

# ◆ The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Petworth, West Sussex, and the work of Charles Barry

By David Parsons

*The church mentioned in Domesday Book was probably the hundredal minster in the late Anglo-Saxon period. After the Conquest a network of chapelries can be identified in an extended parochia. Physical evidence for a church in this early period is limited to parts of a window in the north transept, which has been claimed as Romanesque, and its ground plan. A reconstruction plan is proposed, based on conclusions from the present footprint. The church was aisleless, but a north aisle was added in the 14th century; later in the same century a needle spire was added to the south transeptal tower by 'Parson Acon', identified here as John de Acome, who was rector between 1382 and 1399 at the latest. His spire lasted until 1804, and was succeeded by a more elaborate one in the course of Charles Barry's restoration of 1827–9; that, in its turn, was taken down in 1947 and not replaced. Barry also added a south aisle connected to the nave by a tall arcade with continuous mouldings and no capitals, using expensive Portland Stone. The work was financed by the 3rd Earl of Egremont, who also had a major interest in the local canal system, which was presumably used to transport the stone to Petworth.*

## ORIGINS

**D**omesday Book records a church in Petworth, but there are none of the criteria put forward by John Blair which might suggest that it enjoyed 'superior' status, for example a landholding assessed separately from that of the manor (Blair 1985). Nevertheless, as the principal place within its hundred Petworth might be expected to have had a minster church in the Anglo-Saxon period. The name of the Domesday hundred was Rotherbridge, the crossing point of a minor river on the southern boundary of the present-day parish. The next parish to the south is Duncton, which was a chapelry of Petworth until 1692, but was already recorded as having a church in Domesday Book (Morris 1976, 11.21; the Petworth entry is at 11.18). This implies, but does not prove, that the mother church was founded earlier, which must place it in the pre-Conquest period. This relationship and other, later, links between Petworth and potential dependencies in the hundred were examined in detail by N. S. Rushton in an important paper on parochialisation in Sussex, where they were used as a paradigm for the ecclesiastical development of the county (Rushton 1999). In addition to chapelries at Northchapel and

Egdean, Petworth's *parochia* included Tillington and River, which were in Easebourne hundred in 1086; the diversion of the hundred boundary around the Tillington area implies an earlier arrangement, by which it may have belonged to Rotherbridge administratively as well as ecclesiastically (Fig.1).

Physical evidence for this putative pre-Conquest minster is non-existent. There are no surviving features nor any trace of reused Anglo-Saxon stonework in the present church fabric. It is possible that worked stone of that age was incorporated at some time in the past in the 14 miles of stone wall surrounding Petworth House and Park, but no recording of the masonry has yet been carried out. The earliest feature in the church fabric has been claimed as Romanesque. This takes the form of part of the head of a single-light window in the upper west wall of the north transept (Fig. 2), which was discovered during the restorations in 1827–9, as recorded in an undated entry in the church log book (WSRO Par 149/4/4). The internal chronology of this wall is not clear, however. If the window is reconstructed as round-headed, it would impinge on the strip of vertical masonry immediately to its north, which probably represents the internal angle of the Romanesque transept proposed below, and in

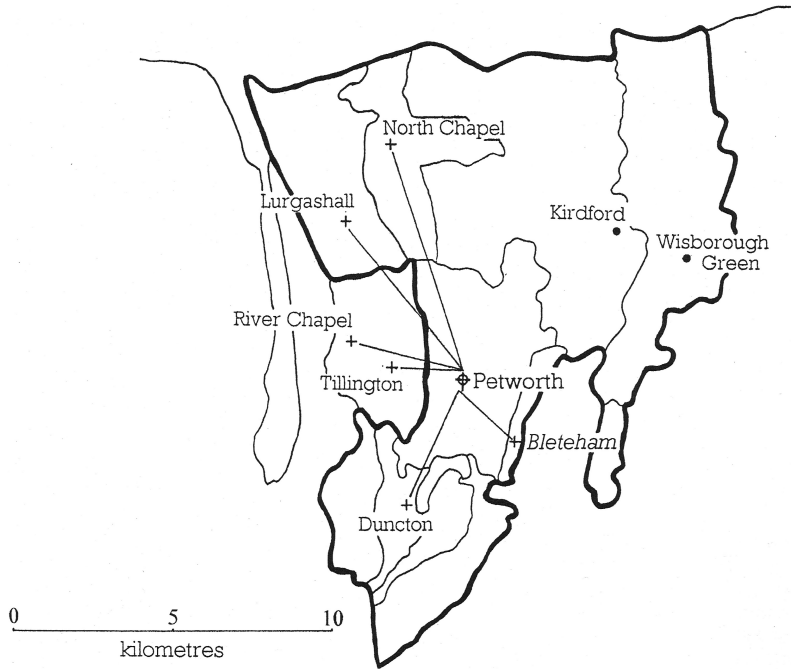


Fig. 1: The *parochia* of Petworth minster in the 12th century (after Rushton 1999, fig.4).



Fig. 2: Petworth, St Mary: remains of reveal of single-light window in west wall of north transept at gallery level (photo: D. Parsons).

any case would be too close to the quoin for stability. It could be considered as belonging to the fabric of the transept as later extended, but in that case it would have impinged on the vertical feature; that however appears to be intact. It is more likely that the window should be reconstructed as a narrower lancet of Early English type; the internal reveal would probably have cleared the vertical feature, but would still have been too close to the corner to have been inserted in the transept wall before its extension to the north. Provisionally, then, the window is almost certainly not Romanesque and probably not a feature of the original transept wall; it is likely to have been inserted after the extension of the north transept but before the addition of the north aisle, since the 14th-century arch between the aisle and the transept cut away its left-hand (southern) jamb. This serves to indicate the date of the proposed extension to the north transept, as proposed below, which would vindicate Nairn's

observation that the detail of the arches between the chapel to the east of the transept and the chancel—and the transept itself—‘look C13’ (Nairn and Pevsner 1965, 295).

Nevertheless, the form of the Romanesque church can be deduced from the present ground plan (Fig.3). East of the north and south transepts everything is either late medieval or modern (as shown in Figs 7, 8 and 14 below), and the shape of the east end in the late 11th to 12th centuries cannot be known. The south aisle is known to be an addition (see below) and the north arcade, much rebuilt, appears to be of 14th-century date (see Figs 6 and 9 below), suggesting that the north aisle is also an addition, though the evidence for this that might exist in the west wall of the building is hidden by a buttress. This leaves an aisleless nave flanked by transepts, but without a crossing tower; the north transept may be presumed to have matched its southern counterpart, but later extended to the

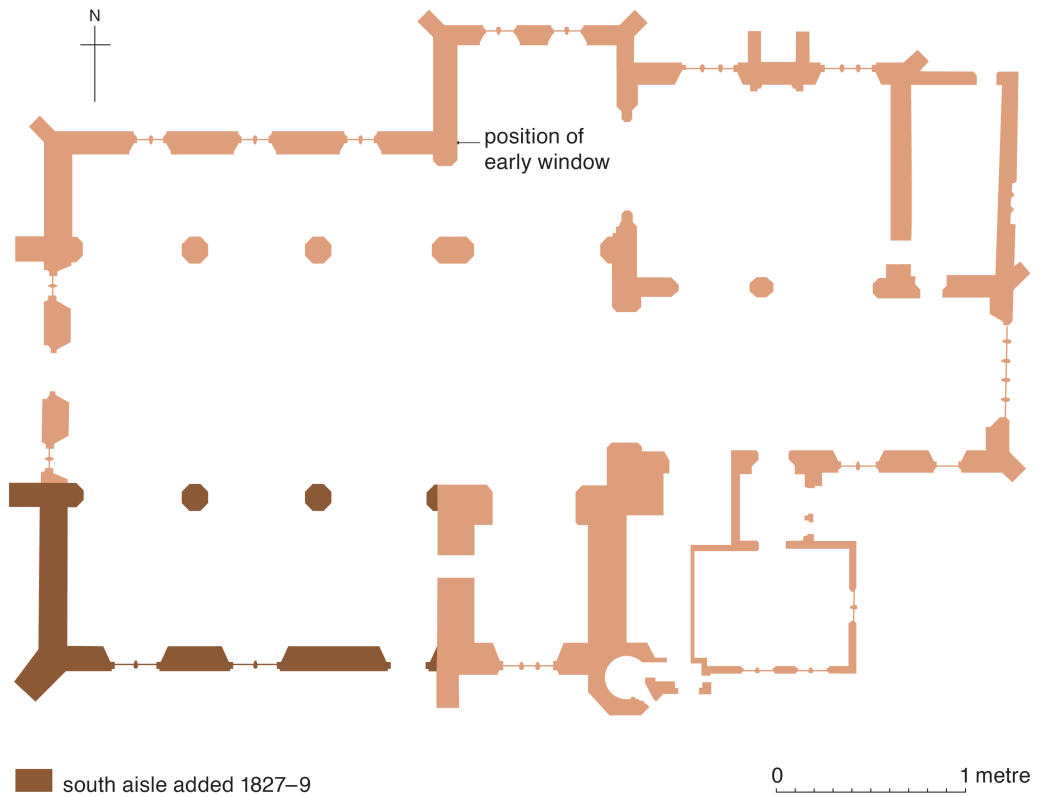


Fig. 3: Petworth, St Mary: present ground plan (drawing by Christina Unwin, based on survey by F. Reginald Steele & Partners, architects, 1984).

north, perhaps to accommodate the abutment of the broad chapel on the north side of the chancel (Fig. 4). The tower, built on top of the fabric of the south transept, appears to be later. It has a polygonal stair turret attached to its south-east corner, reminiscent of such examples as the north transept at Wimborne Minster, Dorset (Parsons 1978, 135–6), which probably dates to the Saxo-Norman overlap. Unlike Wimborne, however, the staircase inside the Petworth tower does not take the form of a helical barrel vault, which was ubiquitous in the Romanesque, but is constructed of self-supporting wedge-shaped steps, a type that becomes common from the early 13th century (Parsons 1982, 40). The tower has been reconstructed on so many occasions since the late 18th century, however, that the chronological significance of this observation is not great.

The nave and transept layout without a crossing tower has been recognised in the Midlands as a form used for important churches in the Romanesque

period which are likely to have succeeded Anglo-Saxon minsters. The central space, or crossing, was not structurally separated from the nave, though in some cases there is evidence for an arch or screen between the two. A prime example of the type (and of the possible screen wall) is Oundle in Northamptonshire, known to have been an early pre-Conquest monastery, with others in the same county at Rothwell, Raunds and Brigstock (briefly mentioned by Barnwell 2016, 159–60; further discussion is expected in Dr Barnwell's forthcoming monograph on Northamptonshire churches); elsewhere there are Oakham, Rutland, almost certainly the original mother church of the area, and Adderbury, Oxfordshire, the site of an early royal monastery. Not only do all of these churches share a similar footprint and have similar proportions, but in many cases their actual dimensions are comparable: the lengths of their naves fall between 22 and 24 metres, the total north–south measurement of the transepts between

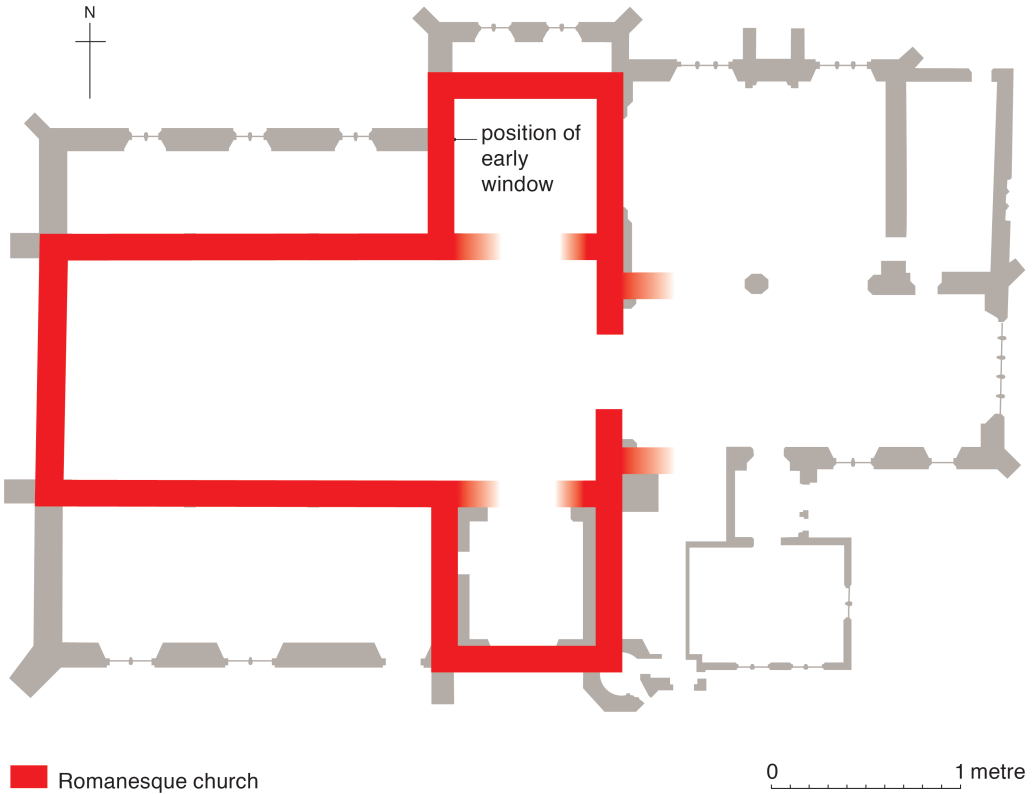


Fig. 4: Petworth, St Mary: proposed plan of the Romanesque church (drawing by Christina Unwin).

18 and 20 metres and the transept depth east to west between 7 and 10 metres. The respective dimensions of the proposed restored plan of Petworth church in the Romanesque period are a close match for the lowest of these bracketed values.

### THE SOUTH AISLE

The nave of the church appears to have remained aisleless until the 14th century, when the north aisle was added. The lean-to aisle roof is likely to have covered at least part of the earlier window in the west wall of the north transept, mentioned above, and may have been the occasion of its blocking.

The south aisle was added in the course of the work carried out by Charles (later Sir Charles) Barry between 1827 and 1829, just after the completion of his building of St Peter's in Brighton (Dale 1989, 31–40; Berry 2010). The Petworth campaign was funded by the 3rd Earl of Egremont and his employment of Barry almost certainly stems from their previous collaboration in Brighton, where Egremont was chairman of the trustees for the erection of the new church. The earl also chaired the committee for the development of the Sussex County Hospital from the end of 1824, and in the following year Barry's plans for the new building were approved. According to Gaston, Egremont 'had Barry in mind' from the start (2008, 8). Not only was Barry engaged as architect for the Petworth rebuilding, but William Ranger, who had been the main contractor for St Peter's and for the County Hospital (Gaston 2008, 9), was employed in the same capacity at Petworth. A further link between the two enterprises was the common use of Portland Stone (see below).

According to Ian Nairn, the south arcade at Petworth was replaced by Kempe and Tower, who carried out a further restoration in 1903 (Nairn and Pevsner 1965, 295), but the documents in the Petworth House Archives relating to this restoration do not substantiate that assumption. At all events there is no mention of the south arcade in the faculty of 27 November 1902, which authorized this work, though there is a specific reference to the rebuilding (once again) of the north arcade piers (WSRO Ep1/40/5655). There appears to be a prejudice against the attribution of the arcade to Barry, on two general grounds. The first is architectural: the elegance of the arcade, both its proportions and its lack of capitals—the arch mouldings die gracefully into the piers—are held

to be too sophisticated for work carried out before the full Gothic Revival (Fig. 5). A comparison with St Peter's, Brighton, tends to contradict this, however: here the nave arcades are tall and elegant, the piers are without full capitals, and those that appear on the inner order of the piers and on the half-shafts on the interior elevations are very small and set high up (see, for example, Maughan 1922, frontispiece). The general impression is similar to that given by the sort of continuous mouldings chosen by Barry for Petworth.

There is good medieval precedent for this type of arrangement, for example in a group of churches in south Leicestershire and north-west Northamptonshire: Kibworth Beauchamp, Gumley and North Kilworth in Leicestershire, and Lilbourne, East Farndon and Stanford on Avon in Northamptonshire. Of these, Stanford is the most elegant example. Although this is not generally recognized as a Sussex characteristic, there is some photographic evidence that the north arcade at Petworth may have been similar, at least to the more run-of-the-mill examples. Unfortunately Barry rebuilt the piers of the north arcade in the 1827–9 campaign, but the 14th-century arches remain; their mouldings die into the piers above the capitals which were added in 1903. Photographs taken before this date, however, do not show any capitals, though the timberwork of the galleries makes it difficult to be certain (see Fig. 6). It is possible, therefore, that Barry's inspiration for the new south arcade came from the existing north arcade, which he was rebuilding.

The other negative assumption is perhaps easier to counter. It is often claimed that Portland Stone, of which the south arcade and other parts of the church are built, was not brought into the area before the introduction of the railway; in the case of Petworth this would have been some 30 years after the supposed date of construction. This assumption is palpably incorrect: not only did Barry use Portland for St Peter's Brighton a few years earlier, but there is clear documentary evidence for its employment in the rebuilding of Petworth church. The report and summary account of 'sundry works relative to Petworth Church' submitted in 1829 by the contractor, William Ranger, to the Earl of Egremont mentions specifically 218 tons of Portland Stone (PHA 5199).

The means of transport can only be inferred; since water was always the preferred (and cheapest)



Fig. 5: Petworth, St Mary: (a) general view of Barry's south arcade, with (b) a detail of the mouldings (photos: D. Parsons).

method, it is likely that stone reaching the Chichester harbour area by sea from Portland was transhipped into barges using the Portsmouth to Arundel canal, which had been completed in 1823, continuing on the existing Arun Navigation and the (western) Rother Navigation as far as Coultershaw, just south of Petworth on a good turnpike road. Since the Earl was heavily committed to the inland waterways system and funded the construction of the Rother Navigation himself, it would have made good sense to use it (for a general discussion of the Rother Navigation see Vine 1995). There is plenty of general evidence for the carriage of bulky goods on the canal system: there are frequent mentions in the documents (again in the Petworth House Archives) of coal stores, there was active debate about the way tolls for timber were to be reckoned, agricultural lime was moved about the countryside,

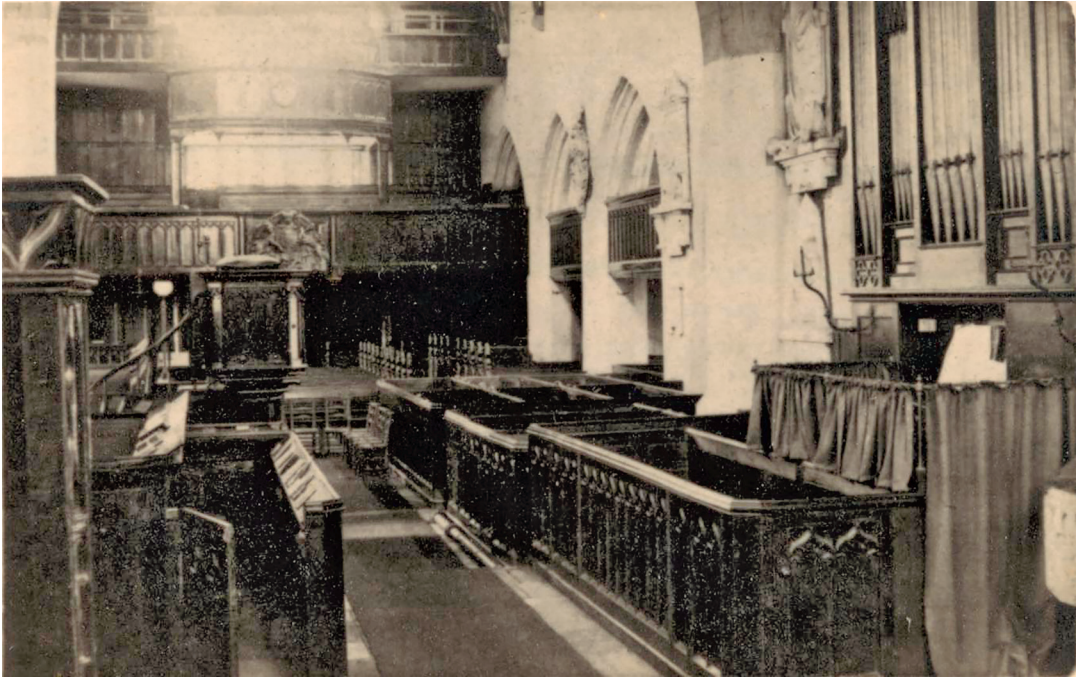


Fig. 6: Petworth, St Mary: interior view to north-west before 1903 restoration (photographer not known; from print in the parish collection at WSRO, Par 149/7/5 no.3; courtesy West Sussex Record Office).

and in 1803 it was recorded that 4030 tons of chalk were transported (PHA OF 13/16a/22). For the crucial dates in the late 1820s very few records survive; there is however a single-sheet list of tolls and receipts of cargoes carried on the Rother Navigation in 1828–30 (PHA OF 13/16b/57). The total quantity of stone (not including chalk) transported in 1828 was 1567 $\frac{3}{4}$  tons, which could easily have included the 218 tons intended for Petworth church. No such data for 1827 have survived. Alternatively, the stone might have formed part of an earlier consignment from Portland in the course of the building of St Peter's, Brighton; in that case a similar waterborne route along the coast and then up the Arun and Rother Navigations can be assumed.

#### THE TOWER AND SPIRE

When the south transept was converted into a tower is not known; the date of the construction of the spire, assuming that to be a later addition, is however recoverable. The earliest known reference to it is by John Leland (1503–52), who attributed it to 'Parson Acon' (Toulmin Smith 1909, 92). No-one

of this name features in the list of Petworth rectors (Hennessy 1900, 118), but there are records of John de Acome, an adherent of the Percy family, which owned Petworth House and held the advowson of the church. He was principal trustee named in the settlement of the estates of Maud, second wife of Henry Percy, who became Earl of Northumberland in 1377. She died in 1398 and her property devolved upon the Earl (PRO 1927, 255, 482–4; Johnston 1961). Sir John's surname presumably indicates an origin in Acomb, a place-name that occurs near York and near Corbridge in Northumberland. Either would make a north-country connection with the Percys entirely plausible.

There is a convenient gap in Hennessy's list between William Shrovesbury, who died in 1382, and the presentation of Thomas Thwayt (whose locative name probably indicates another northerner) in July 1400, though John de Acome is unlikely to have held the rectory for the whole of this period, since one of the references is to him as 'late' parson of Petworth in 1399 (PRO 1927, 484). Nevertheless it is clear that if Leland's information was correct, the spire was built at some time in



Fig. 7: Petworth, St Mary: watercolour by S. H. Grimm, showing the medieval spire in 1789 (BL Add. MS. 5674, f. 54 (no. 96); © British Library Board).

the last twenty years of the 14th century. This is an acceptable date for the known form of the superstructure on the tower, which was a needle spire of timber covered with shingles, either of lead or of wood; most secondary sources refer to it as 'leaden' without citing any evidence for this. It survived until the late 18th century, and was the subject of a drawing by S. H. Grimm in 1789 (Fig. 7). It was taken down, supposedly in 1800, but in fact the vestry resolutions to remove the spire and parapet from the tower were made between April and October 1803, and included the intention to raise the height of the tower by twelve feet and to add pinnacles, using local stone (PHA 8484). The work was specified on 13 December of the same year (PHA 8485), but not carried out until 1804. An elevation drawing of the south side of the tower and part of the nave shows the proposals; it cannot be a record of the completed work, since there is a separate piece of parchment attached to the upper part of the tower, beneath which an

alternative scheme is shown, and the document is dated 1803 (PHA 11348). The appearance of the finished work was recorded soon after completion by Henry Petrie in a watercolour and a possibly monochrome drawing. The watercolour forms part of the Sussex Archaeological Society's Sharpe Collection, in which it is numbered 256 (Fig. 8) and shows the church from the south-east. It is undated, but the other drawing, showing the view from the north-west, was taken in 1804, and the likelihood is that the watercolour was done at the same time. The dated drawing is not part of the present Sharpe Collection, but was photographed while the collection was still in private hands, and a black-and-white print is part of the Society's file of photographs of the Petrie archive; it is numbered 255, though this number has been reallocated in the printed catalogue of the Sharpe Collection (Smith [1979]; see Fig. 9). There are minor discrepancies between the two drawings; the details of the watercolour are closer to those of the 1803 elevation. One further drawing shows the appearance of the tower before Barry's restoration, a sketch labelled 'by Jos. Cragg 1825', which seems to exaggerate the height of the pinnacles (WSRO Par 149/7/4).

Charles Barry's 1827–9 restoration was carried out at the expense of the 3rd Earl of Egremont. At the end of the project his contractor, William Ranger, provided his lordship with a summary of the work done and its overall cost, which was £12714 9s. 5d.; Barry signed off this document on 16 October 1829 (WSRO PHA 5199). Ranger described the work on the tower as:

Taking down a portion of the Tower, rebuilding the same and erecting a Spire thereon, underpinning the walls of the Tower, taking down and rebuilding the back wall thereof, and shoring up the Tower and Spire during that operation; covering the whole of the Tower and Spire with Roman Cement; ... How much of the medieval masonry survived this 'operation' is uncertain, though the lower south and west walls are possibly original (inspection is now possible following the removal of the 'Roman cement').

The spire was a feature of the townscape for the next 120 years and appeared frequently in illustrations ranging from paintings and sketches by J. M. W. Turner to line drawings, photographs and picture postcards. Turner's *oeuvre*, indeed, includes a painting of the spire under construction in 1827,





Fig. 8: Petworth, St Mary: watercolour by Henry Petrie, showing church from south-east, n.d. but c.1804 (SAS LEWSA.VR. Sharpe 256; courtesy Sussex Archaeological Society).



Fig. 9: Petworth, St Mary: photograph of a view by Henry Petrie of the church from the north-west, 1804 (SAS Library Acc. No. 28218; courtesy Sussex Archaeological Society).

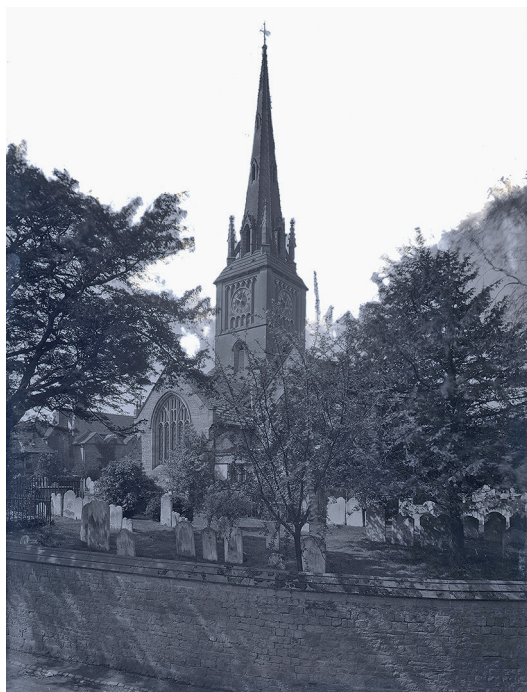


Fig. 10: Petworth, St Mary: view of church and Barry's spire from the north-east, 1877 x 1908, by Walter Kevis (WSRO, Kevis Collection 4/186; courtesy West Sussex Record Office).

which shows the timber framework but is otherwise not helpful in terms of the following discussion (TB CCXLIV, 52). It was suggested by Rodney Hubbuck that Barry used a spire design not carried out at St Peter's, Brighton (Nairn and Pevsner 1965, 294), though at first sight a comparison of photographs of the Petworth spire, such as Fig. 10, with Barry's well-known illustration of St Peter's complete with spire (Dale 1989, fig. 8; Berry 2010, fig. 4) might suggest otherwise. However, two versions of Barry's detailed drawings for the lower part of the proposed St Peter's spire form part of the collection of drawings rescued from his office by James Murray, now in the archive of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA Images 67930 and 96118). The designs are similar but not identical, and while both bear a resemblance to the Petworth spire, the details such as pinnacles, lucarnes and crockets in RIBA 67930 are a closer match (see Fig. 11), though the pinnacles and base lucarnes at Petworth seem to have been more even in height (Fig. 12). The main discrepancy, however, is the sloping transition from the top of the tower to the spire, which appears not

to sit directly on the top of the tower walling. It is this that makes the Petworth spire look so dissimilar to Barry's drawings. His elevation drawings for the rather simpler spire on the tower of Holy Trinity, Hurstpierpoint, which he designed in 1843 (WSRO Par 400/4/45), show a similar 'skirt' at the base of the spire; the section drawing (no. XII) shows this covering the squinches supporting the spire, rather as though corner broaches had been enlarged so as to merge together as a continuous feature round the base of the spire.

Actual dimensions are not obtainable because of the demolition of the Petworth spire in 1948, but from the drawn evidence it is clear that the top of the tower was—and is—slightly larger than that at St Peter's. Scaling from a modern architect's plan gives a measurement east-west of approximately 24ft 2¾ in. (7.385m) at ground level and from the 1803 elevation drawing 24ft 3in. (7.391m) at the base of the parapet. An undated and untitled drawing of the south elevation of the tower and spire (Fig. 13), which forms part of the parish archive (WSRO Par 149/4/2), has the appearance of a professionally drawn document; its scale is stated as '8ft to inch' [*sic*], and the dimension of the top of the tower is 23ft 11in. (7.29m). The RIBA drawing at half an inch to the foot gives a dimension of slightly greater than 22ft 5¼ in. (6.84m) below the moulding at the base of the spire. There is thus a discrepancy of between 1ft 5¾ in. and 1ft 9½ in. (0.451m–0.546m) between the top of the Petworth tower and the base of the St Peter's spire as drawn. Although these dimensions are approximate, it is clear that the proposed spire would not fit exactly on to the Petworth tower and that some adaptation would have been required. This could account for the sloping 'skirt' between the tower top and the base of the spire pinnacles, shown in all surviving photographs and drawings (e.g. Fig. 10). Whatever the reason for its use at Petworth, Barry adopted it fifteen years later for the spire at Hurstpierpoint, which he designed from first principles.

The other, more minor, discrepancy between the RIBA drawings for St Peter's, Brighton, and the former appearance of the Petworth church spire has been mentioned briefly above. This is the difference in the relative heights of the gablets at the base of the spire and the flanking corner pinnacles. In the drawing RIBA 67930, which is not specifically labelled as referring to St Peter's, the difference in the relative heights is exaggerated compared with

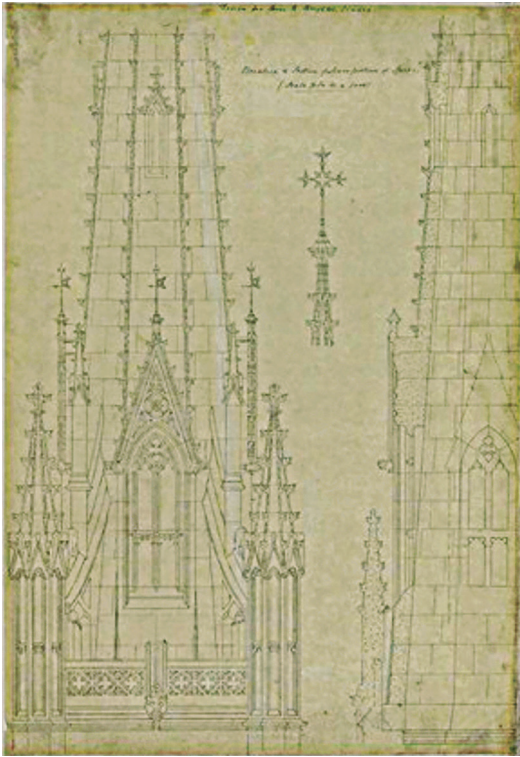


Fig. 11: Brighton, St Peter: Barry's design for the spire, which was not carried out, RIBA 96118 (courtesy Royal Institute of British Architects).

RIBA 96118. The latter itself seems to be exaggerated compared with the former appearance of the Petworth spire, as shown in photographs such as Fig. 10, but is consistent with the main elevation drawing Par 149/4/2 in the parish records. The second of these drawings, which shows details of the pinnacles, appears to have been cut down from a larger one, and has lost any attribution or scale which might originally have been written on it. It is annotated with the vertical dimensions of the elements of the pinnacles, but the height of the gable of the base lucarne is not given; the drawing shows it slightly lower than the tops of the pinnacles. It is clear that there was a degree of flexibility in the detailing of the Petworth spire as built; the differences in the various depictions of it and of the supposed model should not be afforded too much significance, but can be regarded as an indication that an original design, perhaps that for

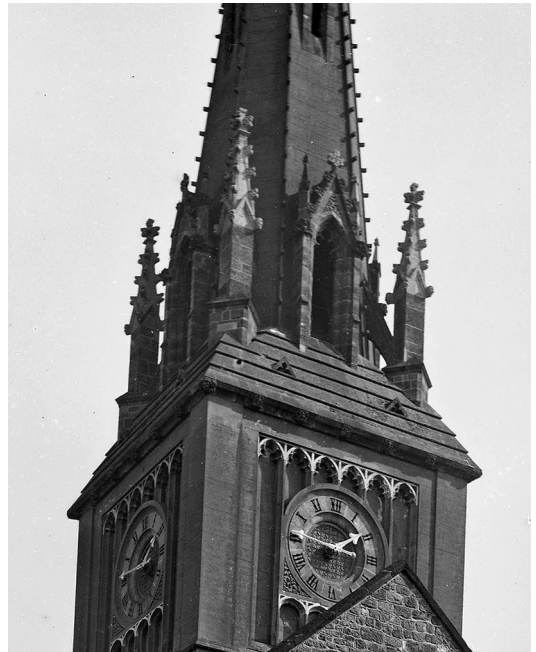


Fig. 12: Petworth, St Mary: view of Barry's spire from the north-west, 1877 x 1908, by Walter Kevis (WSRO, Kevis Collection 4/191; courtesy West Sussex Record Office).

Brighton St Peter, was adapted to suit the conditions at Petworth in the late 1820s.

Despite the underpinning and rebuilding carried out by William Ranger, the spire was ultimately too much of a burden for the tower. It is generally said that it was condemned in 1947; the record in the church log book gives the date as April 1948 (WSRO Par 149/4/4, p.53). A curious stub of masonry or timber survived for a few years, and appears in some photographs; this was removed in 1953 and in the following year the upper part of the tower was made good in brick and the present pyramidal cap was added by the architect L. H. Parsons (WSRO Par 149/4/4, pp.53<sup>v</sup>-54; Fig. 14).

## CONCLUSION

The work carried out by Barry had a profound impact on the appearance of St Mary's, both externally and internally. His added south aisle is still a prominent feature when the church is viewed from the south-west, and its elegant arcade is equally a prominent feature of the interior. It is no longer possible to assess the effect of Barry's interior overall, since his



Fig. 13: Petworth, St Mary: south elevation of tower, spire and stair turret, undated and unattributed (WSRO, Par 149/4/2; courtesy West Sussex Record Office)

work on the north arcade was superseded by the further restoration in 1903, and the furnishings have been reordered on several occasions. Externally his work on the tower and spire has been similarly overtaken by events, and his spire can be appreciated only from illustrations; in its day, however, it constituted a striking addition to the appearance of the church and a notable townscape feature, captured by artists and photographers from J. M. W. Turner to Walter Kevis.

#### Acknowledgements

Mark Tarver, formerly churchwarden of St Mary's, helped and encouraged in many ways, in particular by giving me access to the Leconfield gallery and to the drawings of F. Reginald

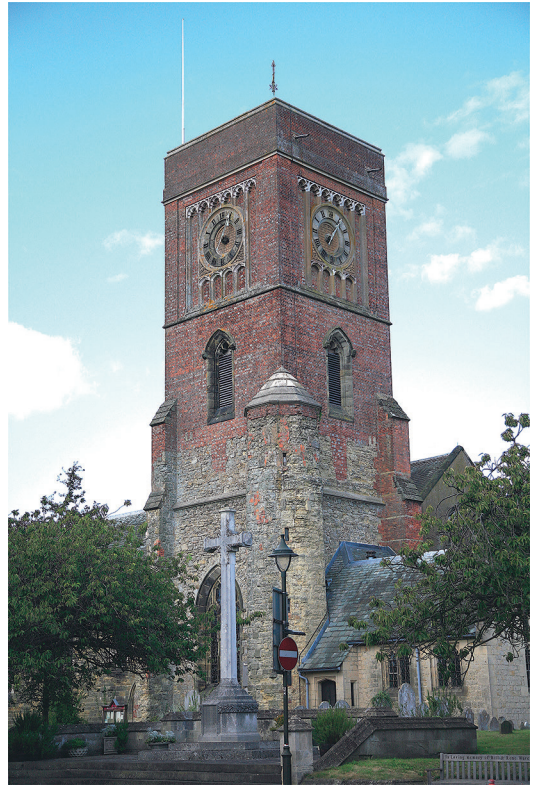


Fig. 14: Petworth, St Mary: view of the tower from the south-east, showing the modern brick upper stages, 2012; the pyramidal cap is hidden behind the parapet (photo: D. Parsons)

Steele and Partners; Christopher Whittick and Judith Brent kindly helped with the identification of 'Parson Acon'; Simon Dyson, DipArch, RIBA, supplied the dimensions of the tower of St Peter's Brighton; Dr Sue Berry put her expert knowledge of St Peter's at my disposal; the British Library, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Sussex Archaeological Society and the West Sussex Record Office supplied copies of original drawings and photographs; and WSRO also provided copies of documents from the Petworth House Archives in the ownership of Lord Egremont. The staffs of all these repositories have been most helpful in answering my queries, especially Alison McCann and more recently Diane Ladlow at WSRO. I am grateful to them all and to other colleagues and friends who have listened sympathetically to my ideas over many years.

**Author:** Dr David Parsons FSA, Newlyn, Southover High Street, Lewes, BN7 1HX; [dpa36@icloud.com](mailto:dpa36@icloud.com)

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- WSRO Kevis 4/186, 4/191**. West Sussex Record Office, positive copies from glass plate negatives showing Petworth church spire and detail by Walter Kevis, 1877 x 1908.
- WSRO Par 149/4/2**. West Sussex Record Office, parish records, Petworth St Mary, two architectural drawings, tower and spire south elevation, and details of pinnacles, n.d.
- WSRO Par 149/4/4**. West Sussex Record Office, parish records, Petworth St Mary, log book.
- WSRO Par 149/7/4**. West Sussex Record Office, parish records, Petworth St Mary, Cragg sketch.
- WSRO Par 149/7/5 no. 3**. West Sussex Record Office, parish records, Petworth St Mary, interior view to north-west before 1903 restoration, photographic print, n.d.
- WSRO Par 400/4/45**. West Sussex Record Office, parish

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