stage of the tower stair is entered from inside the tower through a narrow doorway in a wall canted across the south-west corner. The doorway is deeply chamfered with broach stops. (An external doorway has been roughly inserted at a later date, cutting the external plinth, probably in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it occupies the re-entrant of the south buttress and the

south tower wall.) The stair is of stone newel form, rising clockwise on plan, and lit at intervals by small lancets with trefoil-cusped heads. The masonry lining the stair is in particularly fine large blocks of clunch. The stone winders have chamfered lower edges. Three narrow lancets light the stair at intervals, and to the right of the highest of these there is a well-executed scribed daisy-wheel design. The stair rises to just above the level of the former vault, where it is crowned by a remarkable vault (Fig. 9) consisting of twelve chamfered ribs supported at their intersection by a column rising from a moulded base set on top of the newel. At this level the stair opens on to an intramural gallery (Fig. 10) running the length of the south wall of the tower, lit by borrowed light from a five-light arcade opening into the tower. The openings are chamfered with broach stops; some have been partially infilled with stone, while the remainder have been closed off with timber boards. Where they face into the tower they are linked by a continuous chamfered sill. Arches spanning the gallery spring from the mullions and jambs framing the openings of the arcade, and between each pair of these (five in all) there is a small triangular vault bearing the weight of the wall core above. Traffic through the gallery has worn a deep trench in the soft clunch of the floor.

The reason why the stair rises initially in the south-west angle is so as not to impair the strength and integrity of the masonry forming the responds to the tall arch linking tower and nave. A stair in this position, however, cannot provide access for maintenance purposes to the nave roof. Once the height of the arch is cleared, therefore, the gallery serves to transfer movement to the south-east angle, where another stair ascends to the top of the tower. This stair also descends by a few steps to an external doorway, chamfered externally, which provides access to the south parapet gutter of the nave.



Fig. 9 (left). The vault at the top of the south-west stair.

Fig. 10 (right). The gallery viewed from the west.

The manner of lighting the gallery raises an interesting question about the vault below it. The tower vault is original to the first stage of the tower but appears to have been removed when the second stage was added, perhaps after only a short interval (the gallery openings have details similar to those of the ground-floor stair doorway). The arcade seems designed to supply the gallery with borrowed light from the tower interior; a processional function, making movement through the gallery visible from below, seems to be ruled out by the great elevation of the openings, which would render any observation through them too oblique to be

worthwhile. In either case the vault would have nullified the aim. Therefore it would appear that the vault was either dismantled as construction of the tower continued, or perhaps that it had already collapsed in the great storm of 1361.

The stair in the south-east angle differs slightly in form from that in the south-west angle. Where the latter has chamfered lower edges to the winders, the former generally has a cavetto moulding. The south-east stair also incorporates a recessed moulded stone handrail, a refinement not found on the lower stair. These differences would seem to imply an interval of time between the construction of the two stairs, and perhaps the arrival of new masons, and suggest that there was a pause after the first stage of the tower was completed.

The first level to be accessible from the south-east stair is the ringing chamber, which roughly corresponds to the external second stage of the tower. The floor structure, visible from ground level, consists of two east-west beams and heavy joists laid flat in the medieval manner. The beams and many of the joists have been renewed, but some of the joists appear to be original. A large trimmed hatch in the centre is for raising or lowering bells and other bulky items. That this floor level is original, in spite of much alteration, is indicated by the presence of a chamfered two-centred arched doorway opening off the stair at this height, and by the relative height of the windows lighting the second stage of the tower. The doorway retains what appears to be an original 14<sup>th</sup>-century door consisting of three planks and ten nailed ledges. Two of the boards have a tapered edge which is let into a groove in the adjacent board to prevent gaps opening up between them, and the wrought-iron, pintle-hung hinge straps are neatly let into the boards.

#### *Ringling chamber (second stage)*



Fig. 11 (left). The doorway from the south-east stair to the ringing chamber, showing the 14<sup>th</sup>-century door.

Fig. 12 (right). The ringing chamber interior, showing the south-facing lancet window, floor trap, clock cupboard top right, and re-set bench seat from the nave.

The ringing chamber, which now also houses the clock cupboard containing the clock mechanism, is lit by a tall, slender lancet in each wall. These have tiny cinquefoil-cusped heads and open on to wide splays in the thick tower walls. The rear-arches are of depressed

two-centred form, and are moulded (reverse-ogee), unlike the jambs; above each rear-arch there is a rubble relieving arch. The walls are generally in clunch rubble, coursed beneath the level of the window sills, but more irregular above; the window quoins and the corners of the room are of ashlar in large blocks for strength. This includes the canted south-east corner incorporating the doorway to the stair.

The ceiling of the ringing chamber is a post-medieval insertion (though it incorporates some re-used, probably medieval, timbers), and creates a floor level not originally envisaged in the construction of the tower. There is no doorway from the stair at this level, and access is accordingly by ladder only. A series of smallish square sockets in the upper walls suggest some form of earlier floor structure or staging, but this too does not appear to have been original. The original ceiling of the ringing chamber survives higher up, where it forms the floor of the belfry (see below).

The stair continues past the ringing chamber doorway and is lit by another lancet before reaching a doorway, now blocked, with a chamfered four-centred arched head. Arches of this form are rare before the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, but this one must correspond to the pointed two-centred rear arch visible inside the belfry (Fig. 13), and it appears to be an original feature, one moreover which conflicts with the present structure of the bell-frame, part of which is lodged in the blocking. Climbing the stair beyond the blocked belfry doorway there is one further lancet before the top of the tower is reached. The stair column is bridged by a depressed two-centred stone arch. A hatch gives access to the flat tower roof.

#### *Belfry (third stage)*



Fig. 13 (left). Interior of belfry, showing blocked doorway in south-east corner, indicated by pointed two-centred arch low down, its crown just above the further wheel.

Fig. 14 (above). Detail of bell-frame.

The belfry, forming the third stage of the tower, is a tall space marked externally by paired two-light windows in each wall, their upper parts louvred, with cinquefoil-cusped lights surmounted by a quatrefoil and sunk spandrels, the lower parts, beneath a moulded transom, having blind trefoil-cusped lancets. A later floor has been superimposed on the original belfry floor but the original can be seen from the inserted level below. Two heavy east-west foundation beams rest on timber corbels at the walls; sleeper beams of roughly half the scantling run parallel along the north and south walls, where they too are supported on timber corbels; short north-south binding joists are tenoned into the beams at each end, two of them forming a central trap; the joists, laid flat, are tenoned into the binders and extend east-west

parallel to the beams. A couple of very wide boards survive from what appears to be the original floor surface, beneath the later floor.

A full analysis of the bell-frame (Fig. 14) is beyond the scope of this report. The bell-frame is of medieval appearance but, as noted, it conflicts with the blocked original entrance to the belfry, and must therefore be a secondary feature. The frame appears to be of a 'long-headed' type, an indication of a late-medieval (or later) date; the fact that it incorporates duplicate and scissor braces rules out a post-medieval date, and it is therefore likely that the frame dates from a 15<sup>th</sup>-century re-ordering of the bells.<sup>48</sup> The present arrangement forms six bell-pits, but this is clearly not the original arrangement. A previous report concluded that the frame originally housed four bells around a tenor pit, and that it was rearranged for six bells in 1694 (the date of the earliest surviving bell). The bell founders and dates are recorded as follows (clockwise from the north-east bell-pit):<sup>49</sup>

1. A Hart, W Lilly, CW, J Briant, Hertford, fecit 1791
2. Charles [...] N Newman [...] made mee 1694
3. John Briant, Hertford, fecit 1817
4. T Hart, R Christy, CW, J Briant, Hertford, fecit 1787
5. Robt Taylor, St Neots, fecit 1809, Thomas Kirbyshire church warden
6. Wm Lees & Jno Ball church wardens. John Briant, Hartford, fecit 1789.

#### *Fourth stage and 'spike'*

Above the belfry, the fourth stage of the tower is accessible only by ladder from the belfry. The floor is modern. The interior is lit by a two-light window in each wall. The principal feature of this stage is the timber frame designed to help support the spike. Large renewed stone corbels in the north-west, north-west and south-west corners, and one on each side of the canted wall in the south-east corner, support flying sill-plates, from which posts rise the full height of the stage to a wall-plate. From low down the posts, long, heavy scissor braces rise, crossing at a halving joint in front of the upper part of the windows, and from the backs of



Fig. 15. Wall-posts and scissor-braces with struts rising from the latter just below the halving joint.

these braces subsidiary posts rise, into the sides of which the upper ends of the scissor-braces are tenoned (Fig. 15). Long braces spring from these subsidiary posts (which act in the manner of wall-posts in an arch-braced roof, and have jowled heads to create a stronger joint with the beams resting on them) at an angle so as to intersect with the star-shaped arrangement of beams at the base of the spike, providing some mid-span support for the very heavy load imposed on the beams (Fig. 16). This timber-framed structure, with its square-cut sections, use of scissor-braces and, in the corners of the structure, unjowled posts, would seem not inconsistent with a later 14<sup>th</sup>-century date.

<sup>48</sup> Chris Pickford, *Bellframes: A practical guide to inspection and recording* (Bedford: the author, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> NADFAS (2009), no. 132, incorporating a report by Robert Sheldrick and Robin Mills, and citing Geoffrey Dodds, *The Church Bells of Hertfordshire* (Hertfordshire County Association of Change Ringers, 1992).

The base of the spike, thus supported, consists of one heavy, square-section beam spanning roughly north-west to south-east, and another at right angles to it, their rotation in relation to the walls of the tower doubtless reflecting a desire not to impose the loads at the beam-ends directly over the windows in the fourth stage (Fig. 17). Four slighter half-beams converge on the junction of the two heavier ones, bisecting the angles between them to give a figure resembling an eight-pointed star on plan. A central post rises from the centre, and lesser posts rising from each beam define the inclination of the spire. The lowest portion of the spike has vertical sides, however, and these are formed by a further set of posts rising from nearer the perimeter of the tower. Long shores rise from the ends of the beams, past the outer and inner (inclined) posts to meet the central post, and higher up there are braces rising from the inclined posts to the central post.

The supporting structure in the tower is clearly designed to support either the present spike or one of similar structural form. The external detailing of the spike, noted above, makes it plausible that it dates from no later than the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### The nave and aisles

*Note: in the description of the nave and aisles, bays are numbered 1 to 6 starting at the west end. The north and south entrances occupy Bay 2.*

The nave and aisles appear to be broadly co-eval, dating from the mid- to late 14<sup>th</sup> century. They are not, however, uniform in their materials and construction, though they share details such as shouldered buttresses (angle-buttresses at the corners) and a cavetto-moulded cornice at the base of the parapets. The bay divisions are marked externally by buttresses and except in the entrance bays to north and south, each bay has a three-light window.

### Exterior

The south aisle, as noted above, does not continue the moulded plinth of the tower. Its blind west return is built of unusually massive clunch blocks on a simple chamfered plinth, also in clunch. Directly above the plinth, on the south elevation, a series of long blocks of what appear to be Barnack limestone occur. Otherwise, the south elevation displays a good deal of flint as well as clunch. Bay 1 has been largely re-faced in small square clunch blocks and a smaller area of red brick. Bays 1 and 4 to 6 have been refenestrated (see Fifteenth-century alterations,



Fig. 16 (above). Braces rising from struts on the backs of the scissor-braces are angled in to meet the undersides of the beams forming the base of the spike.



Fig. 17 (right). The base of the spike, seen from the fourth stage below. The principal beams form a cross, and lesser beams bisect the angles between them. Braces originally rose from the frame below to all eight beams.

below). Bay 3 retains an original later 14<sup>th</sup>-century three-light window with a two-centred arched head. The lights are cinquefoil-cusped at the springing level of the main arch, the outer ones beneath pointed two-centred arched heads and the central one beneath a four-centred head in the tympanum. Another original window occupies the east return, where it lights the Lady Chapel. This has more steeply pointed heads to the cinquefoil-cusped lights, and an array of super-mullions above. The renewed hood-mould has badly weathered head-stops. The corresponding window in the north aisle has a flamboyant tracery design with an ogee-headed central light. All the other windows lighting the north aisle are 15<sup>th</sup>-century replacements. The west return is blind.



Fig. 18. Bays 3 to 6 of the south aisle and 2 to 6 of the clerestorey

The clerestorey has what appear to be the original windows in Bays 1 and 2 of the south elevation and Bays 3 and 4 of the north, but the two pairs are of different form. Those to the north are the earlier in style, consisting of two steeply pointed cinquefoil-cusped lights beneath a cavetto-moulded two-centred head overall. Those to the south have a four-centred arch containing two lights also with four-centred, cinquefoil-cusped heads. They appear to be unmoulded, but the extent of subsequent repair makes their original treatment uncertain.

The nave and aisle roofs were largely concealed by the parapets, which drained through long lead spouts or 'spitters'. The Churchwardens' Accounts use the term 'spout' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, apparently in reference to these. They are a distinctive and, in heavy rain, striking feature of the building.

Entrances to the nave were provided for the laity in the conventional position one bay in from the west end. The principal entrance was from the south and is now enclosed by the later porch (Fig. 19). It has a two-centred arch, a broad moulded surround and a hood mould with one returned end (the stair turret rules out a return on the other side). The rear arch is ovolo-

moulded and depressed two-centred. The double-leaf doors are probably the originals. They consist of a morticed and tenoned frame (bottom rail, hanging and closing stiles and arched top), within which vertical planks are secured to a square lattice frame assembled with bare-faced dovetail joints (Fig. 20). The boards are held between the thicker vertical stiles of the frame, plank-and-muntin fashion, and the stiles are therefore visible on both faces, while the thinner horizontal rails pass over the backs of the boards and are halved over the stiles. The boards have a slightly cambered profile to the exterior, and the stiles are chamfered where they are joined. Nails secure the boards and stiles to the horizontal timbers. The long, plain, wrought-iron, pintel-hung hinge straps (three per leaf; one truncated) appear to be the originals and resemble those on the ringing chamber door. The early timber-cased rim lock and wrought iron door furniture are also of interest.

### Interior of nave



Fig. 19 (left). The south entrance, with its 14<sup>th</sup>-century double doors.

Fig. 20 (right). The doors from inside the south aisle.

The nave and aisles are six bays in length, but the rhythm of the two does not quite agree, the window bays of the aisles being offset slightly east of the arcade bays (plus one blind bay at the west end) of the nave. This situation is further complicated by the placing of the clerestorey windows, which coincide with the piers rather than the arcade bays. The arcade piers (Fig. 21) are of three distinct types, all based on an underlying cruciform geometry with roll mouldings in the re-entrants, and these variations suggest a phased evolution. The west respond and first pier on each side have chamfered arms to the cross. The next two piers have clustered semi-circular shafts, and the fourth pier and east respond have clustered segments of larger circles. There is also a change in the mouldings applied to the arches of the arcade. Bays 3 to 6 share one moulding (wave, rebate, reverse ogee), while Bay 2 has another (ogee, step, cavetto, hollow, fillet, reverse ogee). These differences led the RCHME to date Bays 3 to 6 to *circa* 1340-50, but Bay 2 (the first bay is the blind-panelled bay adjoining

the tower) to *circa* 1380.<sup>50</sup> The arches of the arcade have hood-moulds with carved stops. At the west end Bay 1, the form of which is determined by the need to buttress the tall west tower, is treated as a blind pointed two-centred arched window, incorporating two cinquefoil-cusped lights with small trefoil—cusped lights between the super-mullions (Fig. 22).



Fig. 21 (left). The nave looking east towards the chancel.

Fig. 22 (right). Bay 1 (west end of the nave), north side: the blind window disguising the tower buttress.

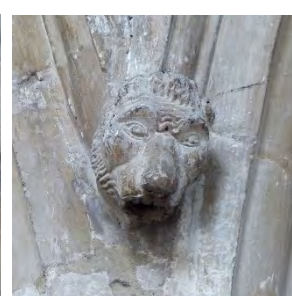
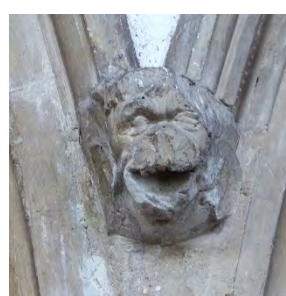


Fig. 23. Nave arcade label stops. Left pair from north side of nave; right pair from south side. From left to right: grotesque male face with scalloped cape; female head with star on forehead; monkey; lion.

The nave arcades have hood-moulds decorated with label stops in the form of human and animal heads (Fig. 23). Some have been defaced but the majority are either little-damaged or at least identifiable. The chancel arch at the east end follows the clustered semi-circular pier/respond type and the associated arch moulding. It is off-set north of the nave's central axis, no doubt reflecting the alignment of the previous chancel, as noted by Millard.<sup>51</sup> A hood-mould has been dressed back on the nave side (perhaps when the Royal Arms were painted

<sup>50</sup> RCHME (1911), pp. 38-9.

<sup>51</sup> Millard, 'Structural Development', p. 21

here –see below), but on the chancel side there was no hood-mould. The nave roof was replaced in 1819 – see below. The original roof was probably of a similar or shallower pitch.

### South aisle interior

The south-facing windows east of the entrance have angle-shafts rising from a continuous sill with a weathered upper and a cavetto-moulded lower edge. The window in Bay 1 has a similar sill, and a cavetto-moulded four-centred rear arch, but columns and bases of a distinctive form, whereas those in Bays 3-6 form a group (the column apparently rising through the cap, but in fact forming part of a stilted rear arch). The entrance has an ovolo-moulded depressed two-centred arch. In the north-west corner of Bay 1 the wall is canted across the corner beneath a cavetto-moulded squinch-arch.

Bay 6, at the east end of the aisle, was a chapel. In the south wall there is a piscina with a two-centred, trefoil-cusped arch and hood-mould. The bowl of the piscina has been cut back flush with the wall. Above it there is a niche with the same moulding and an unusually cusped pointed-arched head, but no hood-mould; a later shelf supports a statue. To the left of the east window there is a mutilated bracket, moulded and apparently to support a figure statue.

The aisle has a seven-bay shallow mono-pitch roof (Fig. 24) which appears to be medieval in origin, though partially reconstructed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The half-trusses consist of a tie-beam off which, at the nave end, rises a short wall-post supporting a ridge-purlin (absent in Bay 6), while a side purlin rests directly on the tie-beam. Along the south wall lengths of cornice beam occupy the spaces between the trusses, except in Bays 1 to 3, where they are missing. The tie-beams and purlins are cavetto-moulded, probably indicating a medieval date. The common rafters are of flat to square-ish section and pegged directly over the ridge-purlin.



Fig. 24 Interior of south aisle, looking east towards the Lady Chapel (with later parclose screen).

### North aisle interior

The north aisle is broadly similar in form to the south aisle, with a comparable continuous sill to the windows, and hood-moulds with carved head stops to the nave arcade. Unlike in the nave and the south aisle, however, the stops have been defaced with just one exception. A chapel was provided at the east end. Here the piscina has a moulded cinquefoil-cusped two-centred arch and a hood-mould with returned ends. Again the bowl, which drains, appears to have been cut back. The seven-bay roof is also similar, with cavetto mouldings to principal timbers, but the extent of renewed timber is greater. A difference, however, is the inclusion of

tie-beams against the end walls. The first three tie-beams from the west, and the whole length of the side purlin, appear to be original. The floor of the north aisle is in smaller clunch slabs than elsewhere in the church, and very likely the earliest surviving paving.

### The chancel

The chancel consists of three roughly equal bays and follows the conventional pattern in being lower and narrower than the nave (Fig. 25). The buttresses between the bays, and the angle buttresses at the east end, have shouldered set-backs which are modern in their present form but appear, unlike those on the tower, to reflect the pattern existing at least by the time of Charlotte Morice's sketches. The chancel was provided with an external doorway on the north side of the central bay. The windows and their hood-moulds have been substantially renewed. They are of three cinquefoil-cusped lights, the mullions continuing with super-mullions to form an upper tier of cinquefoil-cusped lights with quatrefoils in the spandrels. The south window in the east bay has a substantially higher sill than the other two south-facing windows in order to accommodate the sedilia inside. James Harraden's 1826 view (Fig. 2), and John Buckler's from a similar viewpoint, show the other two south windows blind up to the level of a transom at the same height as the sill of the easternmost.<sup>52</sup> On the north side the easternmost window position is blind because of the structure originally attached to this bay. On the same side, the central window incorporates a stepped sill respecting the position of an original external entrance or priest's doorway (Fig. 30). The large east window, recently restored, is of five lights, with super-mullions giving an upper tier of four pairs of lights, all cinquefoil-cusped, and quatrefoils or mouchettes occupying the spandrels.



Fig. 25 (above). The chancel from the south-east, with the Lady Chapel window extreme left.

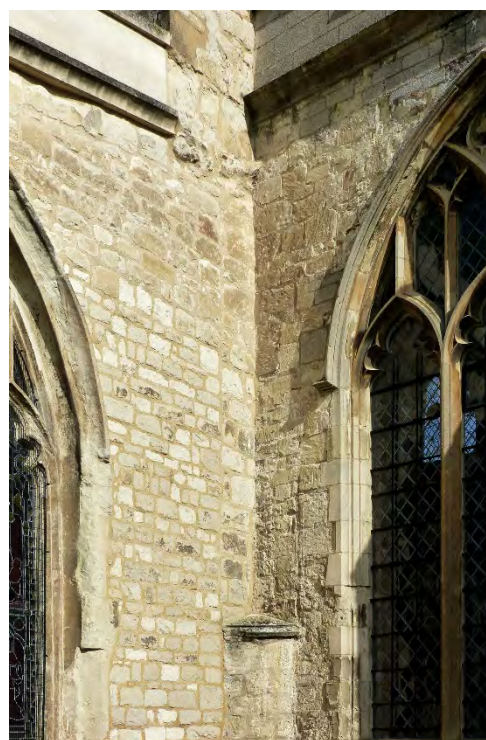


Fig. 26 (right). Detail of re-entrant of south aisle and chancel, showing surviving projection for rood loft stair, and scars higher on wall indicating its removal.

A coved cornice runs along the wall-head at the base of the parapets, and although largely renewed in limestone it retains the two gargoyles in what appears to be Barnack stone draining

<sup>52</sup> John Buckler, 'South East View of Ashwell Church', sepia ink and wash drawing, apparently unsigned and undated but clearly by Buckler, included in extra-illustrated copy of Clutterbuck's *History* (HALS, DZ/119/10/488B). The HALS catalogue describes it erroneously as signed J. Buckler and dated 1837, though there is every possibility that the date and authorship are indeed the same as those of the 'South West View' HALS, DZ/119/10/488C). A Charlotte Morice pencil sketch dated 1835 shows the blind lower part of the central and west chancel windows in sketchier fashion (HALS, DZ/119/10/488F).

each parapet gutter.<sup>53</sup> The parapet has mostly been rebuilt or refaced, and the crenellations are entirely modern. They appear less numerous on Charlotte Morice's sketch, perhaps owing to decay. The roof was described as being of lead in the 1790s but is now laid with Welsh slate.<sup>54</sup>

A rounded projection in the re-entrant of the chancel and the south aisle indicates the former position of a mural stair within the south respond of the chancel arch (Fig. 26). This has been blocked up and the upper part of the projection has been dismantled, leaving a vestigial return in the masonry of the chancel and a straight joint in the east return of the aisle. The date at which this alteration occurred is unclear; neither the surviving part nor the missing part of the projection appears in the only one of Charlotte Morice's to take a suitable viewpoint.



Fig. 27 (above). The chancel from the west.  
 Fig. 28 (top right). The sedilia and piscina.  
 Fig. 29 (bottom right). Twin doorways in the north wall of the chancel. On the left, the internal face of the priest's doorway. On the right, the doorway into the former vestry on the north side of the east chancel bay.

Inside the chancel the north window in the central bay has a small square-headed niche in each splay. That to the east splay has a simple moulded sill, while that to the west has a more elaborate moulded sill carved with a representation of a lion (?) and vegetation. There are two doorways in the north wall (Fig. 29). That to the west is a priest's doorway, entering from the churchyard, with its internal face (a cavetto-moulded four-centred rear arch) to the chancel. That to the east presents its front face (a moulded two-centred arch, formerly with a hood

<sup>53</sup> On the south side the gargoyles are carved to represent a lion (west) and a monkey (east); on the north side a [?] (west) and perhaps another lion (east).

<sup>54</sup> Peter Barfoot & John Wilkes, *The Universal British Directory*, 5 vols (London: J. Wilkes, and Champante & Whitrow, 1793-98; facsimile reprint, Castle Rising: Michael Winton, 1993), vol. 4, p. 343.

mould) to the chancel and originally gave access to the lost structure adjoining the chancel's east bay. It is now occupied by a small modern tabernacle mounted on a stone shaft.



Fig. 30. The north elevation of the chancel, showing the blind eastern bay incorporating a blocked doorway to the demolished vestry, and a niche for a holy water stoup. The priest's doorway occupies the central bay.

In the south wall of the chancel is a four-bay sedilia and piscina, a series of niches with cinquefoil-cusped and crocketed ogee arches with carved finials (Fig. 28). The bay divisions are expressed by slender uprights in the form of shouldered buttresses which rise clear of the springings of the arches. The three western bays, which are undifferentiated, form the sedilia, and incorporate stone seats for clerics officiating at the Mass, which would have been celebrated originally at an altar under the east window. The piscina, a shallow stone basin for rinsing the chalice after Mass, has the basin set higher than the seats of the sedilia, giving a stepped appearance. The basin incorporates a drain which issued below ground ensuring that consecrated water which had been sanctified by contact with the body and blood of Christ could not be abstracted for other purposes.

### **The lost sacristy or vestry**

There is clear evidence that when the chancel was built the east bay was adjoined to the north by what was probably a single-bay structure terminating roughly in line with the chancel's east end. There are three principal pieces of evidence for this: 1) the absence of a north chancel window in this bay; 2) noticeably inferior wall masonry in this bay, consisting of roughly coursed rubble (in contrast to the ashlar used elsewhere on the chancel), with some re-used stone, rising to about the second shouldering of the buttresses; 3) the presence of a piscina or stoup in what is now the external wall of the chancel; and 4) the presence of a doorway leading from the chancel into the lost structure. This doorway is identical in essentials to the priest's doorway entering the chancel from outside, and the two are placed side by side, with just a buttress intervening on the exterior. Each doorway has a pointed two-centred arch and

a moulding to the arch and jambs facing the direction of first approach, and a rear arch of depressed four-centred form with a cavetto moulding to the arch but not the jambs. The piscina has a moulded trefoil-cusped surround with foliate decoration to the spandrels, and a hood-mould with simple head-stops, one of them now badly weathered.

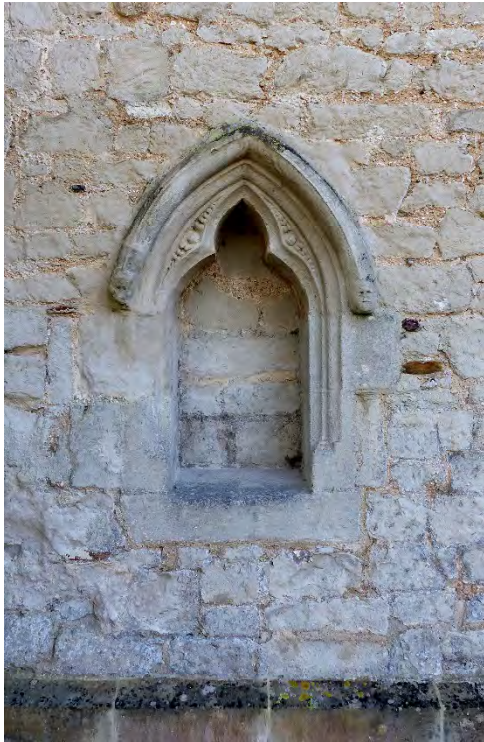


Fig. 31 (left). Probable piscina in the north chancel wall serving the former sacristy.

Fig. 32 (right). The priest's doorway (right) and the blocked doorway into the demolished sacristy (left).

Modern pipe-laying works uncovered what were interpreted as the footings of the north wall about 24 feet north of the chancel.<sup>55</sup> This is puzzling. If the remains were correctly identified it suggests a structure slightly wider than the chancel assuming it was orientated the same way; alternatively it might suggest a structure of two or more bays aligned north-south. Access from the chancel, the apparent presence of a piscina, and the proximity of the priest's doorway, are consistent with the structure serving as a sacristy for the storage of church plate and vestments.<sup>56</sup> The suggested piscine currently has no drain, and might therefore better be described as a recess for a holy water stoup. Its position, on the other hand, sets it apart from the doorway and places it conveniently for an altar at the east end. Possibly the sill, which appears to have a slightly inclined surface to shed water, has been renewed. Either way, water placed there was probably used to cleanse the body spiritually prior to entering the church or performing Mass.<sup>57</sup>

Other evidence for the form of the lost structure is lacking, and it must be presumed that the extent of subsequent weathering and stone replacement or repair has removed any evidence that may once have existed. It is likely that the west wall extended in line with the present buttress separating the vestry entrance from the priest's doorway, and that the east wall was similarly in line with the buttress projecting northwards from the east end of the chancel. Remote-sensing technology or excavation might reveal evidence for the extent of the structure, as might parch marks in a dry summer. No convincing evidence of a roof scar is apparent.

<sup>55</sup> Sketch plan in the possession of the PCC made by John Cope. Copy kindly supplied by Iain Frearson.

<sup>56</sup> RCHME (1911), p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Friar, *The Companion to Churches*, revised edn (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), pp. 241 and 346.

## Fifteenth-century alterations

During the 15th century the north and south porches were added and the existing parts of the church were mostly refenestrated with the exception of the tower. This may reasonably be taken as evidence that Ashwell continued to attract or generate considerable wealth.

### The south porch or parvis

Porches, particularly those with an upper floor (a type often referred to as a parvis or parvise), were a popular form of aggrandisement; nearby Hitchin has a particularly opulent example. The upper chambers were often used as schoolrooms, or as lodgings for a chantry priest. At Ashwell the use – from the later 16<sup>th</sup> century at least – is probably confirmed by a payment of 2s 0d in 1576-7 ‘for glassing the scolemaster chamber’.<sup>58</sup> In 1582-3 John Lace received 2s 4d ‘for flowringe [flooring?] of the scolehouse’, and John Reynard was paid 20d for making ‘thinges’ for it.<sup>59</sup> These payments could indicate the new fitting-out of a room previously used for other purposes, but the fact that they are spread over several years suggests that they represented repairs. Furthermore, in 1583-4 the Churchwardens’ Accounts refer to the ‘old’ schoolhouse.<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 33 (left). Charlotte Morice pencil sketch of the south porch from the south-west *circa* 1840, prior to the restoration of the 1850s. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

Fig. 34 (right). The south porch from the south-east, showing the reinstated Gothic south windows.

Ashwell's two-storey south porch was added in the early to mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps as part of the wider campaign of refenestration, and rises significantly higher than the eaves of the adjoining south aisle, forming an impressive sight on approach from the south – the approach most parishioners are likely to have followed. It is built in clunch ashlar, somewhat patched with brick, flint, replacement clunch and tile repairs, with an original octagonal stair turret at

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Palmer, ed., *Tudor Churchwardens' Accounts*, Hertfordshire Record Publications (Hertford: Hertfordshire Record Society, 1985), 15. An earlier payment of 8d in 1562-3 was for carrying lead and stones into the schoolhouse (*ibid.*, p. 3).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

the north-west corner where it meets the aisle wall, and angle buttresses to the south-west and south-east corners. The stair turret clips very closely the westernmost window of the south aisle, where the porch abuts at a straight joint. A cornice and parapet have been very largely renewed, but a small portion of original masonry survives on the east elevation. In the period since the south aisle was built its south wall appears to have moved out of vertical, and this probably accounts for a feature resembling a straight joint on the inside of the aisle, where new walling for the porch was raised plumb.

The gabled south elevation incorporates a moulded two-centred arched doorway with hood-mould and weathered head stops. The openings above are restored and evidence for the previous form of this area can be derived only from views by James Harraden, Charlotte Morice and John Buckler. They demonstrate that the chamber window had already been replaced once, and that no obvious details of the original opening remained. The niche in the gable, however, appears in the most detailed and reliable-looking of the views (those by Charlotte Morice) in much the same form as today. The odd feature of a south gable rising well clear of a much shallower-pitched roof is also clearly represented, notably on the Harraden view. The east and west return walls each incorporate a two-light ground-floor window. These have cinquefoil-cusped two-centred arched lights beneath an overall square head. External hood-moulds have been weathered or dressed back. Above, on both walls, there is a small, blocked, chamfered loop-light. The purpose of these is unclear, since they are set too high to light the ground floor and too low to light the chamber.



Fig. 35 (above). The south porch roof from the north-west, showing the stair turret. The brickwork and chimney probably date from the 1858 restoration.



Fig. 36 (right). South porch interior, showing stair turret.

The interior of the ground floor, which incorporates stone benches along the east and west walls and has a stone-flagged floor, is well-lit from three sides. The windows have moulded square heads internally. The original access to the upper level was via a doorway, now blocked, in the south wall of the aisle. This has a two-centred arched head and a four-centred rear arch, and opened on to a newel stair rising clockwise to the first floor, lit at intervals by two plain loop-lights. A square-headed doorway, canted across the north-west corner of the plan, gives on to the first-floor room but has no clearly datable characteristics.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Was an earlier doorway removed? John Rayment paid 2s 4d for the stone door of the old schoolhouse in 1583-4 (Churchwardens' Accounts, in Palmer (1985), p. 22).

The chamber retains elements of its original two-bay roof and was originally open to the roof. The north truss was originally of king- and queen-post form. The double-pegged king-post and the single-pegged west queen-post remain, and a peg-hole indicates the position of the former east queen-post. The south truss has been replaced but the original king-post remains *in situ* between the truss and the gable, the tenon at its base now floating free. The central truss also appears to have been replaced: its tie-beam is set lower than the other two (lower also than the wall-plate) and it was concealed by the former lath and plaster ceiling. This detail is consistent with, though by no means diagnostic of, a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century date, and may suggest that the chamber was underdrawn at this time. There is a single rank of side purlins and a square-set ridge purlin. The side purlins are crudely propped at the replaced trusses but the west purlin appears to be in its original relationship with the north truss. Many of the common rafters have been re-used.

### The north porch

The north porch is built in clunch ashlar, on a plinth of the same material (though largely rebuilt in red and blue brick) incorporating a lower chamfered course, an intermediate frieze course and a moulded top course incorporating reverse ogee mouldings. The clunch ashlar contrasts sharply with the clunch rubble and flint wall of the north aisle at the point where it abuts at straight joints. There are angle buttresses to the north-west and north-east corners, and a rebuilt cornice and parapet concealing the shallow-pitched roof. The north entrance has a richly moulded pointed two-centred arch springing from colonettes with moulded capitals, and set within a square-headed frame, also richly moulded, with pierced spandrels. The composition is completed by a hood-mould with small head stops, one defaced, one restored in cement.<sup>62</sup> The hood-mould is repeated internally, where the stops are better preserved. The jambs do not make an allowance for a door, but subsequently iron pintles were inserted in both jambs.



Fig. 37 (left). The north porch from the north-east.

Fig. 38 (above). Interior view of the 15th-century north porch, showing the 14th-century north entrance to the church, the east porch window, and the stone bench, one of two lining the east and west walls.

The interior is lit by elaborately moulded three-light east and west windows. The lights have cinquefoil-cusped heads beneath an overall four-centred arched head and hood-mould, the latter with defaced stops on the east window (renewed without stops on the west). Again, the

<sup>62</sup> Curiously, there is a later draw-bar socket across the *outside* face of the doorway.

hood-moulds and stops are repeated internally. There has been some patching of the internal walls in brick. Stone benches line the east and west sides. The floor is of brick.

The simple roof appears to be of oak. A square-set ridge-purlin spans from north to south, and is supported at each end by a short king-post rising from a chamfered tie-beam. The latter is placed against the aisle wall to the south, and on top of the porch wall to the north. There are no principal rafters, and the common rafters are laid flat. The tie-beams, king-posts and ridge-purlin all have cavetto mouldings. Despite its simplicity, there is every likelihood that the roof is original, with the exception of the softwood sarking boards overlying it.

### The refenestrated nave and aisles



Fig. 39. The nave and north aisle from the north-west

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century most of the windows of the aisles and the nave clerestorey were renewed in the Perpendicular style. On the aisles all the windows except that in Bay 3 of the south aisle were replaced with four-centred arched openings consisting of three cinquefoil-cusped lights, and six trefoil-cusped, pointed-arched transom lights. The transom lights were created by alternating three super-mullions with the two rising through the transom. The original arrangement can be seen in Bays 1, 3 and 4 of the north aisle; elsewhere the super-mullions have been removed and the damage to the remaining elements of the window made good, albeit at the cost of creating some rather mis-shapen transom lights. Three windows were left unaltered: Bay 3 of the south aisle, and the east windows of both aisles. This may have been because of stained glass schemes which were judged particularly important (or which were defended by particular donor families).

In the nave clerestorey all the windows except those in Bays 1 and 2 (on both sides) were renewed, probably in a single campaign. On the south elevation Bays 3 to 5, and on the north elevation Bays 4 and 5, were provided with square-headed, three-light windows with

cinquefoil-cusped lights and sunk spandrels. On both elevations Bay 6 has a two-light window with similar elements but the individual lights are slightly wider. There is some variation in the treatment of the rear-arches, with chamfered, cavetto-moulded and plain forms all present. These windows probably date from the later 15<sup>th</sup> century or even the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## Post-medieval alterations and repairs

By the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the town of Ashwell appears to have been in decline. In absolute terms this may not have been a dramatic reversal, but as other nearby towns asserted their newfound status Ashwell's stature was rapidly diminished. While across the nation there was a considerable falling off in church-building activity as an expression of piety, we may perhaps also see in the relatively sparse catalogue of post-medieval repairs a mirror of the town's dwindling vitality.

At some period before the earliest large-scale maps appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the original structure on the north side of the chancel was taken down. No disturbance is apparent in the surviving masonry at the points where the demolished structure is likely to have been attached, and it is therefore likely that demolition occurred at a relatively early date, perhaps shortly after the Reformation, and that subsequent weathering and stone replacement have removed evidence in the fabric.

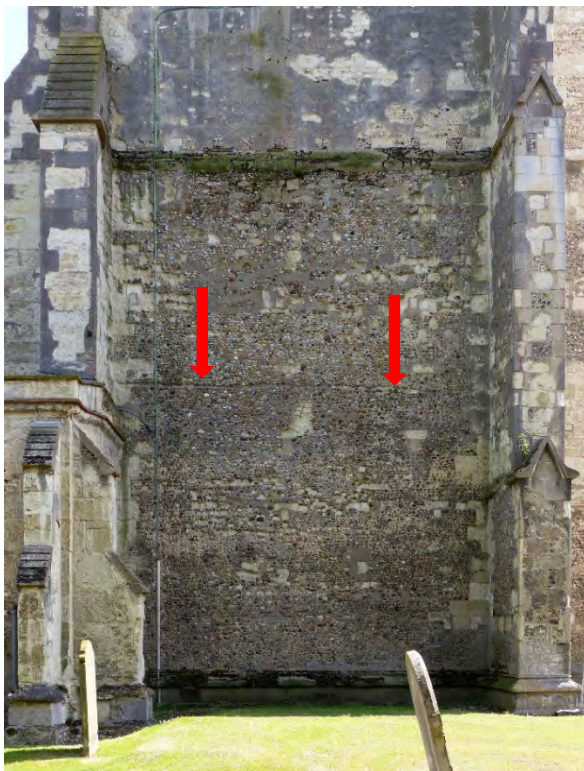


Fig. 40 (left). North elevation of the tower, first stage, showing the crease for a former roof flashing.

Fig. 41 (below). Section of the plinth at the base of the tower, showing three of the cut-outs for timber posts.



On the north side of the tower there is evidence for a former attached structure which, from its position, is likely to have had a pent roof. There are several types of evidence for this structure. The first consists of a row of four unevenly spaced notches in the moulded upper course of the tower plinth. These appear to be the seatings for upright timbers which either rested in them entirely or were perhaps notched into them but descended all the way to ground level. The timbers do not survive, and there is no clear evidence for fixings higher up the tower wall, or on the return of the north aisle or the corresponding buttress to the east, on each of which a roof scar might be anticipated. As with the structure on the north side of the chancel, it may be that subsequent weathering and stone replacement have removed evidence that may once have been visible. A clearly defined mortar-filled crease extending from buttress to buttress on the north wall of the tower, at a height just above the roof of the north aisle, seems to mark the top of the roof of the addition. Corresponding evidence for the fall of the roof, which should leave traces on the buttresses, is more elusive, though on the west buttress a diamond-shaped render patch just below the first set-back has the appearance of marking a purlin position. The final piece of evidence is a roughly arched doorway inserted in the return wall of the north aisle. The crudeness of its external face suggests that it provided access from the aisle into

the lost structure, and that it did not serve as an external entrance to the church.<sup>63</sup> Thus interpreted, the doorway, which is now blocked on the inner wall face, provides a minimum extent for the lost structure, the purpose of which is uncertain but was clearly of a subordinate nature.

Alterations to the south porch include the fitting of new gates in the outer doorway, probably in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the closing, before 1911, of the original access to the upper chamber, by blocking the doorway from the south aisle and inserting another in the north-west corner of the porch. The broad double-leaf doors, which leave the tympanum of the arch unobstructed, are flush-boarded to the exterior, and have four sunk panels incorporating a form of reeding to the interior. They are hung on long, plain, wrought-iron hinge straps and pintles inserted in the masonry, indicating that the porch was not originally doored. There are traces of what appears to be a stone-coloured paint on the timbers. Some new timbers have been scarfed in at the base.

### The south aisle roof



Fig. 42 (above). Tie-beam inscribed by T. Clarke, 1707. Fig. 43 (below). Tie-beam inscribed with 1764 date.



The south aisle roof was altered, probably in 1707, the date recorded (with the 7s reversed) next to a large inscription with the name 'T CLARKE' [sic] on the first tie-beam from the west.<sup>64</sup> A payment to Clarke is recorded in the Churchwardens' Accounts for that year, but it is unspecific, mentioning only 'Tho: Clarke his Bill', for which he was paid £2 8s 11d.<sup>65</sup> Roof repairs were evidently a recurrent need. On the soffit of the second tie-beam from the west appear the initials 'H + S + JS', very carefully cut with serifs, and darkened to contrast with the timber. On the west face of the same beam is the full-length inscription (mixing upper and lower-case letters):<sup>66</sup>

JULY · 27 · 1764 · T · SQUIER [Squier] · LAID · ME · HEAR · TO · LY · 100 · YEARS  
Other, undated repairs are apparent, for example, the fourth tie-beam from the west has a scarfed-in length at the north end, secured with large nails or spikes.

<sup>63</sup> The RCHME describes it as a 'barrow hole' (RCHME (1911), p. 39).

<sup>64</sup> The 'A' in Clarke takes the form of an upturned 'V'.

<sup>65</sup> Churchwardens Accounts, HALS, D/P 7 5/1.

<sup>66</sup> This corrects and completes the version recorded in NADFAS (2009), no. 378.

A rainwater head on the north aisle, with the painted date 1746, may commemorate similar repairs there.

### The south porch altered



Fig. 44 (left). Charlotte Morice watercolour of south porch, looking south, showing a flat plaster ceiling (HALS).



Fig. 45 (right). The interior of the south porch, from the south, showing the sexpartite vault inserted in 1858.

Two views by Charlotte Morice depict the south porch before a major restoration later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They demonstrate that, probably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the upper floor was refenestrated with an upper and a lower pair of what may have been sash windows, and were at any rate wide, domestic-looking multi-pane windows. This would have made the chamber very well lit, and probably relates to the use of this room as a school. Another view by John Buckler, dated 1837, appears to equivocate over the form of the windows, showing them as simple two-light mullioned openings. Buckler may be 'correcting' his subject in the interests of a more harmonious (or historically reconstructed) image. Morice's watercolour looking southwards through the south porch shows a flat plaster ceiling just clipping the crown of the entrance arch. This is low enough to fit two low storeys of chambers over the entry, and thus to account for the windows on two levels above. It also accounts for the need to alter the access from the stair in the north-west corner, and to adjust the size of the door in the process (see below).

The domestic-looking windows may be associated with internal changes to the schoolroom. The doorway opening off the stair is, in its present form, of uncertain date, and contains a re-used early to mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century two-panelled softwood door with sunk panels and cyma reversa panel mouldings; the door has been lengthened at the base and widened on both sides to fit the present opening. The chamber is heated by a fireplace canted across the south-west corner. This, too, is of uncertain date in its present form (the stone lintel is mutilated and the jambs incorporate some brick), but one of Charlotte Morice's views shows a utilitarian

(probably brick) chimney associated with it, and it is likely that the fireplace was inserted, or at least extensively modified, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A feature resembling a moulded corbel (perhaps a lamp or candle bracket) is set in the chimney breast above and to the right of the fireplace; it is roughly inscribed 'TB 1792' and 'TM', and may perhaps date the fireplace, an alteration to it or a wider phase in the chamber's evolution. The walls of the room are plastered, and at least some of the plaster appears to be pre-20<sup>th</sup> century. An inserted ceiling is evidenced by mortices in the tie-beams above, but has been removed.

## Nineteenth-century alterations

### The nave roof

The nave roof dates from 1819, judging by an inscription on a painted ground on the west face of the 5th king-post from the east. The inscription (Fig. 46) reads 'EA | WS | 1819', and the initials are probably those of the churchwardens in that year. The ten trusses include one against the east gable and another against the tower; these end trusses are concealed by boarding, but the king-post bolt is visible in each case. The king-post trusses are constructed principally in softwood but the king-posts, which taper towards the top, have expanded heads and



Fig. 46. 1819 inscription, with painted border, on oak king-post in nave roof.

feet and are through-bolted at the foot, appear to be of oak. The tie-beams are chamfered with run-out stops; raked struts rise from them to the principal rafters to coincide with the single rank of butt purlins. There is a heavy plank ridge and the roof slopes are laid with sarking boards.

### The remodelled south porch and other alterations in the 1850s

In 1850 Revd H. W. Hodgson succeeded Henry Morice as Vicar of Ashwell. He commenced a series of alterations, including the restoration, for £330, of the chancel, which was described as 'lately ... restored and beautified' in 1855.<sup>67</sup> No other details of this work have so far come to light.

The south porch was extensively restored slightly later during Hodgson's incumbency. One source dates the work to 1858.<sup>68</sup> An account of recent work at the church published ten years later in 1868 noted that the cost (£120) was met by the vicar's father Mr C. Hodgson, 'hoping that this might lead to some more extensive improvements', and that 'about the same time' the nave floor was re-laid with York stone.<sup>69</sup> The work to the porch, for which no architect has yet been identified, involved removing the plaster ceiling over the entry (Fig. 45) and inserting the present vault (Fig. 48). The quadripartite rib-vault incorporates tiercerons, and short liernes define a central octagon. All the intersections, and the ends of the transverse and longitudinal ribs, are marked by carved foliate bosses. The central boss – the largest of the set – has a vine leaf and grapes design. The diagonal ribs and tiercerons spring from foliate capitals except in the north-west corner, where the stair turret intrudes.

At the same time the south front of the porch was rebuilt above the doorway to create a more authentically medieval appearance. Whether there was any evidence for the form of the present first-floor window or not is unclear; it is probably safer to assume that no substantial

<sup>67</sup> *Kelly's Directory of ... Hertfordshire* (London: Kelly & Co., 1855), p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> *St Mary's Ashwell* (Ashwell: Friends of St Mary's, Ashwell, no date), p. 4. Pevsner declares the vault to be 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Pevsner (1953), p. 41).

<sup>69</sup> *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578.

evidence survived. As reinstated, it is a two-light window with a four-centred arch and hood-mould with head-stops. The form of the niche above it, on the other hand, is perhaps close to what was depicted in the views made in previous decades. This has a four-centred arch beneath an overall square head and hood-mould, again with head stops. The niche is richly moulded and the jambs each incorporate a pair of colonettes. The gable, which has been rebuilt and is of red brick behind the stone facing, rises well clear of the present shallow-pitched lead roof, but the general arrangement appears unchanged since Harraden's view.<sup>70</sup>

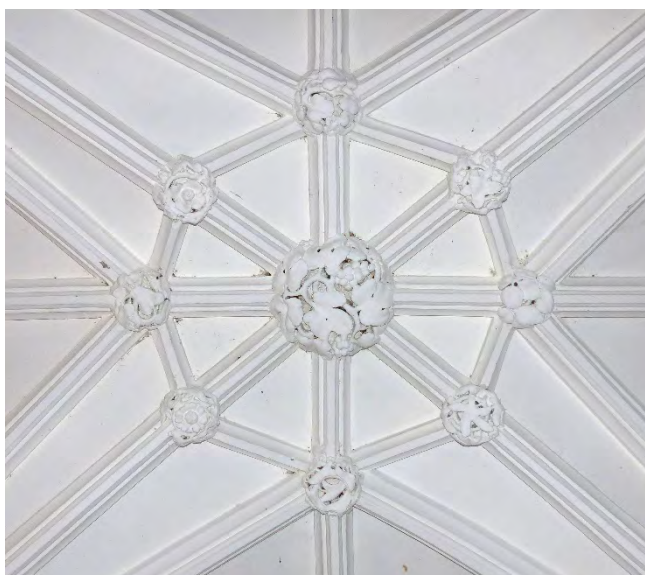


Fig. 47 (left). The panelled inner face of one of the gates to the south porch.

Fig. 48 (above). The crown of the inserted 19th-century vault in the south porch.

Further work in the vicinity of the porch is suggested by a rainwater head draining the south aisle parapet gutter immediately west of the porch, dated 1881, but the nature of the works (if more extensive than simply guttering) is unclear.

### Re-ordering and repairs by James Shilcock, 1867-8

A church plan dated 16 December 1867 (Fig. 60), signed by James Shilcock, architect, of Hitchin, is associated with a scheme of re-ordering and repairs. The most visible elements of this work were the replacement of box pews with the current bench pews and the introduction of the present church organ, both of which are described in more detail under Fixtures and Fittings, below. The scheme also extended to repairs, chief among which appear to have been strengthening the 'Tower Floor'.<sup>71</sup>

### The chancel roof

The chancel was re-roofed in six bays probably in 1873 as part of a wider restoration.<sup>72</sup> The builder was George M. Bates. The trusses (Fig. 27), which are elaborately stop-chamfered, incorporate a tie-beam, queen- and princess-struts, a central two-centred arch motif in slender timbers, and panels of trefoil-headed 'lights' and daggers in the outer positions. Alternate trusses also incorporate wall-posts resting on moulded stone corbels, with arch-braces up to the tie-beam. The queen-struts and the arch-braces are bolted to the tie-beams. At the wall-

<sup>70</sup> 'Ashwell Church', engraved by George Cooke after James Harraden (London: Nichols & Son, 1826); copy in church.

<sup>71</sup> Churchwardens' Accounts, HALS, DP/7/5/3. The works to the floor cost £77 17s 6d.

<sup>72</sup> Incorporated Church Building Society records, Church of England Record Centre, ECE/11/4/35.

heads there is a brattished timber cornice to north and south. There are two tiers of trenched purlins, a plank ridge and overlying softwood sarking boards.

## Alterations and repairs since 1900

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as photographs make clear, a large proportion of the external clunch was severely weathered, giving the church an irregular appearance and giving cause for concern about its continuing structural integrity. Since 1900 there have been numerous episodes of repair and restoration, ranging from comparatively minor and localised works to extensive schemes of stonework repair. The earliest of these, under the rectorship of S. W. P. Webb, was the involvement of Milne & Hall, London architects, F. J. Bailey, builder, of Ashwell, and J. T. Gibson, plumber, of Norwich. Recorded on the spike in cast lettering dated 1902, it may have been limited to leadwork. A recurring difficulty throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the shortage of funds for repairs.

## William Weir and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings



Fig. 49 (left). Tile and render repairs on the west wall of the south porch, an example of Weir's work.

Fig. 50 (above). A mixture of piecemeal and systematic stone replacement, and render repairs with simulated tooling and mortar joints.

For some forty years the architect William Weir (1865-1950)<sup>73</sup> was responsible for maintaining the fabric of the church with the exception of the chancel, which was separately maintained on behalf of the Rector. Weir was Scottish-born and began his career in Edinburgh where he was articled to Archibald Macpherson in 1882. In 1888 he moved to London as assistant to James Marjoribanks MacLaren, studied at the Architectural Association and met the influential Detmar Blow. Around 1890 he joined the practice of Philip Webb, a founder member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Weir set up in independent practice in 1900 and specialised in the restoration of historic buildings, becoming a leading exponent of the SPAB's conservation philosophy. He was responsible for a series of high-profile restorations, including Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire (1907) and Tattershall Castle in Lincolnshire (from 1912), the latter for Lord Curzon, for whom he went on to restore Bodiam Castle, East Sussex. When Curzon left Bodiam to the National Trust it opened a door for Weir to become the Trust's architect on a series of buildings. Between 1931 and 1938 he was in charge of the partial rebuilding of Dartington Hall, Devon.

<sup>73</sup> Biographical details are summarised from the online Dictionary of Scottish Architects (<http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/> consulted 8 June 2018). An account of Weir's career is in Martin Drury, *Wandering Architects: In Pursuit of an Arts and Crafts Ideal* (Stamford: Shaun Tyas, 2000), ch. 10. Neither source mentions Ashwell.

Weir's association with St Mary the Virgin, Ashwell, is detailed in documents held in the SPAB archive. It began at the initiative of the SPAB, on 18 December 1908, when Weir's services were offered to the Rector, Revd Webb, the poor condition of the tower having come to the Society's notice.<sup>74</sup> Weir reported to the Secretary of the SPAB on 1 February 1909, following a visit on 25 January.<sup>75</sup> Except for the roofs of the nave and chancel, he noted approvingly, the church has 'escaped "Restoration" to a great extent'. He found the external clunch of the tower 'badly worn & perished'. Stone weatherings of the lower offsets had been 'renewed with stone in an unsatisfactory manner' and the upper portion of the tower was particularly badly weathered. Some mullions had been 'renewed with oak in a temporary manner'. Crowning the tower, only the end portions of the panelled parapet remained. He noted recent repairs (presumably Milne & Hall's work of 1902) to the framing of the spire and lantern, and lead gutters behind the parapet. He found that the mullions in the main west window were badly damaged by the rusting of iron fixings. Weir proposed re-facing the stone of the tower, and treatment of the whole surface with a solution of lime. The method was to cut out and repair defective areas in concrete (granite dust and Portland cement). Mullions were to be repaired and oak louvres fitted to the belfry, and the parapet was to be repaired and missing portions renewed. The bells were to be re-hung on a frame standing free of the walls. He estimated the total cost at £1200. This work seems not to have proceeded, however, since much the same assessment was made in 1927. Indeed shortage of funds was to plague attempts to put the church in order throughout the twentieth century.

In 1924 Weir was again working at Ashwell, this time on the north wall and nave clerestorey. In a letter to W. H. Bayliss, Secretary to the Parochial Church Council, dated Letchworth, 14 November 1924, he reported on an inspection on 10 November. He found the clerestorey wall to be of clunch rubble, plastered externally, except in two westernmost bays, which were of exposed ashlar. Weir dated these to a later period and associated them with the string course and parapet. The latter he found to be 10in thick and plastered on both faces. Some brick repairs were observed on the inner face and he considered the stone coping to be renewed; the condition of the plaster was poor. On this occasion Weir proposed the replacement of missing lengths of string course with 'hand-made tiles built up in courses to the contour of the moulding and bonded into grooves cut in the remaining stone', then finished in cement mortar to match stone colour (4 parts washed local sand to one part Portland cement). Brick to be replaced by concrete cast in situ (4 [parts] clean ballast, 2 [parts] sharp sand, 1 P[art] cement). Parapet and clerestorey wall to be finished in cement mortar. Cesspits to be formed in parapet gutter'. This work seems to have gone ahead, judging by a reference to cesspits on the north side in 1927.

The only substantial change to the building's footprint in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came with the addition of a semi-sunken, flat-roofed brick boiler house, in the re-entrant of the chancel and the north aisle. This can be dated, on map evidence, between 1921 and 1937,<sup>76</sup> and the date can be narrowed further by its appearance in outline on a dimension plan of the church by Weir, dated June 1927.<sup>77</sup> It does not appear (or indeed appear likely) that Weir was involved.

On 12 May 1927 Weir returned to inspect the tower, sending his report to Revd Henry Allday Griffith on 28 May.<sup>78</sup> He deplored the lattice work in the belfry windows, another indication that his 1909 recommendations had not been pursued, and generally he repeated the observations on condition of his 1909 report. He recommended hand-made tiles to replace

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<sup>74</sup> SPAB Archive, Ashwell Church file 1.

<sup>75</sup> SPAB Archive, Ashwell Church: William Weir file.

<sup>76</sup> Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map, Hertfordshire sheet 4.9, revised 1921, published 1924; and the subsequent edition, revised 1937, published 1940.

<sup>77</sup> SPAB Archive, William Weir file.

<sup>78</sup> HALS, D/P7/6/3. Another copy in the SPAB archive.

perished stonework (method as described in 1924), then a coat of cement mortar. This method, he pointed out, reduces the amount of cutting out required as compared to inserting new stone. Also it achieves 'the absence of any sharp or aggressive lines in the finished result'. He recommended treatment of the surface on completion with 'a preservative such as Professor Lauries' "silicon ester," followed by a dressing of specially prepared lime, in order to harden the clunch and arrest its decay'. The ornamental band on the tower was to be repaired and treated 'without attempting to renew the missing ornament'. The parapet was to be restored but omitting the decorative work; renewal in this case was necessary 'to relief [sic] the present unsatisfactory finish', i.e. for aesthetic reasons, though generally Weir opposed 'restoration'. The belfry mullions were to be renewed. Wrought ('wrot') angle plates were recommended to tie the inner angles of the bell-frame, and long bolts to secure the frame to the foundation beams. The steps of the tower stair were to be re-levelled using cement concrete with granite dust. The estimated cost of the recommended works was £1700.

Barely a month later, on 15 June 1927, Weir made another inspection, this time examining the whole church. In a letter to Griffith dated 22 June, he mentioned lead remaining on westernmost bay of the nave roof (where there is still a leaded section), and lead roofs to the aisles and south porch.<sup>79</sup> For defective masonry he again recommended hand-made tile repairs, bedded in cement mortar with a half-inch cover of cement mortar, followed by a coating of Lauries' silicon ester. He noted the battlemented parapets to the chancel and south porch, and rebuilt parapets elsewhere, but recommended the retention of the latter, including the renewed copings. Scarfed repairs to the aisle roofs were specified, new oak boards to replace the existing deal; the lead to be recast, and laid with hollow rolls and clips, and concrete and asphalt repairs to the parapet gutters. Wide cesspits were recommended for the lead gutter behind the south parapet of the nave roof, similar to those formed in 1924 on the north side. The estimated cost was £3000. This time the work appears to have been carried out according to Weir's specification. A group of three 1927 graffiti on the first stage of the tower stair may be the work of building craftsmen involved in the works, which are recorded as having been completed in 1930 when they were dedicated to Griffith's memory.<sup>80</sup>

During the tower repairs Weir attempted to safeguard the incised drawing of Old St Paul's (see Fig. 55, below). In a letter dated 22 October 1945, Weir related that in 1929 he 'had the stone taken out of the wall, put into a lead case and refixed in its position in the wall. The damp has dried out and the surface of the clunch has shown no deterioration, or sealing, during the interval'.<sup>81</sup>

A further phase of repairs resulted from an inspection by Weir on 18 January 1936, which focused on mainly masonry and window repairs to the south aisle and porch, the chancel, north aisle and porch, and the south clerestorey: £1300 in all. The ensuing specification, dated October 1938, once again stipulates hand-made tile repairs concealed with mortar (1 part lime, 6 parts sand, 1 part cement). On completion he specified the application of 'Silicaseal' (a product of Silicaseal Ltd, Newcastle-upon-Tyne). Leadwork to the windows was to be repaired, and casements were to be added for ventilation. Bitumastic paint was selected for eaves gutters and downpipes. The repairs to the aisle roofs repeat those identified in 1930, and so may not have been done at that time.

Although Weir commented on the condition of the chancel in a number of his reports, this remained the Rector's responsibility, now the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Their architects were the partnership of Caroe & Passmore and Herbert Passmore took the lead on Ashwell.

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<sup>79</sup> SPAB Archive, William Weir file.

<sup>80</sup> Stone plaque in church.

<sup>81</sup> Letter to Mr Martindale, Ashwell Rectory, dated 22 October 1945 (SPAB Archive, Ashwell Church file 2). The letter was by way of reply to another, addressed to the Diocese by Felix J. Lander, dated 2 July.

He commenced a scheme of replacing defective stonework with new stone in 1939. Contrasts between the approach adopted on behalf of the Commissioners and that demonstrated by Weir over more than a decade led to angry exchanges. On 16 September 1939, shortly after the outbreak of war, Miss B. Howes of the SPAB, temporarily working from Richmond (to evade the threat of air-raids?), forwarded to Weir a letter from Mrs Mary S. Raikes of Ducklake Farm, Ashwell, objecting to the 'ignorant "restoration"' of the chancel by the Commissioners. Mrs Raikes praised Weir's ongoing work on the south aisle, 'most carefully and successfully carried out with a minimum of damage to the character and beauty of the fabric'. She contrasted this with the work for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who 'have already patched one window in a manner which can only ruin the Chancel if it is carried out all over. They are making no attempt to match the colour of the local chalk-stone, or to soften the severity of their hard outlines'. One wonders whether Weir had some influence over the complainant. Passmore was clearly constrained by his budget. Under pressure, he was persuaded to abandon stone replacement in favour of plastic repairs by the Bidder Engineering Co. This then appears to be the origin of the rendered repairs, simulating stone, which are found on the chancel masonry (see Fig. 50).

Weir's final work at Ashwell followed the end of the war. In 1945 he returned to specify the re-leading of the spike. This resulted in cast lettering on the leadwork of the spike dated 1947, together with the names of John Keith, Rector, and Phyllis Fordham and John Sale, Wardens. W. A. and F. Bray appear to have been the builders, and the final phase of work was not until January 1948, the date cited by Pevsner.<sup>82</sup>

A full examination of Weir's legacy at Ashwell would require further work, but he would appear to be clearly associated with a number of areas and techniques. The work is of a conservative nature, retaining the maximum quantity of original fabric, and resisting the urge to recreate lost or degraded decorative elements such as the frieze and parapet of the tower. In some areas, particularly on the south porch, tile is inserted in mortar joints, a technique associated with works overseen or inspired by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The architects Caroe and Passmore, acting for the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, were responsible for some measure of stone replacement on the chancel before switching to plastic repairs using a cementitious render. This was applied with unusual care to include differently pigmented imitation mortar joints (Fig. 50). The main body of the render is lightly scored to vary the surface and give a stronger resemblance to dressed stone. It is a sophisticated if ultimately unsatisfactory approach to the problem of stone decay.

## Works since 1950

A report on the tower by an unnamed architect was completed in 1963.<sup>83</sup> This recommended a series of urgent and less urgent repairs, at least some of which were recorded (in a subsequent updating of the report) as having been carried out. Repairs included the leadwork and timber of the spike, leadwork of the tower gutters, re-rendering of the tower parapets and repairs to the tower stonework ('now under consideration', with estimates from Norman & Underwood; to be treated with 'Wykamit'). Some less urgent repairs were among those completed, including stonework to the clerestories and the windows and buttresses of both aisles, and plinth repairs to the south aisle where the ground level had been lowered. Notes that the south porch roof was re-leaded in 1930. Further work was seen as desirable when funds permitted, including improvements to heating and wiring, and relaying of floors. Stonework and window repairs to the Chancel were reported as having been completed, as were repairs to the tower stair. A scheme for 'modernising' the Church Room had passed through planning, and proposals were afoot to convert the ground floor of the tower into a vestry, and to reorganise the east end of the north aisle.

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<sup>82</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 40n.

<sup>83</sup> HALS, DP/7/6/8.

The condition of the tower nevertheless continued to give cause for concern, probably because funds had proved insufficient for all the recommended works. In 1975 a fundraising appeal was launched to 'completely renovate and restore the tower, not merely patch it up'.<sup>84</sup> Whilst not conspicuously successful, this raised enough money for further urgent works to be undertaken. In January 1983 a new specification was prepared for the PCC by Victor F. J. Farrar & Associates, Architects, of Bedford, who had been the architects for the church since at least the 1975 appeal.<sup>85</sup> Stonework repairs were to use either sound reclaimed stone to match, or Weldon, Clipsham or other approved stone. The extent of the works included the south face parapet (strip render, selective stone replacement, new Clipsham coping), the south face generally (raking out, removal of hard cement render, some stone replacement, 16 feet of new quoins, new spitter), the south face belfry window (complete renewal of jambs, sill, mullions and tracery, based on original moulding; adaptation of louvres to fit), south-east angle turret (remove all render; some stone replacement (Weldon), and new quoins and lintel to access doorway) and the south-west angle squinch (remove all render; tile repairs). On all elevations, tile repairs using old clay peg tiles and lime mortar were indicated, the tiles showing on completion.

Internally a number of partitions have been inserted in recent years. A kitchen and toilet have replaced the 19<sup>th</sup>-century vestry, partitioned off at the west end of the north aisle; a vestry and an inner room enclosing the pipe organ have been created at the east end of the same aisle; and a churchwardens' store has replaced the children's seating area at the west end of the south aisle. The present partitions are in timber and rise to a height of about two metres only, so that they do not greatly inhibit appreciation of the original spaces. The vestry screen has been executed in a traditional style, emulating that of late-medieval screens in the church, with blind-traceried panels and a simple cornice. The kitchen and the churchwardens' store have been screened with plain panelled partitions, and there is re-used panelling of a similar nature, doubtless from the former vestry here, in the toilet and lobby, and in the partition dividing the vestry from the room containing the organ. The difference between these and the vestry partition reinforces the hierarchical relationship between the various functions.

Alterations and repairs since 2000 are summarised in Appendix 3.<sup>86</sup> The more important episodes have included masonry and internal plaster repairs in 2007-9, supervised by Caroe & Partners, after which Iain Frearson of Freeland Rees Roberts Architects took over responsibility. He directed major schemes of stone and leadwork repairs to the south side of the church in 2010, the north side in 2012-13 and the chancel in 2014, when the east window was a major focus, and an important scheme of internal works in the chancel in 2015.

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<sup>84</sup> Church Tower Appeal Committee Minutes, 27 August 1975 to 1976, HALS, DP/7/6/11.

<sup>85</sup> Specification for tower works, January 1983, HALS, DP/7/6/12.

<sup>86</sup> Based on information kindly supplied by Mike Taffs, Churchwarden.

## Fixtures, fittings, furnishings and graffiti

The NADFAS Inventory provides a high level of detail on no less than 805 church fixtures, fittings, furnishings and much else. It is not proposed here to duplicate that work, but to draw attention to the more significant phases and individual items in the church, particularly those which have an architectural context or character. Features are discussed in broad historical periods.

### The pre-Reformation church

#### Font

The font (Fig. 51) is placed in Bay 1 on the central axis of the tower and chancel arches. A drawing by John Buckler shows it from the east as it was in 1831. Of this, only the stepped plinth survives; the shaft, shaft base and bowl were replaced later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The plinth is octagonal, in the form of two steps, and there are projections to the lower step on the north, west and south sides, and a single projection from the west side of the upper step, perhaps to facilitate the priest's role in officiating at baptisms. The present shaft is also octagonal, with alternating saltires and pairs of roundels each containing enfolded mouchettes. Superficially it resembles that depicted by Buckler, but while the saltires are similar, Buckler shows quatrefoils in the roundels visible, and on one face he shows an arched and traceried panel, which the present shaft does not have. The present moulded base does not match the simpler base shown by Buckler, which instead reproduces stops of the form found at the base of blind-panelled bay (Bay 1) of the nave. He also shows a very simple octagonal bowl, whereas the present one has a moulded base and sunk square panels in each face, carved with the symbols of the Passion. An elaborate Gothic Revival timber font cover is doubtless contemporary with the present bowl.



Fig. 51. The Victorian font and font cover, on a medieval octagonal stepped base. The shaft supporting the font is similar to the medieval shaft depicted by Buckler in the 1830s.

## Rood screen



Fig. 52 (left). Charlotte Morice drawing of the rood screen and Royal Arms before their removal. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

Fig. 53 (above). The parclose screen enclosing the Lady Chapel in the east end of the south aisle.

An 1839 directory refers to 'some fine carvings in oak, particularly a beautiful screen that separates the nave from the chancel'.<sup>87</sup> This is depicted in detail in one of Charlotte Morice's views (Fig. 52). The screen had a blind-arcaded plank base, on which were reared two tiers of cinquefoil-cusped open-work, with the cusping repeated at the base of the upper lights as well as at the head of both tiers, and creating a band of quatrefoils where the two tiers met. A central doorway opened on to the chancel and was topped by an arcade of small trefoil-cusped lights. Another view by Buckler (probably John Buckler), dated 1840, corroborates these details, albeit from a restricted viewpoint. The screen is likely to have supported the rood or cross conventionally placed here on the rood-beam, a practice which was outlawed after the Reformation. The screen survived, only for most of it to disappear at some time after 1840, perhaps in the poorly documented works of the early 1850s.

## Parclose screen

A parclose screen encloses Bay 6 of the south aisle, forming the north and west sides of the Lady Chapel, with a doorway in the middle of the west side (Fig. 53). It appears to be 15<sup>th</sup>-century work, but there is considerable evidence that it has been dismantled and re-erected in a different configuration.<sup>88</sup> The RCHME account of the building noted screens at the western end of both aisles, from which they appear to have been re-set at some time since 1910.<sup>89</sup> Charlotte Morice's interior view shows the screen somewhat indistinctly in what appears to be its present position *circa* 1840, and this is confirmed by Buckler's clearer depiction of parts of it, including the door. This demonstrates another of the changes to have occurred since 1840: Buckler shows a door which is three panels wide, and appears to be at the north end of the west side, whereas there are presently double-leaf doors, each two panels wide, positioned in the middle of the west side.

<sup>87</sup> Pigot & Co.'s *Royal National and Commercial Directory of the Counties of Essex, Herts and Middlesex* (London & Manchester: J. Pigot & Co., 1839); facsimile reprint (Castle Rising: Michael Winton, 1994), p. 95.

<sup>88</sup> There are a series of redundant mortices, truncated timbers and patch repairs.

<sup>89</sup> RCHME (1911), p. 39.

The screen has a panelled base topped by a single tier of traceried lights with delicate cusped and crocketed ogees beneath four-centred heads, and pierced spandrels. This form is close to, perhaps identical to, that shown by the drawings for the rood screen. The upright stiles or mullions, and the horizontal rail dividing the panels from the lights, are moulded, and the rail has carved enrichment in two different designs. A number of the lower panels have intricate blind tracery to the heads and it is clear that others were once similarly treated (ogee heads and trefoil piercings are apparent), judging by the differential fading of their surfaces, but they appear to be from more than one source.

### Memorials

'No monuments of importance' was Pevsner's judgment when he examined St Mary's in 1953.<sup>90</sup> This bleak verdict was revised in 1977 to acknowledge one of significance, an unidentified chest tomb in the north-east corner of the present vestry.<sup>91</sup> It is reputed to be the monument to John Harris of Hinxworth who founded a chantry at Ashwell in 1462.<sup>92</sup> It has elaborate panelled decoration to the sides, each panel incorporating a blank shield within a large quatrefoil, with each of the foils further elaborated as a trefoil (late 15<sup>th</sup> century?). A number of brasses were taken up and sold for the metal in 1633-4, leaving just a shallow impression in the remaining floor slab.<sup>93</sup> Three of these, probably of 15<sup>th</sup>-century date, have been repositioned in line at the east end of the nave.

### Stained glass

Today St Mary's has mostly plain glass, contributing to a light, airy atmosphere. There are some small quarries of medieval stained glass assembled in panels in the clerestory windows. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Pevsner dated these to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>94</sup> These are mostly composed of foliate, patterned or architectural designs. Until 1538 the east window of the chancel contained glass representing the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket.<sup>95</sup> Other surviving 14<sup>th</sup>-century windows, notably those in the east ends of the two aisles, may have been spared replacement in the 15<sup>th</sup> century because of a reluctance to disturb other schemes.

### Seating

Medieval church seating was generally sparse, especially for the congregation.<sup>96</sup> The Churchwardens' Accounts include payments for 'formes' or wooden benches, and it is likely that this formed the basis for most seating into the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>97</sup> before being replaced by box pews.

### Graffiti and inscribed drawings

St Mary's Church possesses a remarkable set of graffiti, ranging in date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to (inevitably) the recent past. They are widely distributed within the church, but the majority are in the tower. They have probably been left by a wide variety of people: clerics, churchwardens, ordinary parishioners, building craftsmen and casual visitors, but perhaps most of all by bell-ringers, since graffiti are most numerous in the ringing chamber. In recent years the study of historic graffiti in buildings has acquired new impetus, with approaches

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<sup>90</sup> Pevsner (1953), p. 42.

<sup>91</sup> Pevsner, rev. Cherry (1977), p. 75.

<sup>92</sup> Church guidebook, p. 13. The date is too late to explain the original function of the demolished structure on the north side of the chancel.

<sup>93</sup> Church guidebook, p. 13.

<sup>94</sup> Pevsner, rev. Cherry (1977), p. 75.

<sup>95</sup> Church guidebook, p. 4. No source is given for the payments recorded here for the removal of the glass.

<sup>96</sup> Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown, eds, *Pews, Benches and Chairs: Church Seating in English Parish Churches from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (London: Ecclesiological Society, 2011), p. 70.

<sup>97</sup> For example John Rayner was paid 6d in 1583-4 for making forms in the church (Palmer (1985), p. 22).

emphasising a range of practical, symbolic, commemorative and wider cultural practices besides the more familiar self-memorialisation.<sup>98</sup>

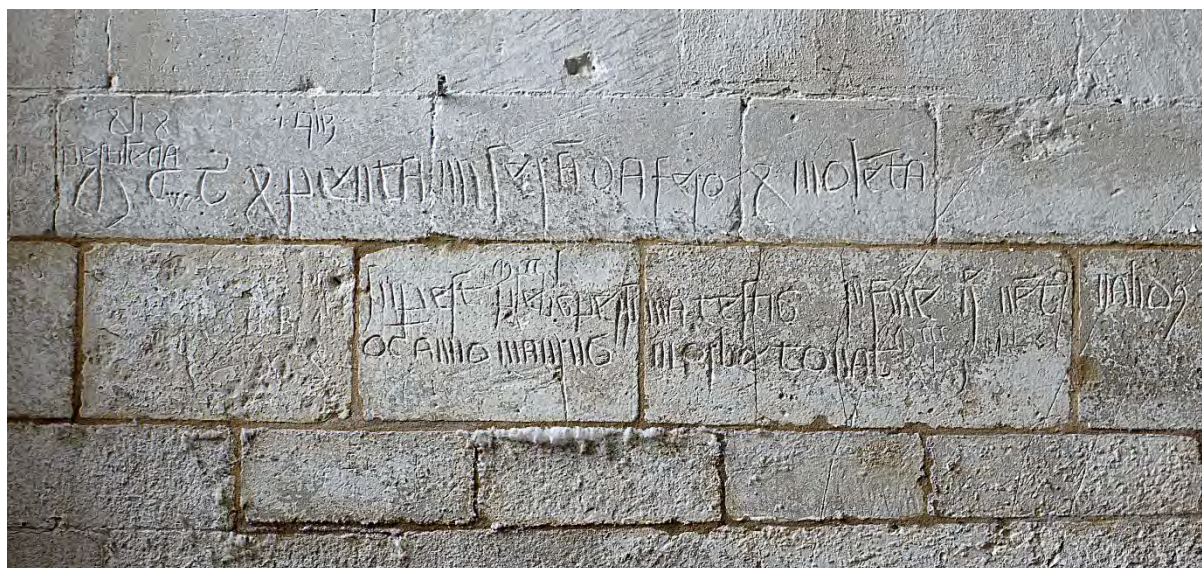


Fig. 54. The 'plague inscription' on the north internal wall of the tower. Salts leeching from the clunch (centre, immediately below the inscriptions) are likely to damage the inscription.

The medieval graffiti on the north internal wall on the ground floor of the tower are of especial significance and have long attracted serious scholarly attention.<sup>99</sup> A number refer to the Great Plague or Black Death which was at its most intense between 1348 and 1349, during which time up to half the population of England is thought to have succumbed, and to the great wind of 1361 (Fig. 54). The inscriptions are not straightforward to interpret, partly because the first and third inscriptions are believed to have been in verse, and employ circumlocutions and other expedients to achieve rhymes and scansion. David Sherlock interprets them as:<sup>100</sup>

- *Primula pestis i [n] m t<sup>er</sup> ccc fuit 1 minus uno* ('Just the first plague was in 1000, 300 and 50 minus 1');
- *M [CCC]XLIX | Pestile[n]cia et q[u]nq[uaginta]* ('In 1[3]49 there was a plague and [in 13]50');
- *M.C.T[er] x penta miseranda ferox violenta | [discessit pestis] superset plebs pessima testis in fine q<sup>e</sup>vent[us] [erat] valid[us] | [...h]oc anno maurus in orbe tonat<sup>MCCC</sup>LXI* ('1000, three times 100, five times 10, a pitiable, fierce violent [plague departed]; a wretched populace survives to witness [to the plague] and in the end a mighty wind, Maurus, thunders in this year in the world, 1361').

The other particularly celebrated graffito (Fig. 55) is interpreted as depicting Old St Paul's Cathedral, which was severely damaged by fire in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and was subsequently demolished and rebuilt. Sherlock compares it with van den Wyngaerde's mid-16<sup>th</sup>-century view of London, and with a 1616 view by John Gipkyn, with both of which it has considerable similarity. He interprets it as viewed from the north, showing the east end of the

<sup>98</sup> E.g. Matthew Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches* (London: Ebury Press, 2015).

<sup>99</sup> G. C. Coulton, 'Medieval Graffiti especially in the eastern counties', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, vol. 19 (1915), pp. 53-62 and plates VI-XVI; David Sherlock, *Medieval Drawings and Writings in Ashwell Church, Hertfordshire* (Ashwell: Ashwell Parish Church, 1978).

<sup>100</sup> Sherlock (1978), pp. 5-6. Sherlock made use of notes compiled by the Hitchin antiquarian Reginald L. Hine.

choir rotated through 90 degrees to express its form more clearly,<sup>101</sup> and faintly indicating the north transept in elevation against that of the tower. If Sherlock is correct, it shows the cathedral prior to the loss of the spire by lightning in 1561.<sup>102</sup> He notes that 'This is by far the most important of the drawings in Ashwell Church, not only because its subject is one of great importance but also because medieval drawings of buildings in such detail are rare even in manuscripts'.<sup>103</sup>



Fig. 55. The drawing on the north wall of the tower interpreted as representing Old St Paul's Cathedral, which was badly damaged in the Great Fire of London, 1666, and was subsequently demolished. The spire is visibly indistinct as a result of damp penetrating the stone.

<sup>101</sup> Alternatively it could be depicting the south transept, but if so it is mis-positioned in relation to the crossing tower.

<sup>102</sup> Simon Bradley and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 1: The City of London* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 157.

<sup>103</sup> Sherlock (1978), p. 3.

## The post-Reformation church

Though the progress of the Reformation was not straightforward, with a brief return to Catholicism under Queen Mary (1553-9), the general trend following the break with Rome was towards the expunging of 'idolatrous' images of saints in sculpture, painting and glass, and the institution of new forms of worship. Saints' images were widely desecrated (there was renewed iconoclasm during the Civil War and its aftermath), rood screens were torn down and communion tables (at which the communicant faced the congregation) replaced alters at which the celebrant turned his back on them. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was an increased emphasis on the spoken word – especially the sermon – in church services, with the introduction of pulpits, and the increased centralisation of the liturgical space. Such changes were usually reversed under the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ecclesiological movement, which sought a return to something closer to medieval liturgical practice. Nineteenth-century restorations were frequently aggressive, replacing stonework, stripping internal plaster and replacing outmoded box pews with bench seats more in keeping with (comparatively rare) medieval precedents. They were also frequently accompanied by the introduction of new stained glass and furnishings. Ashwell was treated more gently than many churches in this period.

### Communion table

An early to mid-17<sup>th</sup>-century communion table forms the present high altar in the chancel. It is made of oak, with a plank top, turned baluster-like legs and plain stretchers. The top rails or aprons are scratch-moulded and carved with lunettes.

### Church chest

Placed on the floor of the chancel, against the south wall, is a fine early 17<sup>th</sup>-century oak chest, raised on short legs, and bound with wrought-iron straps secured with large nails (Fig. 56). The lid is attached by means of hasps at each end of the front, and there is a lock (with later lock-plate and escutcheon) to the centre. The front face of the chest is divided into three bays of blind arcading in the Jacobean manner. The pilasters, arches and spandrels are embellished with foliate carving, and there is a shallow-relief pattern reminiscent of rustication within each arcade bay. The stiles have shallow-relief channels terminating, on the longer corner stiles or legs, in an arrowhead motif at the base. The bottom rail is moulded with more foliate carving, while the deeper top rail has a jewelled frieze with further enrichment to the jewels. Chests were used to store vestments, documents and other valuables, 'the parish chest' eventually becoming a byword for the records of parish communities.<sup>104</sup>



Fig. 56. The church chest in the chancel.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England*, corrected edn (Cambridge: CUP, 1951). The keeping of parish registers was required by law from 1538.

### Pulpit

The hexagonal pulpit (Fig. 57) rests on a cruciform stand on the south side of the nave, next to the column dividing Bays 5 and 6, facing west. A ladder stair, of which the handrail and probably the carriages have been renewed, rises to the open east side of the pulpit. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it stood on the opposite side of the nave in Bay 6, and retained a sounding board. It is constructed principally of oak and bears the date 'ANNO | 1627'.<sup>105</sup> The decorative emphasis is provided by an arched panel on each face. Each has diamond-pointed rustication to the jambs and arch, and a patera in each spandrel; on the stiles framing each panel there are carved drops in the form of half-balusters with finials. A similar motif is applied to the centre of each arch. Beneath the arch there is a raised panel in each face. Above the arches there is a frieze treated with a scrolling pattern of flowers, fruit and foliage, topped by a cornice. On the same face in which the date appears, the lectern projects above the frieze.



Fig. 57. The pulpit, dated 1627.

### Royal Arms and Ten Commandments

Charlotte Morice's view shows two other noteworthy fixtures, now lost. One is the painted Royal Arms, occupying the tympanum of the chancel arch. Royal Arms began to be installed in churches following the Reformation. The depiction is too indistinct to date the Arms. They are flanked by two boards listing the Ten Commandments (one is headed 'Exodus', and Roman numerals can be made out), and two further boards of similar size are visible on the arcade walls adjoining, perhaps listing charitable benefactions. Buckler omits the Royal Arms and Ten Commandments boards, perhaps because he is intent on reconstructing the historic interior, and wishes to exclude jarring or anachronistic features.

### Clock

Evidence for a clock, kept in a clock house in the tower, can be traced back to 1562 in the Churchwardens' Accounts, and there are more or less annual records of payments for maintaining it.<sup>106</sup> Payment for a 'new clock' is recorded in 1600-1.<sup>107</sup> Other clocks may have been installed at later dates. It is likely that the mechanism was housed in what appears to be a two-decker clock cupboard shown by Buckler on the ground floor of the tower, against the north wall.

The present clock mechanism is housed in a substantial timber clock cupboard, with gallery access, in the ringing chamber. The cast iron clock bed is cast with the maker's name, W. Potts and Sons of Leeds, and the date 1896.<sup>108</sup> Later makers' plates record electrification by John Smith and Sons of Derby, clockmakers, in 1971. Clock faces do not appear on the views

<sup>105</sup> Graffiti dated 1633 and 1694 have also been recorded: see NADFAS (2009), no. 315.

<sup>106</sup> Palmer (1985), pp. 3-52, *passim*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>108</sup> The Churchwardens' Accounts report the dedication of the clock (HALS, DP/7/5/3).

of the 1820s to 1840s, suggesting that earlier clocks provided chimes only. The south dial appears in a photograph published in 1911. The clock faces are on the west, south and north sides of the tower, above the belfry windows. A north clock face was reportedly omitted owing to opposition from a landowner who feared his labourers would 'watch the clock'.<sup>109</sup>

## Memorials

A number of monuments are of interest:

- Chancel, south wall. Wall monument (Latin inscription) in the form of a simple classical aedicule, to Francis Jefferys (d. 1740), Vicar of Ashwell 1728-40. Signed 'Robt Whiting | Cambridge | Fecit'.
- Chancel, north wall. Gothic wall monument to Henry Morice (1777-1850), Vicar of Ashwell, Prebendary of Lincoln, and father of Charlotte Morice, who produced many sketches of Ashwell in the 1830s and 1840s.
- Nave, north side, adjoining chancel arch. In sculptural terms the finest wall monument is that to John Baldwyn, who died at the age of 18 in 1689. The sculpture makes liberal use of skulls, cross-bones and hour-glasses as *memento mori*, and has (in the pilasters) shrouded infants taken up into heaven as cherubic angels (Fig. 58).
- Nave, south side, adjoining chancel arch. Bronze or bronzed cast monument (signed F. Wheeler) to Gilbert William Cooper (d. 1900), one of a number supplied by the City of London Volunteers to honour those of its soldiers who died on active service during the South African (or Boer) War (1899-1902). Memorials commemorating the Boer War are a good deal rarer than those commemorating the later World Wars.



Fig. 58. Wall monument in the nave, to Ralph and Mary Baldwyn, 1689.

## Stained glass

A William Wailes window was installed at the east end of the south aisle, lighting the Lady Chapel, apparently a few years before 1868. The glass was the gift of C. Tinling in memory of his wife Mary.<sup>110</sup> The design, in two panels per light, takes its text from Matthew, 25, xxxv-xxxvi: 'For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat ...'.

<sup>109</sup> 'J. M. P.', *St Mary's Ashwell Clocks: The tower clock and the Act of Parliament clock*, church leaflet (Ashwell: no publisher, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578. The window is described as being installed 'not long ago'.

## Seating



Fig. 59. Charlotte Morice's sketch showing the former boxpews in the nave, with the medieval rood screen and post-Reformation Royal Arms in the chancel arch. (Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies)

Charlotte Morice (Fig. 59) and John Buckler show what appear to be late 17th-century box pews, with what appear in Buckler's drawing to be raised (bolection?) mouldings and some 'Gothic Survival' features, surviving as late as 1840. They were replaced in 1868 by freestanding softwood bench pews. Since the present pews do not relate to the mortices in the sills set in the nave floor, it is likely that these are relics of the former box pews.

The present bench seats were made by Seymour of Hitchin in 1868,<sup>111</sup> in a scheme which seems to have been superintended by James Shilcock, architect, also of Hitchin. Shilcock produced a plan dated 16 December 1867 noting, among other things, that the majority of the new pews were to be 'free' (Fig. 60).<sup>112</sup> He also shows choir stalls in the west bay of the chancel, and an area annotated 'children's seats' at the west end of the south aisle. The cost, including some other work, was £400. The vestry was at this date in the west end of the north aisle, now the kitchen. The pulpit was moved from the position recorded by Charlotte Morice to the south side of the chancel arch.

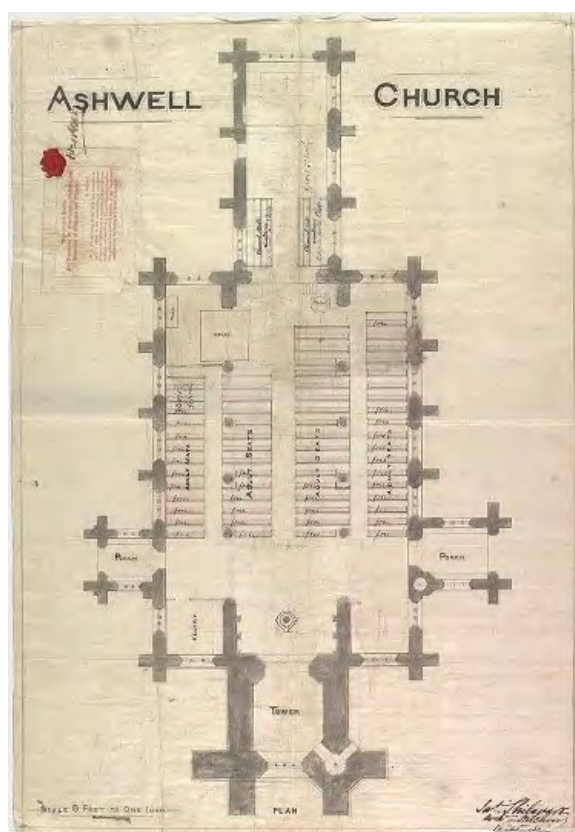


Fig. 60. Plan signed by James Shilcock, 1867, among the records of the Incorporated Church Building Society (Lambeth Palace Library)

<sup>111</sup> NADFAS (2009), no. 333, citing *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578. William Seymour was sent a cheque for £30 on 19 August 1868, a further £35 on 26 January 1869 and the final balance of the account £12 17s 6d on 27 April that year (Churchwardens' Accounts, HALS, DP/7/5/3).

<sup>112</sup> Church of England Record centre, ICBS 6713: Incorporated Church Building Society records: plan of St Mary's Ashwell by James Shilcock, Architect, of Hitchin, 1867.

The number of pews has been reduced in recent years to free up areas for other activities. In the process the pulpit has been brought forward one arcade bay into the body of the nave. Ten bench pews remain *in situ*, on two softwood-planked rafts, one on each side of a central alley, while four on each side have been removed at the east end of the nave. Four occupy the south aisle, just east of the entrance, where they stand directly on the stone floor, and two more have been placed in the north aisle, where a large raft is largely unoccupied. One has found its way up to the ringing chamber. They are made of softwood, and have shaped supports beneath the seat and shaped bench ends with trefoil piercing. The slightly inclined seat backs have fielded panels (with a shelf on the rear face) and a roll moulding along the top. The benches occur in two sizes: two and three panels wide.

### Organ

The pipe organ dates from the same re-ordering as the pews and cost £400.<sup>113</sup> It is positioned in the east end of the north aisle (Bay 6), in the area now partitioned off to serve as a vestry, with its front visible through the easternmost arch of the nave arcade. It has a maker's plate recording that it was installed in 1868 by J. W. Walker, 'Builder', of London. Between 1928 and 1958 it was relocated to the west end of the south aisle, before being returned to approximately its original position, the accompanying restoration and enlargement being funded by Phyllis Fordham, Churchwarden.<sup>114</sup> The pipe-rack is mounted above a panelled base with blind tracery arranged in eight 'lights'.

### Reredos

A sandstone reredos, carved in imitation of Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*, is currently propped in the vestry window (Bay 6) in the north aisle, having been removed from the chancel, perhaps owing to the large crack extending from top to bottom immediately to the right of the seated Christ. It was designed by A. Ashpitel, architect, in or just before 1868 and executed by James Chapman of Lambeth at a cost of £80. It was presented by Mrs H. W. Hodgson in memory of her husband, who was Rector of Ashwell.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Churchwardens' Accounts 1867-8, HALS, DP/7/5/3; *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578.

<sup>114</sup> NADFAS (2009), no. 800. The church was described as 'recently ... restored and re-seated with open oak seats, and a new organ erected at the cost of £400, subscribed by the parishioners' (*Kelly's Hertfordshire Directory* (London: Kelly & Co., 1870), p. 409).

<sup>115</sup> NADFAS (2009), no. 226; *The Builder*, 1 August 1868, p. 578. Arthur Ashpitel was the author of a *Treatise on Architecture*, published in 1846 and re-issued in a revised edition in 1867.

## Lychgate

The timber-framed lychgate, constructed of oak timbers, forms the entrance to the churchyard from the southern end of Mill St, and opens on to a path leading to the south porch (Fig. 61). Its form, including a simple crown-post roof, suggest a 15<sup>th</sup>-century date. The term was popularised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and means 'corpse gate', since funeral processions would pause at the entrance to the churchyard to be met by the priest. A covered gate enabled the coffin or shrouded corpse to be laid down under cover. Aymer Vallance set out a simple typology of lychgate forms in 1920, pointing out that the great majority were either of the 'porch' type, with gables in line with the direction of passage, or the 'shed' type, in which the gables were at right angles to the approach. Ashwell's is of the 'shed' type.<sup>116</sup>



Fig. 61. Lychgate from the north-west.

A small framed structure such as Ashwell's lychgate is comparatively portable and it is difficult to be certain whether it is in its original position, but it may well be. The properties to the south, which front on to the former market place, occupy plots which are likely to have originated at an early date, perhaps at or soon after the commencement of the market in the late Anglo-Saxon period, and there is every reason to suppose that the present position of the lychgate

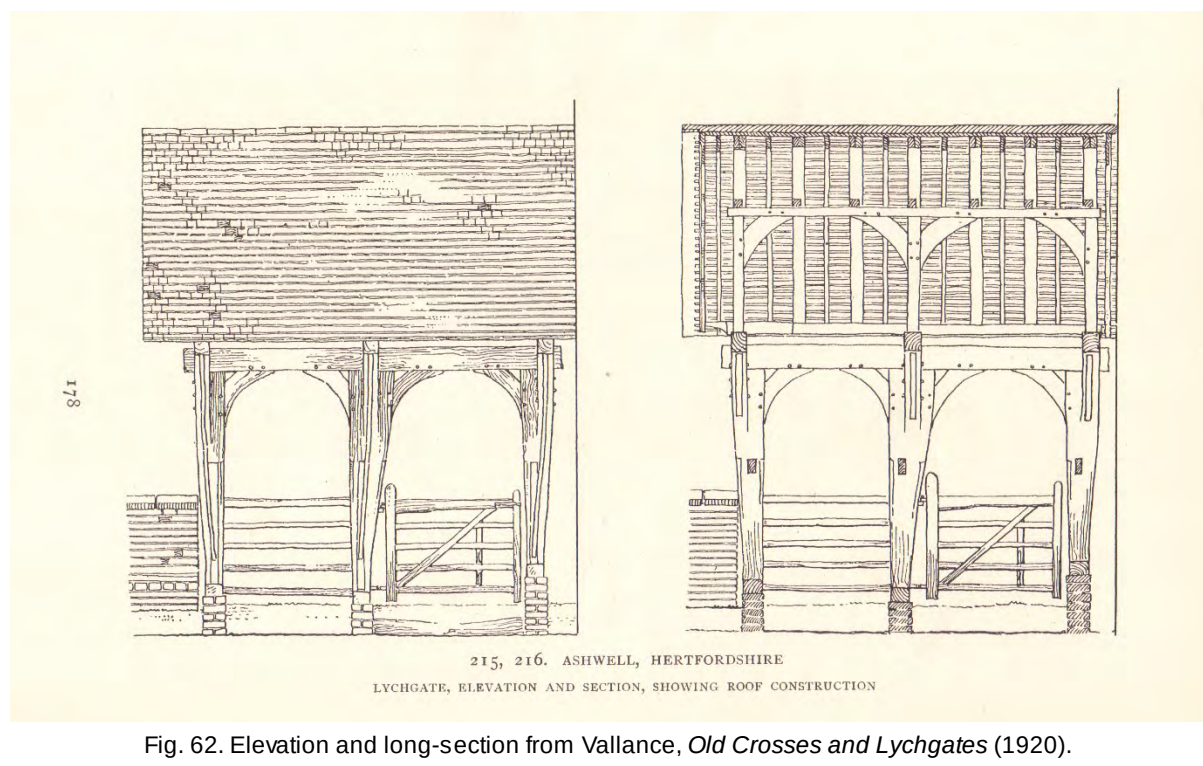


Fig. 62. Elevation and long-section from Vallance, *Old Crosses and Lychgates* (1920).

<sup>116</sup> Aymer Vallance, *Old Crosses and Lychgates* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1920), pp. 164-8, and an attractive series of drawings on pp. 178-9 (Figs 62 & 63), which, however, do not show the mortices and peg-holes for the original down-braces. A slightly earlier perspective drawing appears in VCH (1912).

would have been the natural one to choose in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Views by Charlotte Morice confirm the lychgate in its present position from the 1830s or early 1840s.

The lychgate is an open-sided structure consisting of three posts arranged in line roughly north-south, which support a two-bay crown-post roof. The posts are of square section but incorporate a short cavetto-moulded length at mid-height; this moulding occurs on both faces of the central post, but only on the inner faces of the end posts. The posts have flared heads from which four-way short curved braces spring, one pair rising to an axial (north-south) plate, the other pair to the east-west tie-beams of the roof. The ends of the tie-beams are unsupported and flying plates are pegged over them to carry the rafter feet. Longer two-way braces downwards from the posts, indicated now by redundant mortices, formerly stabilised the structure by bracing it against sill-plates resting on brick plinths on the same alignment as the tie-beams.<sup>117</sup> These down-braces were probably also curved but have been replaced by straight braces of smaller scantling. The crown-posts are square-sectioned, without expansion at the head. Two-way curved braces rise to the collar-purlin. The collars are lapped and pegged over the south faces of the rafters, which are halved and pegged at the apex. The flying plates extend beyond the gable tie-beams and have diminished ends supporting a final rafter couple to the underside of which cusped barge-boards are attached.<sup>118</sup> Small sprockets are mounted on the lower ends of the rafters. A plain-tile roof has been present since at least *circa* 1840, but may have replaced an earlier thatched roof. There is no sign of benches, or 'lych-table' (on which to rest the coffin) as found in some lychgates.<sup>119</sup>

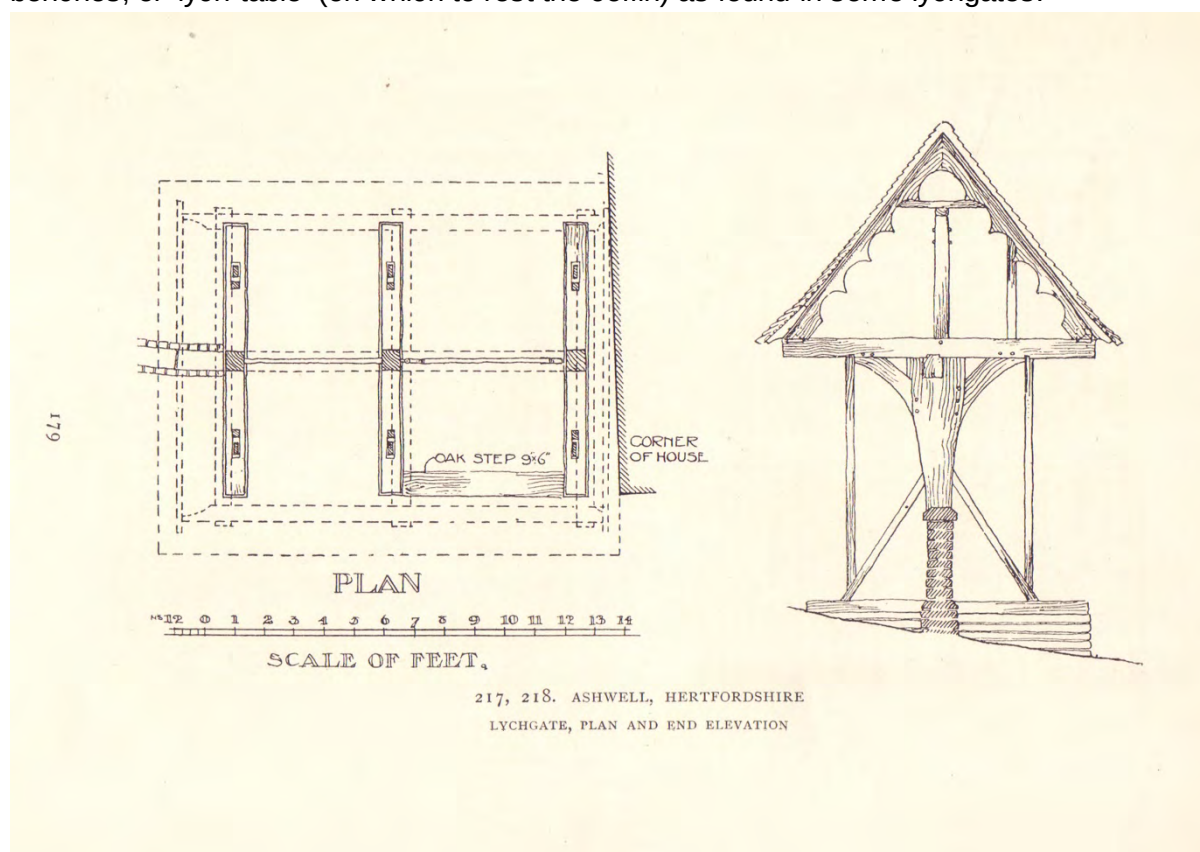


Fig. 63. Plan and cross-section from Vallance, *Old Crosses and Lychgates* (1920).

<sup>117</sup> The southern sill-plate rests on a taller brick plinth than the other two. This anomaly is recognisable in Charlotte Morice's sketches.

<sup>118</sup> On the south gable only the west barge-board is present, but the halved joint at its apex indicates that there were originally a pair as to the north. Oddly, while one of Charlotte Morice's sketches shows a similar pair of barge-boards on the south gable (albeit the east barge-board is not well-defined), the other (in other respects the more accurate of the two) does not.

<sup>119</sup> Vallance (1920), pp. 164-5.

At some point prior to about 1840 the down-braces were replaced and supplementary supports to the tie-beams were added, rising from the backs of the new braces and truncating the ends of the original braces rising from the posts to the tie-beams. This work is secured by nails rather than oak pegs, and is perhaps of 18<sup>th</sup>-century date. Vertical struts in the gables appear to be of a similar era. The alterations are clearly shown in one of Charlotte Morice's sketches and in the drawings published by Vallance.<sup>120</sup> It suggests that the structure of the lychgate was failing, and may have followed an earlier, more limited attempt at stabilisation, the evidence for which is a nailed lap-joint for a former stud rising beneath the east end of the south tie-beam.

A small copper plaque attached to the north face of the central tie-beam records that the lychgate was repaired in 1952 in memory of Benjamin Christy (1862-1949).

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<sup>120</sup> Vallance (1920), pp. 178-9.

## Churchyard

The churchyard is an irregular enclosure bounded by Mill Street to the west, a pasture field falling to the River Rhee to the north, the grounds of the former Rectory to the east, and to the south partly by Hodwell and partly by the house plots fronting on to the former market place. These plots must represent an intrusion at the expense of the churchyard, albeit probably at an early date. Another likely intrusion appears on the 1877 OS 1:2500 map (Fig. 64). This shows a broad strip on the south side of the present graveyard, east of, and extending north-south as far as, the house plots referred to above, and clearly indicates this strip to be part of the Rectory grounds at that date. By the time the map was revised in 1897 this strip had been absorbed (reabsorbed?) into the churchyard, and there is now an entrance from Hodwell at its south-east corner. A number of yew trees cluster around the lychgate and south porch and there are a few larger trees, particularly along the northern and western boundaries, but the churchyard is otherwise mostly grassed. The trees appear to be all of post-1850 growth, early views and photographs showing a much more open aspect to the churchyard. The churchyard has the usual scatter of headstones and other memorials, mostly of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century date. The Sale family has a cluster of monuments close to the south wall of the tower, including two unusual monuments (to John Sale, d. 1862, and to Elizabeth, wife of another John Sale, d. 1872) combining headstones with chest tombs.<sup>121</sup> A new burial ground was donated by a local landowner early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Churchwardens' Accounts refer in 1600-1 to three gates to the churchyard, and two years earlier to the north gate.<sup>122</sup> This last must correspond to the present entrance, now an iron kissing gate, from Mill Street at the north-west corner of the churchyard. The other two are likely to be the lychgate further south on Mill Street and the gate at the north end of Church Lane. The first edition OS map shows another entrance from the Rectory grounds to the east, leading to the priest's door on the north side of the chancel.

The northern and eastern boundaries of the churchyard are formed by modern post-and-rail timber fences. On the south a modern timber picket fence, raised on a low brick plinth, lines Hodwell and the path forming the continuation of Church Lane, and where the house plots intrude the boundary is formed by buildings and short intervening lengths of fence. To the east the grounds of the Old Rectory are screened by hedge and a post-and-wire fence. Only on the west side is there an early and substantial boundary wall, partly of clunch, partly of brick, extending from the lychgate to the north-west corner of the churchyard. Unlike the other boundaries,



Fig. 64. Extract from the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map, Hertfordshire sheet 4.9 (published 1877), showing the church and churchyard. The south-east part of the churchyard is shown annexed to the Rectory gardens. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

<sup>121</sup> These monuments have been badly affected by rainwater shed by the tower.

<sup>122</sup> Palmer, ed. (1985), pp. 50, 41.

maintenance of which fell to the proprietors of the adjacent land, the churchyard wall was the responsibility of the parish.<sup>123</sup>

### Churchyard wall

The wall, which is listed Grade II as part of the lychgate listing, falls gently towards the north, following the lie of the land, but also incorporates a step down immediately north of the tower. Churchyard ground levels rise with repeated interments; consequently the wall now resembles a retaining wall on this side, with only a small height exposed.

The wall has been considerably rebuilt, including two long stretches in the recent past, but it retains some medieval, 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century fabric. There is a chamfered clunch top course to the plinth and a moulded limestone coping throughout. The plinth is otherwise wholly in brick. Above the plinth the earliest fabric is clearly the squared and coursed clunch of the middle section, just south of the tower, which incorporates a single short, shouldered buttress on the outer face (Fig. 65). This buttress appears in a number of drawings of the 1830s and 1840s. To the north and south of this stretch there is a more limited survival of clunch, forming between one and three irregular course immediately overlying the plinth. At the extreme south end of the wall, and for a long stretch at the north end, where the wall has a curved corner



Fig. 65. The earliest surviving section of churchyard wall, of late-medieval date on a rebuilt plinth.

and a brief return to the gate, it is built entirely of brick. The northern section appears to be of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date; the plinth is built in English bond and the upper part of the wall in Flemish bond, but at the curve both parts are in header bond. South of the step in the wall the Flemish bond continues briefly, but there is then an interval of modern brick in Flemish bond (retaining the early coping but incorporating a cement-covered plinth course) before the section of clunch wall is reached. South of the fully clunch wall there is a length of Flemish bond brickwork of 18<sup>th</sup>-century date overlying a band of clunch, then another stretch of modern brickwork in the same bond (the plinth course once again cement-covered). At the south end, adjoining the lychgate, there is a short length of 19<sup>th</sup>-century grey brick in monk bond.

<sup>123</sup> 1822 Terrier, HALS, DP/7/3/11.

## Setting and views

*Note: the analysis of views was conducted during May 2018, when trees were in full leaf.*



Fig. 66. Charlotte Morice view from the south. Greater tree and hedgerow growth in the 20th and 21st centuries has made this view harder to obtain today. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

Ashwell's church is parochial, and its presence was therefore intended to be felt primarily by the local community. That Ashwell enjoyed borough status from an early date, on the other hand, implies that it attracted traders and customers from surrounding villages and to some extent, perhaps, from neighbouring towns. A town church can in some measure be a statement of the townspeople's pre-eminence in the locality. This doubtless helps to explain the large size and conspicuous elaboration of the church, and more particularly of its tower.



Fig. 67. A more distant modern view from the south, on the approach from Newnham.

The position of the church, close to the River Rhee where the underlying chalk strata dip northwards beneath the clay of the vale, does little to enhance its prominence in the landscape, but it stands elevated a few metres above the valley bottom on a gentle rise on the south side of the river. On the approach to Ashwell from the south-east (Odsey and Ashwell & Morden railway station) it remains invisible until well inside the village envelope. From the

south (on the minor road which becomes Kingsland Way when it enters the settlement, the church is glimpsed several times just before Ashwell Street and the steep descent to the High Street, but only the spike and the top of the tower are visible. From the south and south-west (Baldock and Newnham) higher ground screens the view until shortly before the village is reached, and the views, when they materialise, are sudden and dramatic: a tall church tower raising from a congregation of lesser buildings generously interspersed by trees (Fig. 67). From the west (Hinworth) the approach is lower-lying, with the result that views, which begin immediately after leaving the built-up area of Hinworth, are richly sylvan but without topographical grandeur (Fig. 70). From the north and west (Steeple Morden, Guilden Morden and Eyeworth) a slightly elevated plateau intervenes before views are disclosed, but the church is seen prominently from a distance of a mile or more as the ground begins to fall gently towards Ashwell, fringed by trees, and backed by the rising swell of chalk upland. More distant views (up to 3 miles) can be had from the elevated road running between Eyeworth, Denton and Edworth.



Fig. 68 (left). Charlotte Morice view from Church Lane. (HALS)

Fig. 69 (above). A similar view today.

Within Ashwell, the church is seldom seen from the east owing to the presence of buildings and trees. It is well screened from the ancient route-way of Ashwell Street, despite its elevation. From the west (e.g. Gardiners Lane) the church is more open to the surrounding fields. Despite the longer-distance views on the approach from the Mordens, nearer approach causes the church to disappear behind its fringe of churchyard trees, only the spike sometimes making an appearance above the canopy, until the tower emerges belatedly into view on the ascent of Mill Lane. Even then, close-up views of the north elevation are largely screened from the road, and they are not prominent in the range of historic views consulted.

Along the High St there are occasional but pleasing glimpses of the church where gaps in the houses occur. Of particular importance are the views northwards along Church Lane and the footpath extending the same alignment southwards, focused on the nave but with the tower rising to the left (Figs 68 & 69) , and the dramatic 'reveal' when turning into Swan Lane and then Mill Lane from the High Street (Fig. 72).



Fig. 70. The view from Hinxworth.

Some guidance as to what might be considered historic views can be derived from Charlotte Morice's John Buckler's and other visual sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including early photographs. A flurry of views were drawn, and some of them subsequently engraved or lithographed, between the 1820s and the 1840s. Charlotte Morice, a resident in Ashwell, produced the largest number and probably enjoyed greater freedom in gaining access to favourable viewpoints, where these were on private land. One in particular (Fig. 71) adopted a view from the north-east, looking across the River Rhee between its source and the water-mill, perhaps from the grounds of Ducklake Farm (where she produced other sketches). Another sketch seems to be from a similar direction though the river does not appear, and instead farm buildings occupy the foreground. A lively view by Morice is taken from the yard of the former Bull Inn on the south side of the High Street. Most views were from the public road, particularly from the south end of Mill Street looking north or north-east, with the lychgate forming a foreground feature, or the churchyard, where attractive views free of the distractions of nearby village buildings were presented from the south-east and north-east, and a valuable if less attractively composed view from the south. John Buckler's watercolours are severely architectural, but he, like Morice and the Harradens, is content to include elements of the wider village scene, as most emphatically in Morice's view from the Bull and another looking along Church Lane from the south. One distant view by Morice shows the church from the road descending into the village from the south (Fig. 66). Most of these views can still be obtained

today, though views from Ducklake Farm have not been verified, and the surrounding landscape generally has more mature trees and less closely cropped hedgerows than in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is notable that historic views from the north and north-west are absent.



Fig. 71. One of Charlotte Morice's views taken from the north side of the River Rhee, probably from the grounds of Ducklake Farm. (Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies)

A currently unexploited view from Rollys Lane is currently impeded by the tall netting surrounding the former school playground. This is a pity, since the relationship between church and school has important historic associations, albeit of a date long after the church's first construction. A still more appropriate association is between the church and the market place which underpinned Ashwell's status and wealth in the Middle Ages. The market place is infilled, and now recognisable only as a pattern of streets, with an absence (the Town House or Museum is the principal exception) of medieval buildings within. But the views from Hodwell, Swan Street and, fleetingly, High Street still hint at this relationship.

Dr Adam Menuge FSA IHBC  
December 2018



Fig. 72. The view from the former market place at the junction of Mill Street and Hodwell – a popular view since the early 19th century.

## Appendix 1: description in RCHME, Hertfordshire (1911)

Source: 'Ashwell', in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Hertfordshire* (London: HMSO, 1911), pp. 38-40. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/rchme/herts/pp38-40> [consulted 17 February 2018].

(2). **Parish Church of St. Mary**, stands under the hill at the edge of the great plain stretching N. and E. to Cambridge and the Fens, and is of flint rubble and clunch. The first four bays of the *Nave*, with clerestorey, and the chancel arch were constructed c. 1340–50; the *Chancel*, *West Tower* and *Aisles* were built, the last bay of the nave was inserted to connect it with the tower, and the clerestorey was completed c. 1360–80. A *North Vestry*, since destroyed, was also built in the 14th century. The *South Porch*, with parvise, was added c. 1420; and in the same century a *North Porch* was built, and some of the windows of the aisle were heightened. During the 19th century the chancel was repaired, and the roofs of the chancel and nave renewed. The lofty W. tower of four stages, the untouched though rather dilapidated condition of the whole fabric, the Latin verses commemorating the Black Death, and the drawing of what is supposed to be old St. Paul's, scratched on the wall of the tower, are features of peculiar interest.



Fig. 73. Photograph published in RCHME (1911).

### Architectural Description—

The *Chancel* (50½ ft. by 19½ ft.) has an E. window of five lights, two N. windows and three S. windows, each of three lights; all are of late 14th-century date, with much repaired tracery. In the N. wall are two 14th-century doorways, one partly under a window, the other, which led to the vestry, now blocked. The 14th-century chancel arch is of two moulded orders, with responds having moulded bases and capitals. The *Nave* (90 ft. by 24 ft.) has five bays; the first four are of c. 1340–50, and are of two moulded orders with labels on both sides of the walls; the piers have clustered shafts with moulded bases and

capitals; the plinths of the bases have been mutilated; the last bay, wider than the others and of slightly different detail, is of c. 1380; W. of this bay the walls have long traceried panels and form the E. buttresses of the tower; the rood-loft doorways on the E. are blocked, but their lines are distinct. The clerestorey has six windows on each side; the two middle windows on the N. side are of c. 1350, the two westernmost windows on both sides are of c. 1380, and the others were altered in the 16th century. The *North Aisle* (90 ft. by 14 ft.) has a 14th-century E. window of three lights with tracery, and five 15th-century N. windows of three lights, of which the tracery is much decayed and partly destroyed. The N. doorway is of late 14th-century date. The W. wall, built of ashlar, is of c. 1360–70, and has a large, blocked barrow hole. The *South Aisle* (90½ ft. by 13½ ft.) has an E. window of three lights with tracery. In the S. wall are five windows, also of three lights; the heads were raised in the 15th century, and the decayed tracery is of that date; much of the head tracery is missing. The S. doorway is of the 14th century, and W. of it is a blocked doorway to the parvise staircase. The *Tower* (16 ft. square), unusually high, is of four stages with a parapet, formerly embattled but now retaining only the corner merlons, and a small leaded spire on an octagonal drum. The walls are about 8 ft. thick at the base, and are supported at the corners by massive buttresses. The stair-turret begins at the S.W. corner, and is continued above the first stage in the S.E. angle, the connection being through a passage in the thickness of the wall. The tower arch is of c. 1360; it is of three sub-divided, moulded orders, the shafts in the jambs having moulded bases and capitals; the bases are worn, and large pieces have been cut out above the capitals on the W., probably for a gallery which has been taken down. The large W. window of four lights has lost some of the head tracery, and the rest is repaired with cement. Of the sexpartite stone vault over the first stage only the corbels and wall ribs remain. In each face of the third stage are two lofty windows with a band of much defaced tracery below them. The fourth stage, less high and of plainer appearance than the other stage, has four windows each of two lights with tracery. The *North Porch*, an interesting example of 15th-century work, has unglazed traceried windows, and holes for an oak bar remain in the doorway. The *South Porch*, with parvise, has unglazed windows with iron stanchions; the stone vault is modern. The parvise has been restored, and the stair-turret is now entered from the porch. The *Roofs* of the aisles are probably of the 14th century, and the roof of the N. porch is of the 15th century. The chancel roof is modern, and the nave roof is almost entirely of modern timbers.

Fittings—*Bells*: six; 2nd 1694. *Brackets*: in E. wall N. aisle, of stone, much defaced: in E. wall S. aisle, large, moulded, much broken. *Brasses* and *Indents*: in the nave, inscription to John Sell, 1618: in the chancel, three slabs with indents, 15th-century: on S. doorstep, part of a similar slab. *Chest*: in the vestry, of carved oak, early 17th-century. *Communion Table*: 17th-century. *Doors*: N. and S., oak with ironwork, original. *Font*: modern, steps probably 14th-century. *Glass*: in heads of N.E., N.W., and S.W. windows of the clerestorey, some painted glass, probably early 15th-century: in the N. aisle, some fragments of later date. *Locker*: in S. aisle, on N.E., recess only remains. *Monuments*: on N. wall of nave, to Ralph Baldwyn, 1689, with arms: at E. end of N. aisle, rectangular tomb, 15th-century, with plain top and traceried sides, much defaced and mutilated. *Niches*: in two chancel windows, one plain, the other with moulded brackets: in S. aisle above the piscina, of considerable height; all probably 15th-century. *Piscinae*: one in each aisle, c. 1350: one in N. wall of chancel, outside, also c. 1350: one inside chancel, forming a group with sedilia, c. 1380; the projection has been broken away from each bowl. *Plate*: includes an engraved cup of 1688, and a paten of 1632. *Pulpit*: of carved oak, dated 1627. *Screens*: at W. end of both aisles, probably removed from E. end, traceried oak, 15th-century. *Stalls*: remains, including two finials, incorporated in the back of the organ stool, possibly 15th-century. *Sedilia*: in chancel triple, with cinque-foiled and crocketed heads, and foliated finials, c. 1380. *Miscellanea*: On N. wall of tower, scratched inscription as follows:— M.C. ter X. penta miseranda ferox violenta .....superest plebs pessima testis .....oc anno Maurus in orbe tonat: with glosses: over first line, 'pestilencia' with 'xlix' over it; over penta 'quinque': at end of second line, 'in fine °q (?) ventus validus': at end of third line, M. C.C.C. lxi. Also a drawing, apparently of old St. Paul's Cathedral.

*Lychgate*: at the S.W. entrance to the churchyard, of timber, probably 15th century.

Condition—Of chancel, good; tracery of aisle windows much broken and decayed. Stonework generally of aisles, and parapets, buttresses and windows of the tower much decayed and weatherworn.

## Appendix 2: statutory list descriptions

Source: National Heritage List for England (<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list>) [consulted 17 February 2018].

### St Mary the Virgin (Grade I)

Parish Church. C14 (completed 1381). C15 N porch and aisle windows. Large building with exceptionally big W tower. Clunch. Flint rubble. Some red brick. Low pitched slate roofs behind parapets. 4-stage W tower has deeply projecting stepped angle buttresses. Leaded spike with crenellated octagonal base. Lowest stage has 4-light Decorated-style traceried window; belfry stage has paired pointed arches with traceried panels. N and S aisles have 3-light traceried windows; hood moulds; cinquefoiled lights. Chancel with 3-light restored C14 windows. N porch is single storey. Original door arch and windows. 2-storey S porch has C19 restored gabled front. Lierne vault with naturalistic foliage bosses. Internally, the nave is 5 bays. Composite piers illustrating stylistic progression: E 3 with rounded piers, W 2 with canted piers. Tall W arch with canted piers; walls either side with 2 tall traceried panels. C15 aisle roofs, the N one largely restored. Chancel has good mid-C14 sedilia: 4 cinquefoiled arches with crocketed ogee gables. Fittings: hexagonal wooden pulpit dated 1627; C15 traceried wooden screen to Lady Chapel in E bay of S aisle; C19 replica font on early octagonal base; C15 benches near Chancel. On N wall of W tower are remarkable C14 graffiti: an inscription recording survival of citizens of Ashwell during great plague and a drawing of Old St. Paul's Cathedral, London. (Pevsner (1977)).

### Lychgate and adjoining wall (Grade II)

Lychgate and adjoining wall. C15, the wall C19. Lychgate is timber frame. Plain tile open timber roof in 2 bays. Crown post construction carried on ties with arched braces. Curved braces to side walls. C19-20 wooden gates and C19 brick base. Wall is 75 metres long on N. Red brick, some white brick. Some clunch where wall bends near N end. Limestone saddleback coping.

## Appendix 3: Summary of recent works

Based on information supplied by Mike Taffs, Churchwarden.

| Date    | Architect                                               | Contractors                                              | Location         | Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2007-9  | Caroe and Partners                                      | Bakers of Danbury, Essex;<br>Richard Green, Hull (glass) | South Aisle      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rebuilding of the parapet wall (east of the South Porch)</li> <li>2. Masonry repairs to the external walls (including work to the windows)</li> <li>3. Plaster repairs and internal redecorations.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 2010    | Iain Frearson, Freeland Rees Roberts Architects (FRRRA) | R. J. Pinnock and Son, Wallington, Herts                 | South side       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Masonry repairs to the Nave parapet walls, Nave East Gable, and South Porch and Chancel parapet walls, roof abutments, etc.;</li> <li>2. Replacement parapet gutters to Chancel (leadwork and timber structure);</li> <li>3. Minor repairs to roof leadwork, slating, etc.;</li> <li>4. Clearing out, rodding through and testing surface water drainage system, removal of concrete perimeter drainage channel to Chancel south and east elevations, provision of replacement soakaways;</li> <li>5. Repairs to South Porch outer gates; internal redecoration of South Porch.</li> </ol> |
| 2011    | ?                                                       | ?                                                        | South Aisle      | Minor alterations and a adaptation of ironmongery, south door                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2012-13 | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | R. J. Pinnock and Son                                    | North side       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Masonry repairs to the Chancel parapet walls, roof abutments, etc.;</li> <li>2. Replacement parapet gutters to Chancel (leadwork and timber structure);</li> <li>3. Minor repairs to roof leadwork, slating, etc.;</li> <li>4. Clearing out, rodding through and testing surface water drainage system, provision of replacement soakaways;</li> <li>5. Miscellaneous stone conservation and repair work to Chancel (North Elevation trial bay (eastern-most bay)).</li> </ol>                                                                                                             |
| 2012    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | R. J. Pinnock and Son                                    | Services         | Provision of new water supply from the west (originally water had come from the former Rectory on the east side)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2013    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | H. Austwick Ltd, Stow-cum-Quy, Cambs                     | Tower            | Minor leadwork repairs to roof                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2014    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | Lodge and Sons (Builders) Ltd                            | Chancel          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conservation and repair to stonework (including localised stone replacement, in clunch)</li> <li>2. Re-glazing East Window, re-tipping ferramenta, etc.</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 2014    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | Lodge and Sons (Builders) Ltd                            | Nave             | Minor leadwork repairs to roof                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2014    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | ?                                                        | Tower            | Minor pointing repairs to one of the buttresses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 2014    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | Bakers of Danbury Ltd                                    | Belfry           | Cleaning out debris and bird nesting material                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 2015    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | Lodge and Sons (Builders) Ltd                            | Chancel          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Full internal redecorations;</li> <li>2. Stone and pointing repairs to floor;</li> <li>3. Plaster repairs and removal of hard, cementitious plaster</li> <li>4. Re-glazing the north and south windows, re-tipping ferramenta, overhauling window vents;</li> <li>5. Conservation and repair work to the combined sedilia and piscina;</li> <li>6. Removal of redundant French drain to the north side</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2016    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | H. Austwick Ltd                                          | North Aisle Roof | Minor leadwork repairs                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 2016    | I Frearson, FRRRA                                       | Gem Conservation,                                        | Nave floor       | Minor conservation and repair work to stonework                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

|      |                      |                                     |            |                                                                                    |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|      |                      | Upton,<br>Northants                 |            |                                                                                    |
| 2016 | I Frearson,<br>FRRRA | Gem<br>Conservation                 | Nave floor | Minor conservation and repair work to stonework                                    |
| 2017 | I Frearson,<br>FRRRA | Lodge and<br>Sons (Builders)<br>Ltd |            | New footpath lighting bollards to SW corner of churchyard and<br>light to Lychgate |
|      |                      |                                     |            |                                                                                    |

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