

THE PEWS IN THE CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS

New Romney, Kent

by

Roger Bowdler

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ST NICHOLAS'S CHURCH, NEW ROMNEY, KENT

Dr Richard Morrice of the South-East Team of Conservation Department's South Region has asked for a detailed assessment of the pews within this grade I church. The Canterbury DAC is currently considering a proposal that involves the removal of considerable numbers of the box pews and the raising of the floor in the nave. We are asked to supply a history of the pews within the church and comment on their significance in local and national terms.

1 St Nicholas's Church, New Romney: Introduction

St Nicholas's is among the finest medieval churches in the county. V.J. Torr, in *Kentish Churches* (1954) went as far as to call it 'one of the most notable buildings in England... the pride of the Cinque Ports and Kent alike'¹. Best known for its Norman west tower, described in 1880 as 'undoubtedly the greatest Romanesque tower in Kent'², the body of the church consists of two distinct phases: the four westernmost bays of the nave which date from the later 12th Century, and the three easternmost bays of the nave, the north and south aisles and the triple chancel which all date from the early 14th Century. The east end of the church is notable on account of its reticulated tracery and the presence of three sanctuaries -a central chancel flanked by chapels in each of the aisles- with a matching complement of piscina and sedilia.

The fabric of the church closely reflects the changing fortunes of the town of New Romney. Once a highly important port and administrative centre of the Cinque Ports, Romney was large enough for St Nicholas to be but one of several parish churches, albeit the largest. The great storm of 1287 utterly altered Romney's setting. Great mounds of sand were thrown up close to the church and the inlet leading in to the harbour severely diminished. This resulted in the waning of the port's prosperity, and the eventual closure of the harbour in 1521. Leland, writing in c.1540, observed that 'Rumney hath bene a metely good haven, yn so much that withyn remembrance of men, shyppes have cum hard up to the towne and cast ancrs in one of the churchyards. The se is now ij myles fro the towne, so sore therby decayed that wher ther were iij great paroches and chirches symtime is now scant one wel mayteined'³.

Despite this decline, the ancient privileges accorded to the Cinque Ports lent New Romney a stature that ensured the town's continuing importance. Romney, one of the great Rotten Boroughs, returned two MPs until 1832 and the offices of Warden and Deputy Warden of the Cinque Ports remained court appointments: representatives from

¹H.R. Pratt Boorman & V.J. Torr, *Kent Churches* (1954), v and 17.

²Canon Scott Robinson, 'St Nicholas, New Romney', *Arch. Cant.* XIII (1880), 468.

³Quoted in W.R. Somers, *The Story of the Church of St Nicholas, New Romney* (1986), 41.

the towns maintained the privilege of carrying the canopy over the monarch at coronations. Romney enjoyed a municipal prestige that was far outweighed its economic importance, and the church continued to undergo alterations and modifications to its fittings that reflected the town's enduring status.

The living of the church, from at least 1467⁴ had belonged to All Souls, Oxford. In later years -and certainly by the mid-18th century- vicars tended to reside elsewhere and rely on curates for the performance of their pastoral duties. The municipality of New Romney, headed by the Mayor and Jurats, possessed considerable influence over parish business since there were the church's principal benefactors: it was they who provided an organ, they who paid for a west gallery, and they who caused some of the pews to be constructed. As will be seen, this was an unusual church because of its close municipal connections.

2 The Pews: Description

New Romney has an exceptional number of box pews that fill the nave and part of the south aisle; those in the north aisle and the eastern part of the nave were removed during the 1980s. They make an undeniable contribution to the interest of the interior and are an important survival of an increasingly rare phenomenon.

The pews can be divided into four groups: the pews at the front of the nave, the bulk of the pews in the nave and south aisle, the 'Queen Anne' pew in the south aisle, and the former choir stalls in the north and south aisles. These are discussed in turn below.

2 (a) the front nave pews

At the eastern end of the north and south rows of pews in the nave are two rows of pews that are clearly different from the others. They are taller, and constructed of more elaborate joinery than the others. Their H-shaped door hinges, raised and fielded panelling and the mouldings to the upper rails all indicate a date of c.1700. Under the sloping book rests (themselves a Victorian addition) are long cast iron hat pegs. The pews are now painted a dirty dark brown, with discoloured varnish on top, but there are clear signs of lighter coloured paint underneath. These pews now stand on a raised wooden floor of planking. The pews have only been in this position since 1874 at the earliest.

2 (b) the main nave and south aisle pews

The other seventeen rows of pews in the nave and the matching middle eight rows in the south aisle are remarkably consistent in appearance and construction. Like the front nave pews they are made of deal and have two-panel doors with raised fields; in other aspects they are rather different. The upper rails, or capping, have a more intricate profile, of Gothic inspiration, to the others; the panels of the back rests have sunken panels which are edged with applied quarter-round mouldings not cut from the solid; and all the pew

⁴Scott Robinson, *op. cit.*, 477.

doors have cast iron hinges which, with very few exceptions⁵, are of two distinct types and which bear 19th century stamped markings: L?G & SON 932, or W.D. & CO.

The north-facing easternmost pews in the south aisle, closest to the Stuppeny tomb, are an amalgamation of early 18th century fabric and mid-Victorian alteration. The four rows of narrower pews, between the main block of pews behind them and the north-facing pews in front of them, and which are now used in part for children, appear to be entirely of a mid-Victorian date.

2 (c) the 'Queen Anne' pew

The finest individual pew is that at the west end of the south aisle. Known as the 'Queen Anne' pew, it is much larger than all the others in depth and it is constructed of higher quality joinery than the other pews. The two-panel door is attached with long H-shaped hinges, and the inner side of the pew is ornamented with an elaborately carved foliate scroll. The book shelf and bench within are supported on turned columnar posts. The front of the pew is obscured and the back rest has been replaced with vertically tooled planking. It is not clear whether this pew is in its original position. The sloping back-rests in particular have undergone reconstruction but otherwise the fabric of this pew is little altered and of considerable note.

2 (d) the former choir stalls

The only pews remaining within the north aisle are three rows of stepped choir stalls that are clearly of a mid-19th century date, judging by their rich Gothic ornament and the extensive use of cast iron.

3 The Pews: Documentary History

Remarkably full church records survive at the Centre for Kentish Studies in Maidstone. These take the form of churchwardens' accounts from 1692 onwards that include itemised bills from craftsmen, and vestry minutes. Other documentary sources include faculties (at Canterbury Cathedral) and Archbishops' visitation records (at Lambeth Palace Library) and drawings by the Scott family (RIBA Drawings Collection). Taken together, they enable an unusually detailed account of the probable development of the pewing to be outlined. The quantity of archival material is very considerable, and not all of it by any means has been consulted⁶. The following account must be read with that limitation in mind.

⁵The upper hinge on the inner door of the pew second from the western end of the north side is a simple H-shaped hinge compatible with an early 18th Century date. This seems to be a solitary instance of re-use, but closer examination may well reveal more.

⁶Papers not consulted include the churchwardens' accounts from 1747 onwards, and the vestry minutes for periods other than 1832-1870.

3 (a) summary

To summarise briefly: it is evident that there have been three main periods of activity relating to the seating of the church. The first dates from the late 1690s to 1730, when much of the church was fitted with pews, some of greater status than others, and a gallery built. The second period dates from the early 1850s, when extensive repair and alteration to the pews was carried out. The third key period dates from the 1980s onwards, when the north aisle was cleared, chairs were placed at the east end of the nave, and the old pews decommissioned to all practical purposes.

3 (b) earliest references to the pews

The earliest conclusive evidence of pew construction comes from the churchwardens' accounts for 1697-8⁷. In that year £24/17/5 was spent on the church, of which £9/14/6 was paid to Thomas Short, carpenter, for 'heightening ye Seats at ye Church'. His bill included 21 days work for man and boy, and the most expensive item was £4/4/- for 42 'Seat boards at 2/- per board'. This indicates a fairly considerable amount of work to what were in all likelihood plain pews.

In 1699-1700 payments were made for joinery work to the pulpit and desk, including stairs to the former⁸. The accounts for 1701-2⁹ include the considerable payment of £14/15/4 to Thomas Reynolds, carpenter for 'worke and materials in building 3 new Seats', but which was crossed out and subtracted from the total, since the vestry had not sanctioned this expenditure. They settled the bill in the following year, which included the following charges: £1/2/11 for 142 ft of oaken board; £4/10/2 for 62 deals, and for splitting 30 of them; and £6/7/- for 31 yds and 8 ft of 'wainscott with Cornish and Mouldings'¹⁰. These were clearly pews of some status, and rather grander than those altered in 1697-8.

This work may well have been sanctioned by the earliest surviving faculty relating to the church, which was granted in April 1700¹¹, for one John Mascall to erect, and build, or cause to be erected, and built in the Parish Church of St Nicholas in New Romney... three Seates or Pews for himselfe his heires and family forever One whereof at the upper end of the north Isle of the said Church adjoining to the North Chancell of eight foot long and six foote broad, And the other two just within the said North Chancell, of eight foote long together, and three foot and an halfe broad each of them, and adjoining to the aforesaid Greate Seate without the said Chancell.

⁷Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone: NR/ZPa/2/27.

⁸NR/ZPa/2/29.

⁹NR/ZPa/2/30.

¹⁰NR/ZPa/2/31.

¹¹Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCb/EF/New Romney 1.

The Mayor, Jurats and Commonality of New Romney signed a declaration that 'the Seates or Pews formerly belonging to the Jurats Wives of this Corporation did not extend any higher in the said North Isle towards the said North Chancell then only to the lower side of the said Seate or Pew now intended to be erected'. So it is known that the wives of New Romney's office holders sat separately from their menfolk, and that part of the north aisle was devoted to their seating.

In the following year (1702-3), Thomas Reynolds, carpenter was paid £15 'for building two new Seates in ye South Isle of ye Church' and other work¹². Save for an isolated payment in 1710 for a solitary pew door in 1710¹³, the carpenters' accounts submitted to the church wardens make not specific reference to work on the pews. In a town as small as New Romney there was evidently no distinction between carpenter's and joiner's work.

3 (c) the 1718 Corporation Pews

The next faculty devoted to seating dates from 3 June 1718, and referred to the erection of five pews for official Corporation use:

There hath been lately erected in a vacant place in the Pish Church of New Romney... five new Pews or Seats viz One Pew or Seat in the North Isle or Chancell... containing in length nine ffeet and in Breadth Seven ffeet for the use of the Wives of the Mayor and Jurats of the Towne of New Romney... one other pew or seat in the said North Isle or Chancell adjoining to the former containing in length nine ffeet and in breadth five ffeet and a halfe for the use of their servants, two other pewes or seates in the South Isle and Chancell of the said Church containing each in length ten ffeet and in breadth five feet for the use of the Wives of the Comon Councillmen and ffreemen of the Towne of New Romney... and one other pewe or seat in the said South Isle or Chancell adjoining to the last mentioned two seats containing twelve ffeet in length and five foot and a halfe in breadth for the use of their servants.

Tantalisingly, none of the measurements listed above tally with those of the 'Queen Anne' pew or the pews now in the front of the nave: these may well have been cut down at a later date. There are no obvious references in the churchwardens' accounts that refer to this work: regular small payments are made to carpenters, but their itemised bills indicate that most of their work in the 1710's involved the tower, bell frame and roof. It is not clear which actual pews are referred to in this faculty.

The reason for this lack of evidence may well be that the churchwardens were not involved in paying for these pews. A letter from Lord Sondes to the Mayor of New Romney¹⁴, dated 20 October 1716 stated that 'I have been for some time in expection of hearing of ye Pewing for ye Church being Come to Romny, wch ye Joyner promised me should be soon'. Lewis Watson, Earl of Rockingham, Viscount Sondes (1655-1724) was Lord Lieutenant of Kent and, in 1705-8, Deputy Warden of the Cinque Ports. His

¹²NR/ZPa/2/31.

¹³NR/ZPa/2/39.

¹⁴Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone: NR/AZ 82.

principal seat was Rockingham Castle, but he had inherited Lees Court through his wife Catherine, daughter of George Sondes, 1st Earl of Feversham¹⁵. It appears that he arranged for some pewing to be made for New Romney by a joiner named George Theobald, who, on 15 November 1716, wrote apologetically to Godfrey Martin, Mayor of New Romney¹⁶. A letter from the latter had found him 'in a very low Condishon'; work for a Col. Hamilton had taken far longer than expected, and 'I have bine ille & not able to looke out for a Wessell to bring it'. The letter was addressed from Milton and directed 'by London': clearly the pewing had a long journey to make. The 'Queen Anne' pew is very different in construction, size and appearance from all the others: it seems quite possible that this was the pew dispatched by 'wessel' on Sondes' instructions.

Sondes was also the donor of paving within the church, and took a direct interest in the fabric of the building: in May 1720 he wrote again to the Mayor, stating that the Remainders of what is wanting, shall be spedily furnished & have Last Week wrote to Friend to go over in order to y finishing y 2 windows, you desire to be enlarged. & shall give orders for the painting of the Pews. The Pulpit & Desk Cloth are Bespoke¹⁷.

The Mayor, Charles Welland, replied on 19 May 1720 thanking Sondes for £20 given to the Corporation for drinking the healths of George I and the Prince of Wales 'upon ye happy Reconciliation', and for 'the Pavement in the Church... an Addition to former favours'¹⁸. Another local magnate, Sir Henry Furnese of Waldershare Park, had also contributed to the Corporation's drinking money, and it has been asserted that he was responsible in 1712 for having 'beautified the centre chancel by boarding and panelling the ceiling at his own cost. He also made seats for the Corporation'¹⁹. Sondes' letter of 10 May, referred to above, provides evidence that the pews were originally painted.

3 (d) Alterations to the Pews 1722-30

The next specific reference to work affecting the pews is found in the churchwardens' accounts for 1722-3. In that year, William Welch, carpenter was paid the large sum of £21/6/2: his bill included £8/15/- for 50 yards of wainscot at 3/- per yard, £6/16/6 for 39 yards of wainscot at £/6 per yard, and a mere 4/- 'for taking up old pews'²⁰. This was clearly a major campaign of alteration to the church's seating, and was followed in 1730 with the construction of a gallery at the west end of the nave. The faculty petition, dated 17th September 1730 and signed by the Mayor, John Tookey, an behalf of the Corporation:

¹⁵G.E.C., *Complete Peerage* XI (1949), 57-8.

¹⁶NR/AZ 80.

¹⁷NR/AZ 83.

¹⁸NR/AZ 84.

¹⁹Walter Somers, *The Story of the Church of St Nicholas New Romney, a personal View* (1994), 22. The chancel was ceiled in 1726-7 at a cost of £21, as the churchwardens' accounts (NR/ZPa 2/54) make clear.

²⁰NR/ZPa 2/51.

there is not sufficient quantity of seats or pews in the parish Church of New Romney... for the convenient setting of their wives Children and servants to hear divine service there read and celebrated... [they sought] a faculty for erecting a Gallery in the lower end of the west part of the Middle Isle of the said Church adjoining to the Belfery to contain sixteen feet in depth twenty one feet in length and sixteen feet high from the pavement, and a convenient staircase to go up out of the North Isle²¹.

With this addition of a western gallery, the principal period of pewing was completed. Thereafter, the pace of improving the interior of St Nicholas' slowed, and money was spent more on major repairs to the roof and tower. The 1786 Visitation remarked that, of the 500 souls in the parish, 'there are no families of note'²². In spite of this, Kent's foremost historian, Edward Hasted, was able to write in 1790 that 'the inside of the church is fitted up exceedingly handsome and elegant'²³.

4 19th Century Alterations to the Pews

The realisation that the early 18th Century seating was no longer wholly adequate emerged in the late 1840s. At a vestry meeting on 14th April 1849 it was reported that 'the Churchwardens are requested to procure a plan with a view of affording encreased accommodation in the church and report the same to the next vestry'²⁴. The vestry returned to the matter a year later. At its meeting of 5th April 1850 the following resolution was passed:

The Churchwardens not being able with the present arrangement of the pews to afford efficient accommodation, as it is their duty to do, for the Inhabitants attending Divine Service, they are by this Vestry ordered as early as practicable to make such alterations therein as will effectually afford the accommodation required according to the plan submitted by them²⁵.

No such plan is known to survive, but tradesmen's bills within the annual bundles of churchwardens' accounts for this period clearly reveal that such work was carried out. The most important single bill was that submitted by Edwin Baker for £55/6/7 for carpenter's work over the period between May 1850 and February 1851²⁶. As well as doing work on windows and the floor (which may well have been related to alterations to

²¹DCb/EF/New Romney 3. This gallery would have been placed over the notable oak screen of 1603 that is still in situ.

²²Lambeth palace Library, VG 3/1B, 513.

²³Op. cit., 528.

²⁴P309/8/11, 141.

²⁵Idem., 147-8.

²⁶P309/5/58, churchwardens' accounts 1850-51.

the pews), he also carried out extensive work to the pews. Very large quantities of deals, of varying dimensions, were itemised: 528 ft of one size, 280 ft of another 94 ft of a third. The most significant item was £16/13/4 for 500 ft of capping at 8d per foot: this would have been more than enough. Another substantial payment made in that year was to I.S. Hammond & Co., ironmongers and ironfounders of Ashford: most of the payments were for screws and other items, rather than for hinges, which one would have expected to have featured prominently in such a bill, and which were not mentioned specifically.

What was actually done to the pews? Whilst one body of evidence suggests that nearly all the pews were renewed at this date, another indicates that the old pews were not so much replaced as reworked. On 7th August 1851 the church was visited by the Archdeacon (signature regrettably illegible), who noted in the vestry minutes that 'I visited the church found it in good condition & the pews under repair & alteration'²⁷. Since the churchwardens' accounts for 1851-52 do not survive, we cannot know what further carpenter's work was underway in any detail (nor, perhaps, how much was spent on hinges), but the archdeacon's statement is clear evidence that the pews were not replaced wholesale. A payment of £11 was made in 1853 to A.J. Ayers (sic) for 'preparing staining & varnishing Pews as estimated'²⁸, which may suggest that the alterations were completed by then.

At least some of the early pews had originally been painted, as one would expect them to have been: part of the mid-19th Century alterations included the removal of earlier layers of paint and the uniform staining and varnishing, as itemised above; an earlier reference to such work is found in the churchwardens' accounts for 1849-50, when Edwin Baker was paid 2/3 for 'Taking off Pew Door Shortening ditto Getting off Paint 1/2 lb of patash [sic]²⁹. Potash is an abrasive alkaline which seems to have been used for paint-removal.

It thus appears that the early 18th century pews were substantially altered in 1851-3: that whatever old fabric was still serviceable was re-used; that they continued to be box pews with doors, but that these doors were re-hung with almost entirely new hinges³⁰; and that the bulk of the pews in the nave were updated through the addition of new capping, of a distinctive Gothic roll moulding profile; and that they were varnished. This, however, was the only concession to the current phase of liturgical reform, and the box pews remained in St Nicholas's.

Work on the pews continued after the early 1850s. The 1864 Visitation Return, completed by the Vicar, R. Smith, stated that 'additional sittings were obtained ten or twelve years ago by the re-arrangement of the pews in the nave - no alteration has been

²⁷Idem., 157.

²⁸P309/5/59.

²⁹P309/5/57.

³⁰Examination reveals that almost all the doors in the nave and south aisle have been re-hung with machine-made, stamped iron hinges of two types, marked either WD & Co or ?LG & Son. None of the doors show signs of earlier screw holes, which suggests that the

made in the pews in the n. or s. aisle from want of funds - more sittings are required'; the average congregation on Sunday was about 300 persons³¹. The next Visitation, in 1872, revealed that the average congregation had risen to 420, and that 'there are more than 100 Free Sittings for the use of the labouring classes'; that no pews were let for money, and that 'five new pews have been added (since last Vis.) as a continuation and completion of the pewing of the church - by order of the Vestry, and begun some years ago'³².

The arrangement of the fittings and pews in c1874 is recorded in a survey plan prepared in the office of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott [see **plan 1**]. The arrangement of pews in the main body of the pews in the nave had been arrived at by then, but the early 18th century pews in front were not yet in their present position. Most of the south aisle pews had assumed their present configuration, but it is not clear whether the 'Queen Anne' pew was in situ by then. .

5 The Scott Restoration of the 1880s

The alterations to the pews were carried out before the principal restoration campaign got underway. The Scotts were to have little impact on the seating within the church: the main difference they made was the removal of the western gallery and the , but not for want of trying: John Oldrid Scott prepared a scheme of complete reordering in c1879 [see **Plan 2**] that would have imposed a uniform and entirely new set of pews upon the interior. For want of funds and because of the controversy his restoration aroused, this scheme was never implemented.

J.O. Scott's proposals, and the debate they started, are worth considering in some detail. Although the 1872 Visitation Return stated that the church was in good repair, but others thought differently. *The Building News* for 13th June 1879, 676, reported on a meeting held at New Romney thus:

A public meeting was held... on Wednesday week, for the purpose of considering the question of restoring the church. Mr G. Gilbert Scott, FSA, read a report prepared by his late father, setting forth the architectural history of the building, and the reparation he deemed necessary. The amount required for the entire restoration of the fabric, exclusive of fittings, was estimated at from £3,500 to £4,000, but the work, it was suggested, might be divided into sections. A resolution appointing Mr G.G. Scott architect for carrying out the plans of the late Sir Gilbert Scott was carried unanimously, as was another appointing a local committee.

Three Scotts were involved at New Romney: Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811-78)³³, and his sons George Gilbert Scott (1839-97) and John Oldrid Scott (1841-1913). It would

³¹Lambeth Palace Library, VG 3/3b, 164.

³²VG 3/4c, 329-30.

³³New Romney church was listed as among the legion churches he had worked on in the long list given in *The Builder*, 6th April 1878, 360.

appear that the latter was entrusted with the work at New Romney by his elder brother, following the latter's attendance at the June 1879 meeting; the drawings of the church³⁴ date from c1874, that is, during Sir George Gilbert Scott's day, and were essentially unaltered for use in 1880.

In January 1880 an application was made to the Incorporated Church Building Fund for assistance with the restoration: the total cost of works was an estimated £4,165, and only £500 had been raised. Money was needed to pay for 'a thorough general repair. The churches large Roofs all in a bad state. Norman Tower several large cracks. North aisle of nave in ruinous state... it is proposed at first to confine the work to the two western bays of the Nave with its aisles - The Tower Aisles, and interior of the Tower - at a cost of about £1200'; no reseating was proposed³⁵. The faculty was applied for by the Rev. Richard Muspratt South in September 1880³⁶.

A notice in *The Builder* in May 1880 similar to that in *The Building News* attracted the notice of the fledgling Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. They wrote to the vicar, asking for information as to the nature of the proposed works, but received a chilly response. The Rev. Richard Marshall South, replying on June 8th, declined to give the society information for three reasons: the reasons for the SPAB's existence were 'absurd'; its committee 'includes the greatest radicals of the day'; and 'your questions strongly suggest impertinent inquisitiveness'. The correspondence between the SPAB and the church became lively, and was not only reprinted in the SPAB's *Transactions* for 1880 (p.53-9) but also published in the *East Kent Times* in October 1880. Clearly, New Romney did not welcome the attentions of the SPAB: one opponent suggested that it rename itself the 'Antiquated Society of Pryers'.

The artist George Boyce and Philip Webb visited the church in August 1880 to see what was afoot³⁷. Their subsequent 'Information Sheet' described the church as 'in a very satis. state - on the whole - the walls piers etc being remarkably upright'. However, the 'n. wall of tower aisle & w. part of n. aisle had just been pulled down & was being rebuilt'. This demolition set alarm bells ringing with Boyce and Webb, who anticipated that the scrape was about to begin.

The taking down of the west end of the north aisle was the beginning of John Oldrid Scott's restoration, carried out by the local builder Robert Smith in 1880-81. Scott was written to by the SPAB's secretary Newman Marks, and urged to do no more than was necessary to repair the building since it was rare in having 'been practically untampered with for many years', a statement that says much for the unobtrusive nature of the earlier repair of the pews. He was asked particularly to 'resist the introduction of

³⁴See G. Fisher, G. Stamp at al., *RIBA Catalogue of Drawings: The Scott Family* (1981), 66 and 104. Eight plans and drawings date from 1874; a plan showing a proposed refitting of 1879 was John Oldrid Scott's only drawn contribution. There is one other drawing, of roof details, signed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, in the Centre for Kentish Studies: P309/7/2.

³⁵Lambeth Palace Library, ICBS file 8493: application form dated 25th January 1880.

³⁶Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCb/EF/New Romney 7.

³⁷See SPAB's old file on New Romney.

the usual modern incongruous details and miscalled embellishments, such as marble reredos, pavements, pretentious deal fittings, stained glass, petty brass ornaments, etc.' and 'save this lovely building from the fate which usually attends such when its guardians have determined to enter upon the task of renovation'³⁸.

Scott did not reply, but the SPAB had their way; restoration was confined to structural work to the roofs and tower, and the fittings were largely left unaltered. This was probably more the result of the parish's lack of funds, rather than the cogency of the SPAB's arguments. The final item in the Incorporated Church Building Fund file is a resigned letter from the vicar, dated 29th February 1886, which stated 'I am sorry to say that there is no immediate prospect of any work being undertaken for the further restoration of this church'.

6 Subsequent Restorations

After J. Oldrid Scott, the church passed into the care first of T.G. Jackson and then of W.D. Caroe. Caroe wrote a concise report on the church's condition in July 1913³⁹. Most of it was devoted to the Norman tower. Of the south aisle, he wrote that it was 'very dilapidated and owing to the high ground the walls are very damp'; its doors were 'shabby and unworthy'. Of the fittings overall he declared that 'for a church of such exceptional quality the fittings are poor, uninteresting and unworthy'. Such a verdict would be harder to justify today.

In 1930 the location of the vestry was altered, and the pews in the south aisle below the choir stalls, close to the Stuppeny tomb, were removed⁴⁰. The pews at the west end of the north aisle were also removed to create space for a vestry, which had previously been in the north-east corner of the church. The architect overseeing these changes was A.L.N. Russell of Knapp-Fisher, Powell and Russell of 4, Lower Belgrave Street, London.

In 1949 the south chancel (the east end of the south aisle) was restored⁴¹. Archbishop Lang had visited the church in 1941: 'do move that organ', he told the incumbent⁴². The old organ, inserted in 1845 and which blocked part of the aisle's reticulated east window, was duly given to St Saviour's, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex and the floor of the south aisle exposed to reveal medieval tiles and the many 18th Century ledger stones. This involved the removal of more pews in the south aisle: the PCC had resolved in August 1947 that 'probably two or three deal pews, of no particular value, along the south wall, near to the Stuppeny tomb be removed, thereby increasing the spaciousness

³⁸SPAB, *Transactions for 1880*, 57-8.

³⁹Copies at Lambeth Palace Library (Davidson MS 188, 291-5) and at Maidstone.

⁴⁰Canterbury Cathedral, DCb/EF/New Romney 11: faculty dated 21st June 1930.

⁴¹DCb/EF/New Romney 14: faculty dated 16th November 1948.

⁴²Parish magazine, September 1947.

and bringing the line of pews along the south wall into line with those of the north wall'⁴³.

A major re-ordering was proposed in April 1982 which resulted in a Consistory Court. Purcell, Miller and Tritton were the architects of the proposals, which included the creation of a small enclosed 'weekday' chapel for prayers at the east end, the re-ordering of the chancel and the creation of a meeting room-cum-kitchen in the north aisle in place of the organ. The 'weekday' chapel was refused, on the grounds of its harmful impact on the interior and its interrupting the sequence of three matching sanctuaries, but the pews in the north aisle were replaced with an enclosed vestry room, and the chancel was re-ordered through the installation of one hundred 'Cheltenham' chairs, the faculty for the introduction of which was granted in 1986⁴⁴. These alterations of the 1980s had a major impact on the pewing of the church: not since the overhaul of the 1850s, or even the original installation of pews early in the 19th Century had they been subjected to such alterations. All the pews in the north aisle were removed, half the choir stalls were removed (and the rest repositioned in the north aisle), the principal seating was entirely renewed and installed in the formerly empty east end, and the main body of pews were effectively rendered redundant. Their subsequent use as a storage place for roof tiles and other items was the direct -if surprising- result.

7 The Corporation of New Romney and the Church

As a general rule, south sides of churches possess greater status than the northern sides, a phenomenon simply explained by the greater amount of sunlight that penetrates into them. The south aisle in St Nicholas's has particular local significance on account of its connection with one of the country's oldest and most singular civic bodies: the Corporation of New Romney. It was the place of worship of the Mayor and the Jurats, the centre of Corporation life. Numerous ledger stones and wall memorials in the aisle, principally of 18th Century date, commemorate members of the town's leading families such as the Martens, Wilcocks, Cobbs and Bachelers, and further attest to this municipal connection.

The south aisle was used for the important secular, civic function of electing Jurats and the Mayor from the town's citizens. At the centre of this civic ceremony was the chest tomb of Richard Stuppeny (d.1526), which was rebuilt in 1622 by his great grandson Clement Stuppeny, who, as the inscription made clear, 'hath caused this tombe to be new erected for the use of the auncient meeting and election of maior and Jurats of this port towne': the tomb effectively served as a table during these proceedings. The larger open meetings of the Mayor, Jurats and Commons of the town were known as Guestlings: these were held in the church in order that all might be able to attend⁴⁵. And as late as 1885, New Romney's mayors were all elected in this part of the church.

⁴³Ibid..

⁴⁴DCb/EF/New Romney 25.

⁴⁵Edward Hasted, *History and Topography of the County of Kent* III (1790), 523.

The location of Pews in any church carried very considerable social significance: attending divine service was also a form of social display, and the most prominently located pews were the jealously guarded property of families or bodies of influence. In New Romney the allocation of pews was determined partly by private social status -some pews were privately erected and held⁴⁶- but more important was the role of the Corporation. New Romney's south aisle is of particular interest because it reflects this long tradition of municipal involvement in the church

8 A Local Assessment of the Pews

How do New Romney's pews rate on a local level? The fourteen medieval churches of Romney Marsh have long been recognised as an outstanding group, and St Nicholas is one of the finest of them. A number of others still have box pews, as the following survey⁴⁷ makes clear:

Aldington: over-restored interior

Appleton: restored

Bilsington: some pitch-pine pews

Bonnington: restored

Brenzett: heavily restored and refitted in 1902, box pews removed 1876

Brookland: retains Georgian box pews and pulpit

Burmarsh: some pitch-pine pews, Georgian fittings removed 1876

Dymchurch: much-restored interior

East Guldeford: retains box pews

Fairfield: fine painted box pews, little-altered interior

Ivychurch: pews removed

Newchurch: late Victorian fittings, all Georgian fittings removed

Old Romney: outstanding 18th century interior with box pews

Ruckinge: unknown

St Mary in the Marsh: retains box pews, but cut down

Snave: fittings replaced in 1873

Stone-in-Oxney: Victorianised interior

Warehorne: some box pews left.

New Romney is not unique, clearly, in local terms in having retained some of its early pewing but even this cursory list indicates how many churches in the area have lost such fittings. None of the above-listed churches enjoyed anything like the status of New Romney and none had pews of the elaboration of the 'Queen Anne' pew. Nor are any of these churches on quite such a scale as New Romney, or have quite so extensive a set of

⁴⁶A faculty was granted in June 1786 allowing Mrs Elizabeth Coates to erect an 11' by 5' pew at the back of the north aisle for her perpetual use: DCb/EF/ New Romney 5.

⁴⁷Based on John Piper's 1950 King Penguin *Romney Marsh* and the undated booklet by the Romney Marsh Historic Churches Trust, *Romney Marsh Churches*.

early pews. In local terms, then, New Romney's pews are not a unique survival but they are of outstanding importance.

9 Box Pews: a National Overview

The above list presents a distorted picture of the rate of survival of box pews across the country: taken nationally, far fewer churches retain such pews than is the case in the Romney Marsh area. Once a universal feature in churches, they are now relatively rare: New Romney was highly unusual in overhauling its pews in the 1850s rather than replacing them wholesale at a time when the ecclesiological movement was encouraging such fittings to be swept away. No detailed survey has so far, to my knowledge, been undertaken which can quantify the degree of survival of box pews across the country. Only a couple of Wren's City churches have retained any of their original pews at all: that is a measure of the scarcity of these fittings.

The most useful assemblage of churches with intact box pews is Mark Chatfields's *Churches the Victorians Forgot* (2nd ed. 1989). He calculated that, of the 8,000-odd pre-Victorian churches in the country, 'only about 140 retain interiors that... can be regarded as truly 'Anglican''⁴⁸, that is, that retain their pre-Ecclesiological or 'Prayer Book' fittings. The vital components of such interiors are, of course, pulpits and pews. New Romney may have lost the former, but the latter, in part, very much remain.

10 Conclusion

New Romney's pews are of real interest and their removal, even in part, should be stoutly resisted. They have undergone considerable alteration and removal in recent years already, and their present condition is regrettable in the extreme. The Corporation connection with the south aisle lends even great importance to this area of the church's interior. The spatial incursion made by the vestry in the north aisle has had a negative impact on the church: a similar arrangement in the south aisle would be far worse.

Roger Bowdler
Historical Analysis and Research Team

31 October 1997.

⁴⁸Op. cit., 9.

PLANS

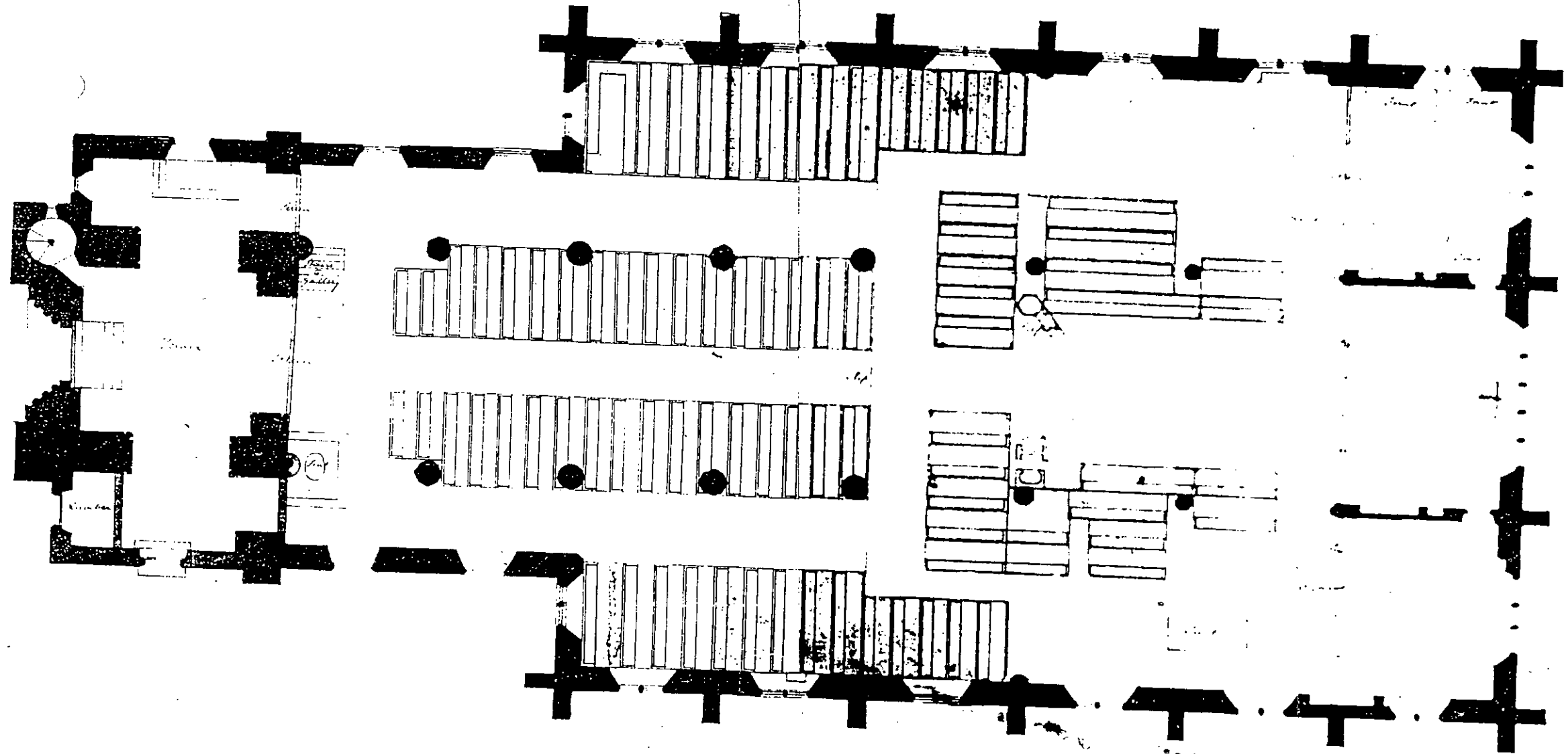
- 1 Office of Sir G.G. Scott: Plan of pews and fittings as existing, c1874
(RIBA Drawings Collection, Sir G.G. Scott Snr., cat. no. 113/8).**
- 2 John Oldrid Scott: Plan of proposed refitting (not executed), c1879
(RIBA Drawings Collection, J.O. Scott, cat. no. 68).**
- 3 Schematic plan of pewing at present, showing principal phases of
alteration by period.**

PHOTOGRAPHS

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH NEW ROMNEY

PROPOSED RESTORATION

EIGHTH SCALE



PLAN

SCALE OF 1/8" = 1'-0" FEET

SIR GEORGE GILBERT SCOTT R.A.
SPRING LA

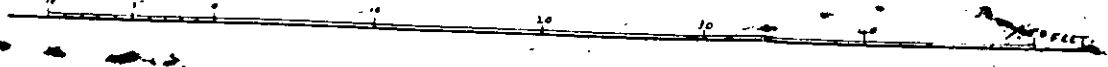
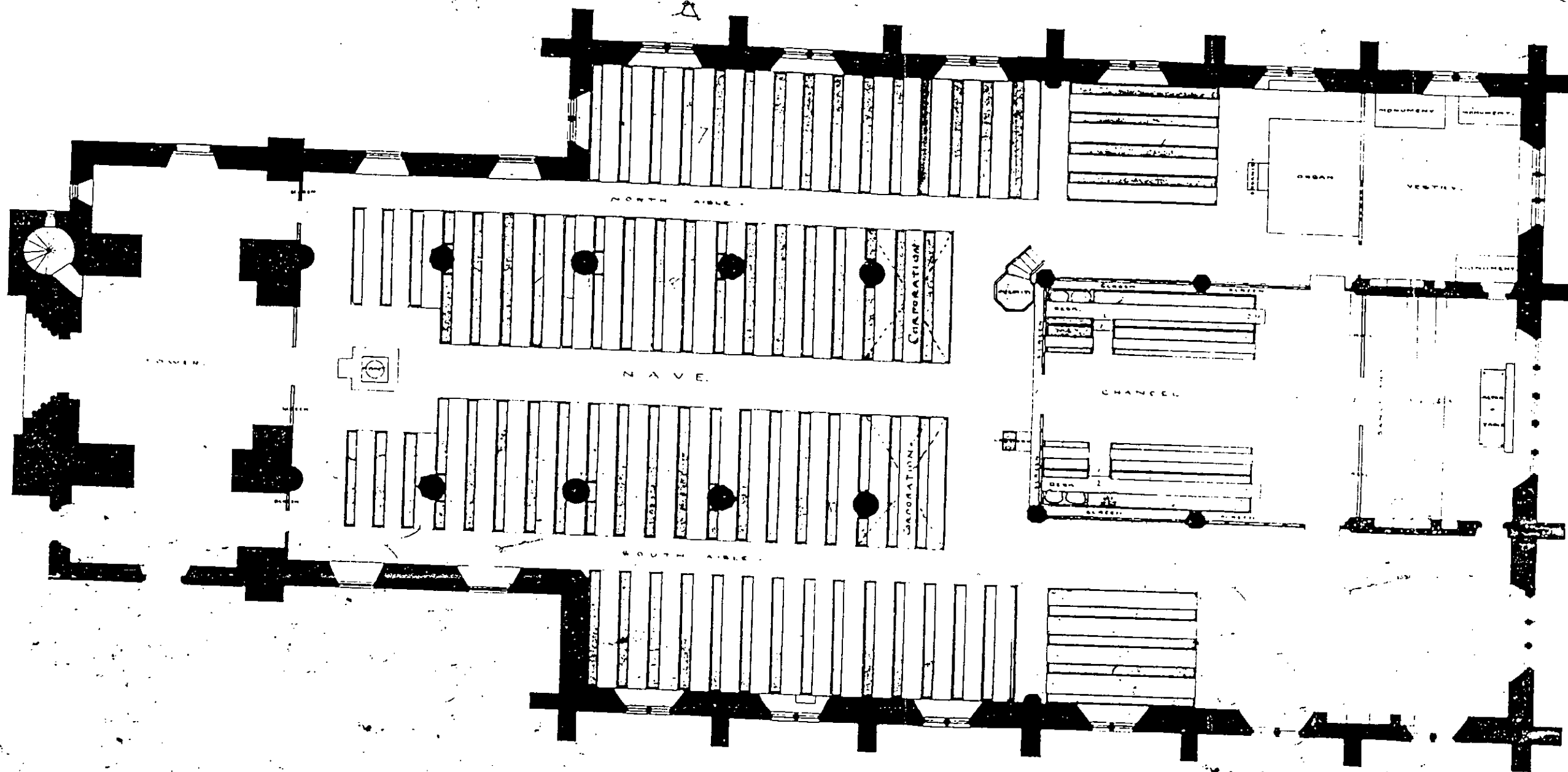
SCOTT G.G. Snr

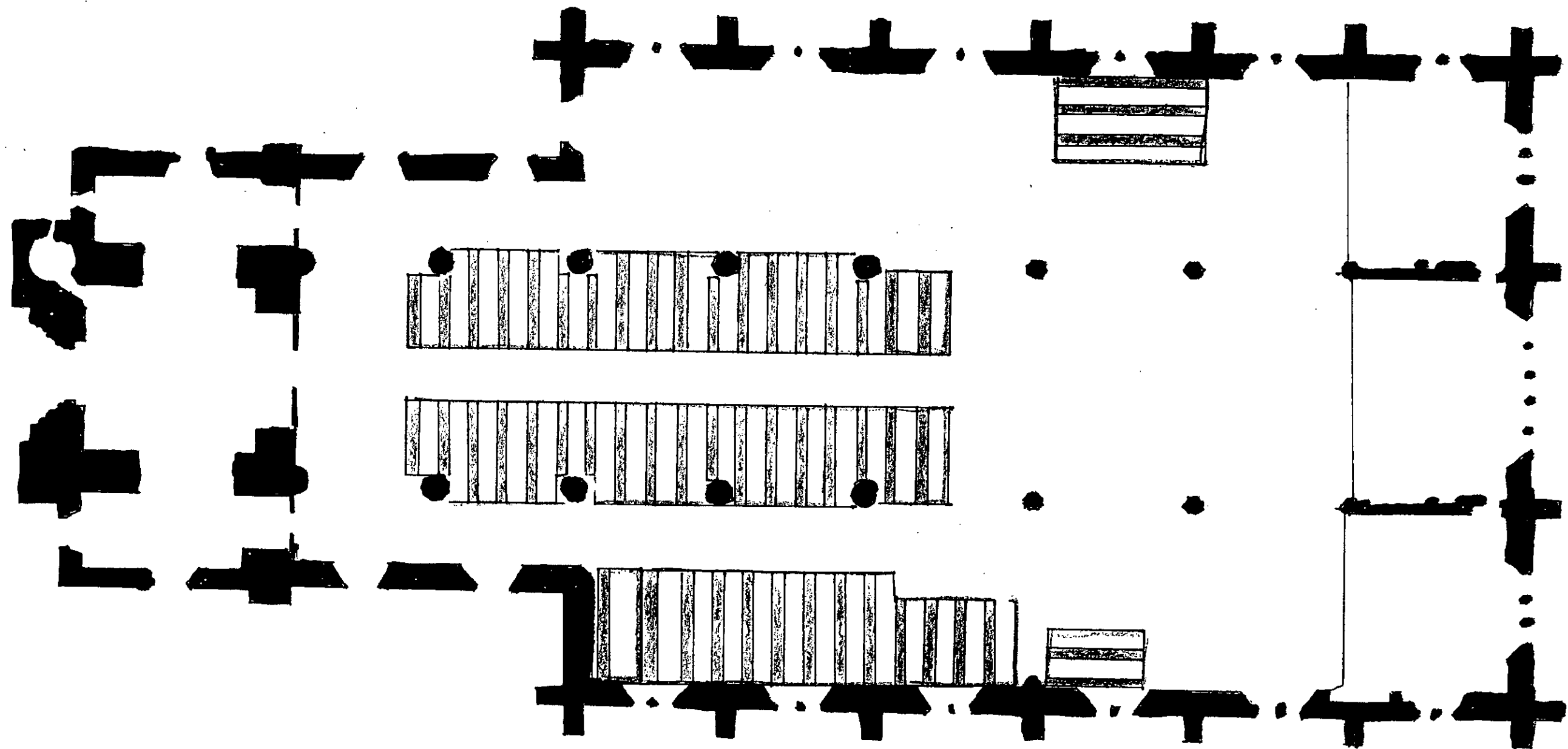
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S. NICOLAS CHURCH NEW ROMNEY.

PLAN SHEWING RE-FITTING

EIGHTH SCALE.





St NICHOLAS,
NEW ROMNEY:
EXISTING PEWS

- EARLY C18 FABRIC
- C18 FABRIC, ALTERED 1850'S
- C19 FABRIC



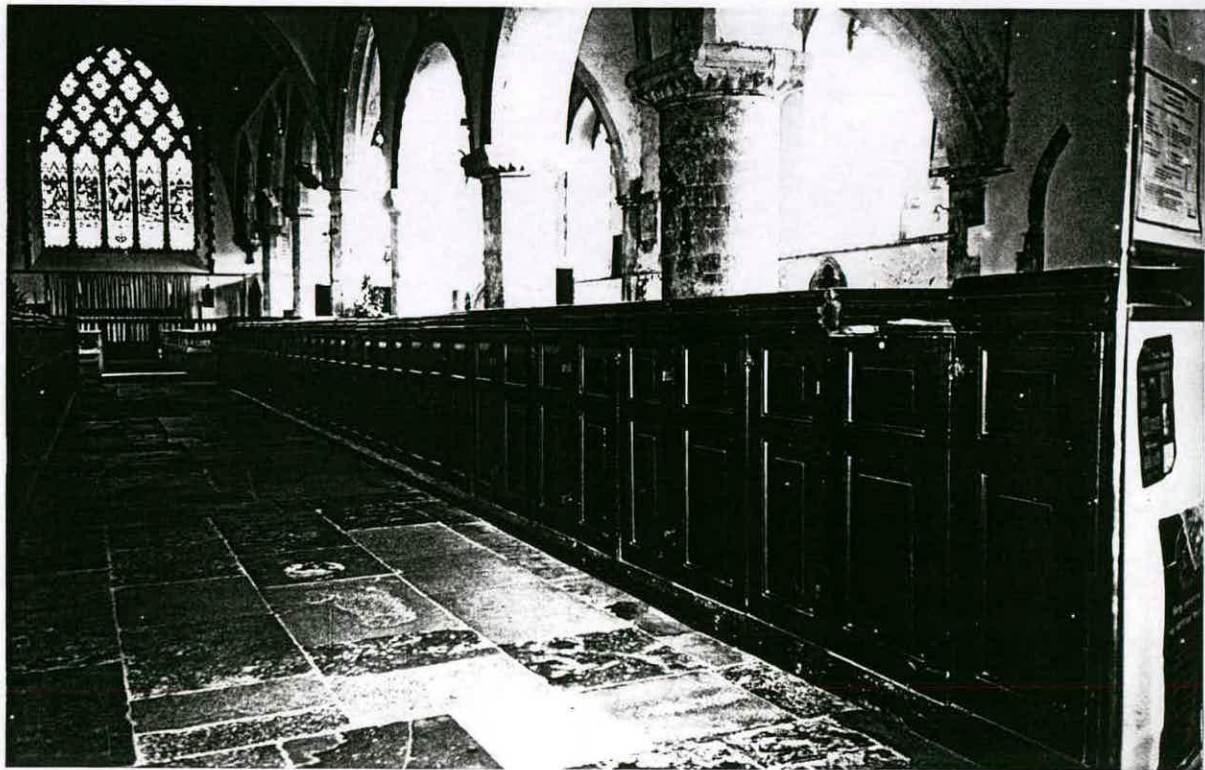
1 General view of church interior to west, from the chancel



2 Interior view to west, from east end of pews



3 View of pews on north side of the nave, from the west end



4 View of the pews on the south side of the nave, from the west end



5 View of pews on south side of the nave, to the south-west



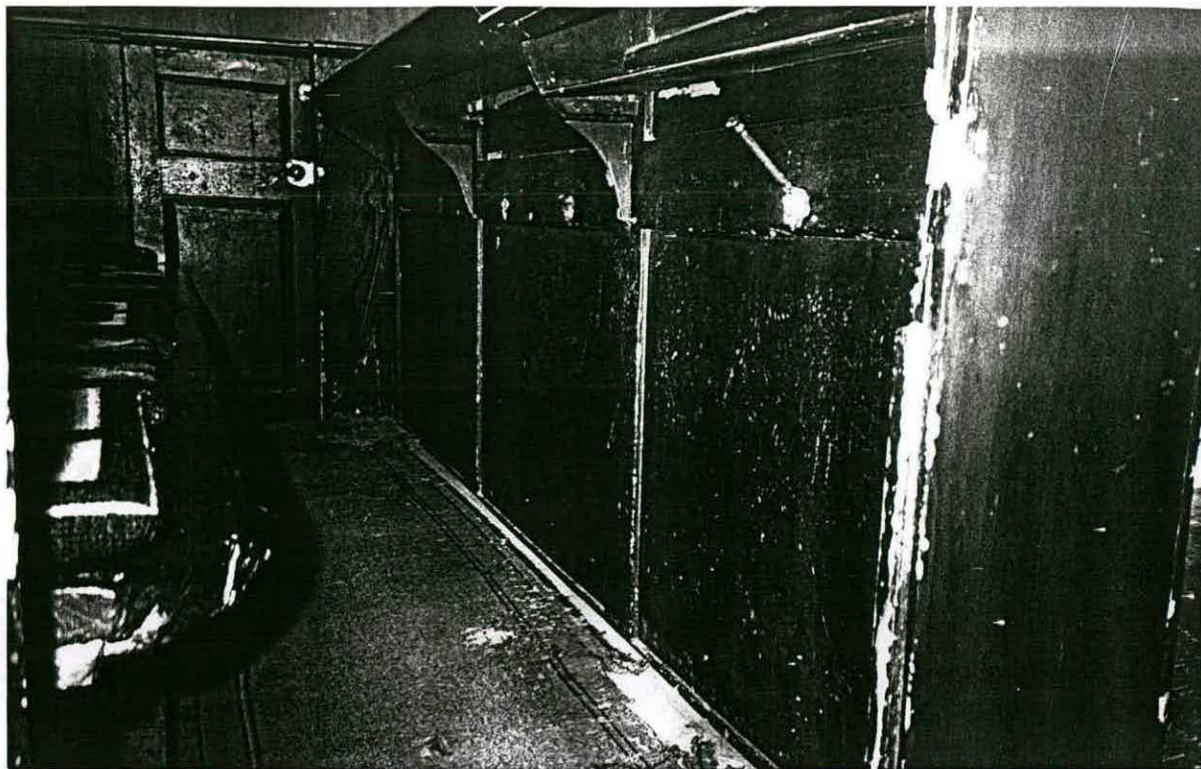
6 Pews on the south side of the nave, to south



7 View of pews on north side of the nave, to the south-west



8 Pews on the north side of the nave, to north-west



9 Front pew on north side of the nave, interior



10 Front pew on the north side of the nave, inner side of door



11 View of south aisle, showing easternmost pews to south-west



12 South aisle to west, showing tomb of Richard Stuppeny (d.1526, rebuilt 1622)



13 View of south aisle, to south-west



14 South aisle to east, from within the 'Queen Anne' pew



15 South aisle: the 'Queen Anne' pew, to south-west



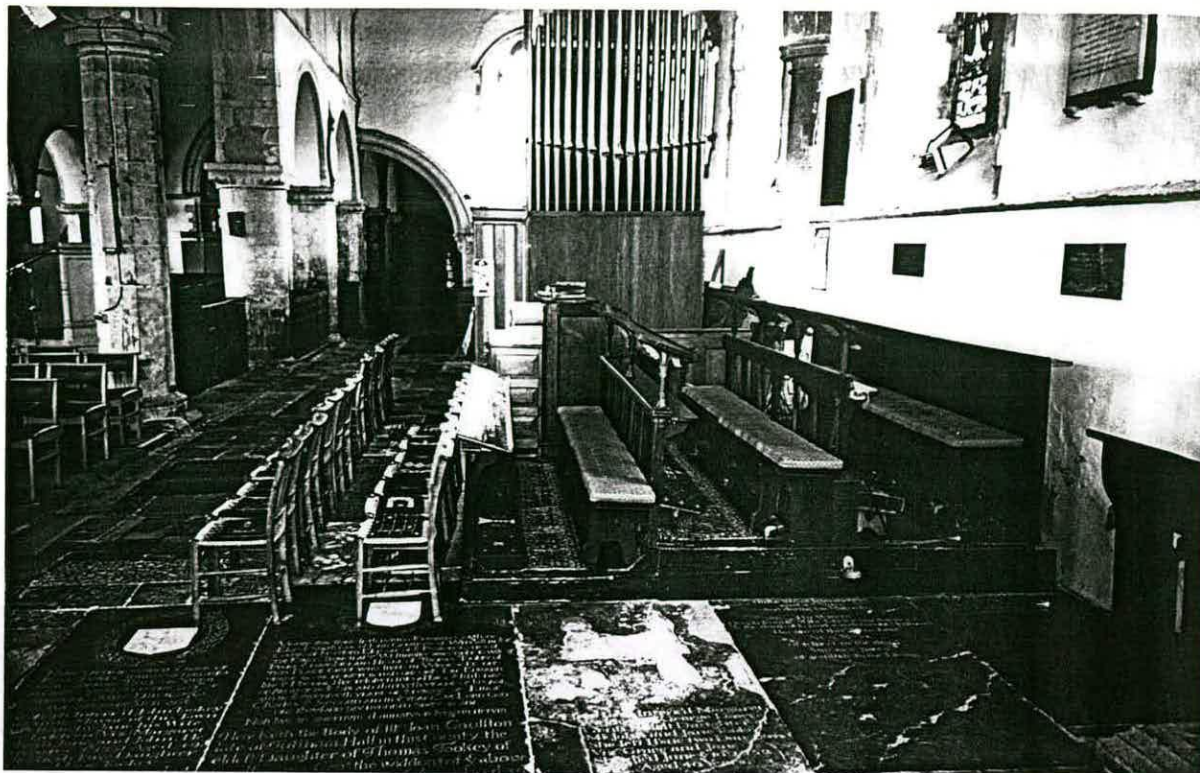
16 South aisle: the 'Queen Anne' pew, interior to north



17 South aisle: the 'Queen Anne' pew, detail of scroll



18 South aisle: the 'Queen Anne' pew, interior showing shelving



19 North aisle, general view to west



20 North aisle: mid-Victorian choir stalls