

# ◆ The construction of St Peter's Church, Brighton, c. 1818–1835

By Sue Berry

*St Peter's church is a landmark in the City of Brighton and Hove. It is the focal point of the view northwards from the Royal Pavilion. Charles Barry, architect of the Houses of Parliament, designed it in the fashionable Gothic style. The parish Vestry knew that the old parish church was too small. It agreed to the suggestion of a new church (rather than extending the old one) because of the offer of land by Thomas Read Kemp and by the prospect of funding by the Church Building Commission. The Church Building Committee's management of the financial records on behalf of the parish was poor. The parish argued with the Commission and lost a court case brought against them for repayment of a loan.*

## BRIGHTON IN c. 1820

In 1821, the population of Brighton was over 24,000. The resort had a distinctive triangular shape (Fig. 1). The development of this thriving resort had taken place entirely within the boundaries of the ancient parish, which still had just one parochial church. The medieval St Nicholas of Myra was full of box pews in the nave and on the galleries rented to worshippers. Anyone who could not afford to rent a pew had to squeeze into the small number of free places (Fig. 2). The parish Vestry had already decided that a new church was essential. St Peter's Church, designed by Charles Barry in an elegant Gothic style, was the result.<sup>1</sup>

The parish of Brighton received loans and grants from the Church Building Commission (CBC) for the construction of St Peter's. The CBC received a state grant to add extra Anglican churches to towns such as Brighton where the population had increased so much that parish churches were unable to accommodate all the worshippers. It approved the design and cost of all eligible churches and expected as many free seats as possible.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF ST PETER'S

On 5 November 1818, the parish called a public meeting to discuss the prospect of a second parish church. Only residents of the parish who were eligible to pay the church rate for the upkeep of the parish church could attend. As a site for a new church, the meeting was offered at no charge land

to the north of the newly landscaped 'Northern Inclosure', the gardens at the north end of the valley to the east and north of the Royal Pavilion (Fig. 1). The parish had only to pay for the re-routing of the roads that met there. Thomas Read Kemp, a major landowner in Brighton who had a share in this low-lying and damp land, had already secured the consents of his co-owners to this plan (Fig. 1).

Kemp's offer was not entirely altruistic; an elegant new church near to land he hoped to sell would be an asset. The meeting was supportive. It was influenced not only by the offer of free land but also by the thought that the Church Building Commission (CBC) could lend or grant a significant part of the cost. It also believed that only a small proportion of the repayment would be met from the church rate, since subscriptions and loans from parishioners would flow in. Some present felt that the Prince of Wales should be consulted about the idea, as they believed that his patronage might help to raise funds.<sup>3</sup>

Nothing happened until 1823, the main reason probably being the lack of subscriptions and loans from local people for the project, which had not been thought through. The project was given direction when, at a public meeting of church ratepayers, the New Church Building Committee was set up to supervise the construction of the church and to obtain a loan to build it from the CBC.<sup>4</sup> From this point, the local press took an interest in progress, partly because many people who paid church rate (particularly the non-conformists) did so reluctantly, but also due to the use of public money. Simultaneously, a company





Fig. 2. St Nicholas of Myra, Brighton, in 1825 by R. Havell the younger, showing the dormer windows in the south roof for the galleries and the stairs to the south gallery. These Georgian features were removed in the early 1850s when the church was virtually rebuilt under the supervision of R. C. Carpenter.



Fig. 3. The front of St Peter's c. 1834 (drawn and etched by John Bruce) showing the tower as built (as it is now).

in which local people were shareholders built the Chain Pier. The contrast in the press reporting on the two projects is striking. Little about the building of the Pier was reported other than a detailed account of its opening, attended by 1000 people.<sup>5</sup>

The parish meeting that agreed to the new church also appointed a quartet of trustees to account for all the subscription and loan income. They were Sir David Scott, Lord Egremont (Chairman) and the Vicar of Brighton (the Revd Robert James Carr), with Thomas Read Kemp as the Honorary Treasurer. Carr (1774–1841), a close friend of the Prince Regent, became Bishop of Chichester in 1824 and of Worcester in 1831.<sup>6</sup> In August 1823, these trustees received £15,000 as an interest-free loan to the parish from the CBC. It had to be repaid over five years at £3000 a year. Due to this short period and to the lack of subscriptions to help to pay for the church, the Vestry realized that the levy on the church rate would be a massive three shillings and sixpence (17.5 p) in the pound. They knew that this was too high for a public meeting of church ratepayers to approve. The New Church Building Committee was chaired by the Revd Edward Everard, one of Carr's curates, who successfully negotiated with the CBC for an extension of the period of repayment to ten years, reducing the annual liability to £1500.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile the New Church Building Committee, a mixture of local businessmen and men of leisure (Messrs Ackerson, Barrowcliffe, Blaker, Creasy, Crossweller, Mote, Taylor, West and Wigney), organized the open competition for the design of the church. Charles Barry won; the local partnership of Charles A. Busby and Amon Henry Wilds came second. Both Barry and Busby had designed churches in the Gothic style for competitions for new churches funded by the CBC, which had also rejected Busby's designs for Oldham and Leeds, believing that his roof designs were unsafe. Between 1822 and 1825, Barry built two Gothic-style churches funded by the CBC in Lancashire: St Matthew, Camp Field, and All Saints at Stand. Barry's porch and tower at Stand were similar to his design for St Peter's. The towers of both Lancashire churches accommodated the staircases to the galleries, a formula that Barry also employed for St Peter's. St Matthew had a spire, which was similar in style to the design

Barry recommended for St Peter's.<sup>8</sup> During the early 1830s, Barry became an architect of national standing who revamped old, and designed new, country houses, and the present Palace of Westminster (began in 1836).<sup>9</sup>

St Peter's (known as the New Church until it was consecrated in 1828) was the first place of worship with an exterior in the Gothic style built in the parish of Brighton since the Middle Ages. All the other Georgian and Regency places of worship built before 1830 were designed in classical styles. Most were box-like in shape. St Peter's and Christ Church, also built by the parish in 1838 in the Gothic style, had aisles but the same internal ordering as the others. The focus of the layout of these buildings was the large reading desk for conducting the service and the big pulpit for preaching the sermon. Behind them, a shallow chancel accommodated an inconspicuous and little-used communion table. St Peter's also had galleries along each side and across the tower; this arrangement was also common in the other larger places of worship such as St George's in Kemp Town and Christ Church.

In a prominent location, St Peter's lacked other buildings either side of it. This added to the cost of building. Only four other places of worship were built freestanding in Brighton between 1818 when discussions about the new church began and 1830: the Union Chapel in New Road (1818), the Hanover Chapel, Church Street (1825), St George's in Kemp Town (1826) and St Mary's in Rock Gardens (1826). The others, such as Holy Trinity in Ship Street (opened 1817, re-opened after a revamp in 1826) and St Andrew's in Hove (opened in 1828), were fitted into street façades, which saved the cost of finishing the whole of the outside of the building.<sup>10</sup>

By August 1823, the detailed building plans and costs for the church were accepted by the New Church Building Committee, which agreed that the building would be in Portland stone. The decision to use this fine material for St Peter's added enormously to the cost of the church and so to the debt faced by the parish. Most new churches built between 1818 and 1828 cost less than £16,000; in Brighton, both St Mary's Chapel and St George's Chapel were well within that figure. They were built freestanding, of local brick with timber galleries and stuccoed façades.<sup>11</sup>

In August 1823, Barry sent designs for the

iron rails around the church grounds to the Committee.<sup>12</sup> It suggested where posts for the gaslights should go but asked Barry to decide where would be best, and asked for two carriage entrances, each eight feet wide, from the roads either side of the church, not one as on the plan. Later that month the Committee met again. It decided that the manufacture of the iron fence should go to tender locally.<sup>13</sup> All contractors had to conform strictly to the drawings as approved by the CBC and by the New Church Building Committee.<sup>14</sup>

In October 1823, Charles Barry sent out notices of the contracts from his office at Ely Place, London. Sealed bids had to be addressed 'To the Committee for Building the intended Brighton Church' and endorsed with trade and trades included in the respective tender.<sup>15</sup> On behalf of the joint owners of the land, Kemp conveyed it to the CBC, a normal condition of support from them.<sup>16</sup>

William Ranger won the contract for the preparation of the foundations and for the construction of the shell of the church in Portland Stone for £12,800. He quickly set to work on preparing the site. In December 1823, a procession of masons attended the laying of the first stone of the building. Then in May 1824, 400 people attended the ceremony for the formal laying of the foundation stone.<sup>17</sup>

Barry and the Committee estimated that the total cost of the landscaping would be £2196. As soon as the CBC had approved the estimates, the construction of the boundary wall, the cast-iron fence that stood on it and the cleaning up of the land ready for turf and trees were advertised. The town surveyor removed the flints on the site to use for work in the town, and replaced them with loam for the landscaping. A Mr Budgen prepared the coping stones for the new wall.<sup>18</sup> Bowen, Williams and Hollibon of North Street, Brighton won the contract for casting the iron railings.<sup>19</sup>

The church quickly became a popular subject for prints. Its focal position at the north end of the fashionable Inclosures made it well known. By 1823, the building of the church influenced new development nearby. The developer of St George's Place argued that the view from his new project would not be overlooked due to the church and to the garden enclosures. Kemp's land was also developed. To the north of the church, some of it became Ireland's Gardens.<sup>20</sup>

## FINANCIAL ISSUES

In June 1824 the *Brighton Guardian* reported that the CBC had received another half a million pounds. It also remarked that the grant would not meet all the applications to fund new churches that flooded in. However, the New Church Building Committee decided to ask for the £15,000 loan for St Peter's to be commuted into a grant.<sup>21</sup> The contracts with Ranger and the various people who were working on the grounds amounted to almost £15,000. Nevertheless, Edward Everard thought that the building, landscaping and fitting out of the church would not cost more than £15,000. At his meeting with the CBC in July, Everard gained the impression that it had agreed to commute £3000 of that loan into a grant. He told the New Church Committee that if the £3000 grant was not spent on fitting out the church then the Vestry would repay only £12,000 of the loan. They could deduct this unspent sum from it.<sup>22</sup> Everard's misunderstanding would later result in legal action by the CBC against the parish.

An extra £3000 received in July 1824 added to the financial burden on the parish. In August 1824, the New Church Building Committee met to discuss Barry's proposal for a spire. Barry had already sought public support for it by publishing a fine print of how the church would look. He dedicated this to the Earl of Egremont, chairman of the trustees of the fund for building the church (Fig. 4). Barry's publicity for his idea did not result in support in the form of subscriptions, and the Committee decided not to go ahead because it would have needed to borrow even more money.<sup>23</sup>

By May 1827, the parish was struggling with the cost of this church, which had risen to £18,000 after the £3000 loan in 1824. The completed church could seat 1998 people. The Vestry wanted the number of free seats reduced to 900 from over 1100. The CBC was realistic. It accepted that the estimated income from 700 seats for rent was between £400 and £500, which was insufficient to pay for the incumbent, the loans and the organist's salary of £50 a year.<sup>24</sup> The vicar and the churchwardens estimated that they needed an income of £800 to cover the stipend for the curate of £500 and the other costs. They nominated 92 pews on the ground floor seating 8 each and 23 in the galleries seating 9 each as chargeable for the income for the church. The final accounts



Fig. 4. Barry's print of St Peter's with spire as he intended and the shallow chancel as designed. It also shows the importance of the church as a focus for this area. Many of the buildings shown on the print around this church are now in disrepair but are listed.

state that the church had 1119 free seats and 879 seats in pews. These figures tally with the figures recorded by the CBC, but do not match entirely the details submitted to the diocese when the Vestry asked to increase the number of rented pews. All sources agree that the church needed more rented pews than first planned. In spite of these changes, the income from the rented pews during the late 1820s and 1830s did not match the costs of the curate and the building.<sup>25</sup>

The cost of the church continued to rise. In June 1827, the CBC paid £700 for strengthening the foundations, the work necessitated by the damp site. The parish spent almost £2292 on additional work on the structure.<sup>26</sup> In December 1827, Everard successfully sought a further loan of £3000, and CBC also gave a grant of £1000. It refunded £839 3s. 5d. paid in duty on the bricks, glass and slate used in building the church in 1827 and 1828, the amount being based on receipts sent to them. Although the evidence is not clear-cut, the

CBC then appears to have turned the loan of £3000 made in July 1824 into a grant. This matches with its final figure of £4858 given in grants.<sup>27</sup>

In April 1828 concern about the cost of the church resulted in a full meeting of all those who paid church rate. An audit committee was appointed to check the figures of the New Church Building Committee. Barry was requested to provide his working drawings for the new church and his calculations, and to attend the next meeting. It met in June 1828 without hearing from Barry, and then was inquorate for its next three meetings. In July 1828, it viewed the accounts of the Building Committee and could not identify a credit of £1200, the sum saved by using wood and not iron girders in the galleries. Otherwise, it decided that the accounts were acceptable and concluded that the high cost of the church was not due to mismanagement. The members considered Barry's refusal to assist them discourteous to the committee and to the town. Barry explained his

figures in the *Brighton Herald* and pointed out that he had done so to the New Church Building Committee. He could not see why he should attend a second meeting unpaid, and remarked that giving working drawings to a client was not normal practice.<sup>28</sup> Barry issued a certificate to the CBC that the work had been completed in a 'sound and workmanlike manner'.<sup>29</sup> He subsequently did more work in Brighton (including Everard's own chapel of ease) and so this disagreement did not affect his reputation locally.<sup>30</sup>

The parish kept the fitting out of the interior to a minimum. When the audit committee published the final building accounts in April 1828 the total of £21,865 included the fitting out of the interior with pews, other work on the interior and a clock for the tower. The CBC paid £4858 and the parish the rest.<sup>31</sup> These figures differ from those published in some sources partly because the cost of fitting out and furnishing the church was not included in some calculations such as those produced by the CBC.

St Peter's was ceremoniously consecrated on 24 January 1828 by Robert James Carr, the former vicar of Brighton, now Bishop of Chichester. The first perpetual curate was the Revd Thomas Cooke (1791–1874), a close friend of Henry Wagner, the Vicar of Brighton from 1824 to 1870 (Fig. 3).

#### CONFLICT WITH THE CBC

When it had repaid £12,000 of the £15,000 loan to the CBC, the parish Vestry stopped further payments. The churchwardens and the vicar accepted what Everard had told them about the balance being a grant. In April 1835, the CBC asked for the outstanding loan of £3000. The members did not accept Everard's version of his meeting with them. By January 1836, the CBC had lost patience with the Vestry and warned it that legal action would be taken against it. In December 1836, the CBC asked again for the unpaid £3000 as a lump sum. It then pursued the matter by instituting an action against the Vestry in the court of King's Bench.

The churchwardens and the clerk to the Vestry (Somers Clarke) requested at a public meeting of church ratepayers that legal costs be paid from the church rate. The meeting formed a committee to defend the parish against this claim, on which Messrs Edwards, Hilton and Slight served. All

those involved with the building of St Peter's were asked to give their records to Somers Clarke. John Juniper of Cranbourne Street, who had been a churchwarden, and W. R. Mott, formerly a member of the New Church Building Committee, provided depositions saying that they understood that the £3000 was part of the £15,000 sum for the building of the church, but a grant. A group of committee members signed a joint deposition claiming the same. The churchwardens could not locate the banker's book, the minute books of the New Church Building Committee or a copy of the treasurer's accounts. The lack of evidence was fatal to the defence, and at the hearing the parish was ordered to repay the outstanding amount to the CBC.<sup>32</sup>

The parish officers learned from this expensive court case and kept good records for three subsequent churches built by the parish with the assistance of the CBC.<sup>33</sup>

#### ALTERATIONS TO ST PETER'S

The character of St Peter's altered considerably in the later nineteenth century (Fig. 5). In 1874, St Peter's became the parish church of Brighton. The Revd John Hannah, the new vicar of Brighton, divided the old parish between the Anglican churches. The new vicar of St Peter's and his parishioners decided to modernize the church. They wanted to add a deeper chancel and re-order the church to allow for changes in worship that had developed since it was built.<sup>34</sup> The full scheme by Somers Clarke cost £15,384. The parish raised only a small part of this, and so temporary alterations costing £3322 were carried out. In 1875–76, a reredos in stone was designed by Edward Lushington Blackburne (who also worked on other local churches) and executed by J. W. Searle. The church was re-seated; part of the gallery in the south aisle of the church was removed to accommodate the organ. Temporary vestries were installed, accessed by doors in the external walls of the aisles. The church was re-opened on 16 April 1876 but between 1899 and 1906 modest improvements were made.<sup>35</sup> In 1882, the old bells from St Nicholas were replaced with eight new ones.<sup>36</sup>

The church lost its distinctively Georgian proportions between 1899 and 1906. Somers Clarke the younger and his partner J. T. Micklethwaite designed the new chancel and the chapel to its

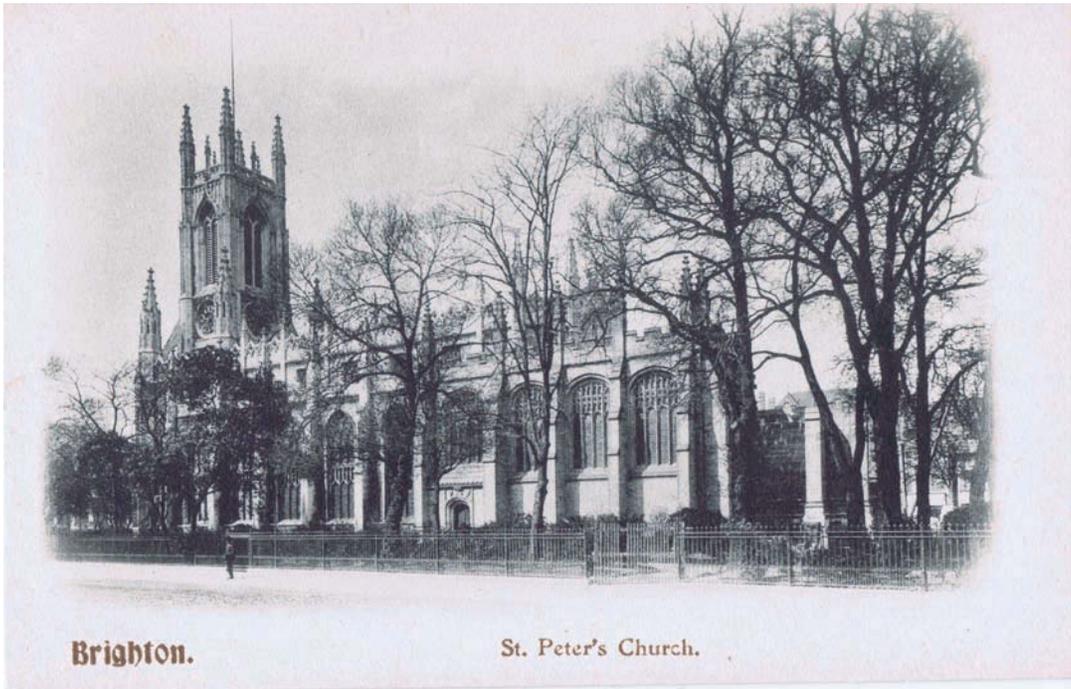


Fig. 5. The rear of St Peter's with the extension and chancel of 1906 we see today. The later work is obvious, for the colour of the stone is different.

eastern side. They chose a heavier Perpendicular style than Barry's, built in sandstone because it was cheaper. Norman and Burt contracted to do the structural work for £8000. They removed the temporary vestries and Barry's east end, lengthened the nave and built the 'spacious chancel' seen today. William Henry Randoll Blacking designed a new reredos. New stained glass windows by Charles Eamer Kempe of Lindfield were installed.<sup>37</sup> More modest changes were made until 1966 when St Peter's underwent a major restoration supervised by John Leopold Denman, which cost £25,000.<sup>38</sup> In 2010 Holy Trinity, Brompton (London) leased the church and saved it from closure. A fundraising drive for major repairs has been launched; the older southern (Barry) section of the church is in particular need of work.

Few auditory churches built by the Church of England or private chapels of ease which were built to make a profit (such as St George's in Kemp Town) survive unaltered. To get a sense of how they looked and felt, a visit to the unchanged St John's in Chichester is worthwhile. Profound changes in

the practices of worship required alterations to the fabric of the building. This is what has happened to St Peter's, where the very substantial Victorian extension to the nave and a large chancel are clearly shown in Figure 5. It is still a very interesting building, with much of the original structure of Barry's smaller church remaining. Barry's tower acts as a key focal point for vistas from the Steine and the Northern Inclosures, and is an important part of the townscape of Brighton today. At present the immediate locality is suffering from the loss of green space to ever-wider roads and the neglect of Georgian and Regency buildings facing the church. With the saving of St Peter's, it is surely time to improve the setting in which the church stands, and return the sense of dignity which the original setting with its landscaping and railings gave the church and, in so doing, enhance the whole of the area.

#### Acknowledgements

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Decennial Census 1821. Sue Berry, *Georgian Brighton* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2004) gives an overview of the resort's earlier development. Sue Berry, 'Thomas Read Kemp and the shaping of Regency Brighton', *The Georgian Group Journal* **17** (2009), 125–40. East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO) AMS 5500/1 (assignment of a pew, seven foot by five foot three inches at the northeast end of the gallery in Brighton church, 6 Jun. 1801).
- <sup>2</sup> M. H. Port, *Six Hundred New Churches: the Church Building Commission 1818–1856* (Reading: Shire, 2006), 37–58.
- <sup>3</sup> Anthony Dale, *Brighton Town and Brighton People* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1974), 4.
- <sup>4</sup> ESRO PAR 277/4/1/1, 15 Nov. 1823.
- <sup>5</sup> *Brighton Gazette* (hereafter *BG*) 13 Nov. 1823, 27 Nov. 1823.
- <sup>6</sup> For Carr, see A. C. Bickley, 'Carr, Robert James (1774–1841)', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> *BG* 12 Jun. 1823; ESRO HOW 37/1, 37/3. Everard was a curate of St Nicholas. He went on to build St Andrew's in Waterloo Street to Barry's design and moved there; Anthony Dale, *Brighton Churches* (London: Routledge, 1989), 66–70; he became a doctor of divinity in 1831.
- <sup>8</sup> Port, *Six Hundred*, 167–70, 122, 223; A. Barry, *Life and Works of Sir Charles Barry* (London: John Murray, 1867), 69–75.
- <sup>9</sup> Port, M. H., *Barry, Sir Charles (1795–1860) Architect*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography online edn Oct 2008, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/1550> accessed 12 May 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> Dale, *Brighton Churches*, 34; watercolour by W. A. Delamotte shows them clearly. St Margaret's *BG* 15 May, 3 Jun., 26 Dec., 30 Dec. 1824. St George's *BG* 5 Jan. 1826. St Mary's *BG* 5 Oct. 1826, 11 Jan., 18 Jan., 25 Jan. 1827. St Andrew's *BG* 10 Jul. 1828. Holy Trinity *BG* 21 Apr. 1826.
- <sup>11</sup> *BG* 25 Jan. 1827; Port, *Six Hundred*, 67, 326–9; J. D. Parry, *Coast of Sussex* (London: Longman, 1833), 107–8 has a good detailed description of this church; Dale, *Brighton Churches*, 177–80.
- <sup>12</sup> ESRO HOW 37/3.
- <sup>13</sup> ESRO HOW 37/3 17 Aug. 1823.
- <sup>14</sup> ESRO HOW 37/3, committee, 16 Aug. 1823.
- <sup>15</sup> *BG* 23 Oct. 1823, 6 Nov. 1823.
- <sup>16</sup> ESRO PAR 277/4/1/1, 15 Nov. 1823. This had to be conveyed a second time, see Berry, 'Kemp', 125–40.
- <sup>17</sup> *BG* 4 Dec. 1823, 3; ESRO HOW 37/3, 1 Apr. 1823; HOW 37/3, 28 Aug. 1823; HOW 37/3/1 costs.
- <sup>18</sup> ESRO HOW 37/3/23, 37/1.
- <sup>19</sup> ESRO HOW 37/3/8.
- <sup>20</sup> *BG* 9 Oct. 1823, 1.
- <sup>21</sup> *BG* 24 Jun. 1824.
- <sup>22</sup> *BG* 15 Jul. 1824, 12 Aug. 1824, 26 Jun. 1827; ESRO HOW 37/3/9.
- <sup>23</sup> ESRO HOW 37/1/5, 37/1/9, 37/2/18; the churchwardens (Ninyon Bradford, Edward Blaker and Edmund Savage), the Vicar of Brighton and members of the new church committee — William Wigney, William Blaker, Thomas West, E. W. Creasy and Thomas Attree — signed for £3000 on 13 Jul. 1824.
- <sup>24</sup> *Brighton Herald* (hereafter *BH*) 6 Jan. 1827; ESRO HOW 37/1/9, 37/1/10, 37/1/16.
- <sup>25</sup> *BH* 26 Apr. 1828; Port, 2006, 342; Dale, 1974, 26–7.
- <sup>26</sup> *BH* 6 Jan. 1827, 26 Apr. 1828; ESRO HOW 3/9, 37/1/16. West Sussex Record Office (hereafter WSRO) Ep.II/41/16; Port, *Six Hundred*, 342.
- <sup>27</sup> ESRO HOW 37/ 3/2/9, 37/2/11, 37/2/19.
- <sup>28</sup> *BH* 19 May, 9 Jun., 7 Jun., 23, 30 Aug., 13 Sep. 1828.
- <sup>29</sup> ESRO HOW 37/2/6.
- <sup>30</sup> Work in Sussex includes Brighton: The Royal Sussex Hospital, a villa in Queen's Park for Thomas Attree, St Andrew's Waterloo Street, Hove, Chain Pier House, a house in the north Steine for Mrs Dulaney and Hurstpierpoint church.
- <sup>31</sup> Port, *Six Hundred*, 342.
- <sup>32</sup> ESRO HOW 37/1/3, 37/1/16, 37/2/51, 37/1/2/14, 37/2/20, 37/2/3, 37/2/25, 37/2/36.
- <sup>33</sup> Port, *Six Hundred*, 342.
- <sup>34</sup> Dale, *Brighton Churches*, 36.
- <sup>35</sup> WSRO Ep.II/27/325.
- <sup>36</sup> WSRO Ep.II/27/327.
- <sup>37</sup> WSRO Ep.II/27/328; Dale, *Brighton Churches*, 39 notes Blacking and Kempe without clear dates.
- <sup>38</sup> Dale, *Brighton Churches*, 39.

