

THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF ANCIENT BUILDINGS CAMPAIGN TO SAVE HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, PENTON MEWSEY

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ABSTRACT

In the last quarter of the 19th century the Church of England continued its Gothic revival. Still inspired by the Oxford Movement and the Cambridge Camden Society (founded in 1838), its visible results were new churches and much remodelling and restoration, often at the expense of original features not fitting the Victorian concept of mediaevalism. In 1877 the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was established by William Morris and his circle to combat this trend, perceived by them as akin to vandalism. The threat to demolish the small 14th century parish church of Penton Mewsey, near Andover, offers insights into S.P.A.B.'s early campaigning methods. It equally illustrates some of the local divisions within the Church of England itself.

INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth century England produced a conjunction of unprecedented population growth, wealth generated by the industrial age and challenge for the hearts and minds of its working class. In the earlier part of the century the Evangelical movement crossed denominational boundaries, with its emphasis on prayer, moral conduct and Sunday observance. From the 1830s the Anglican Oxford Movement revived interest in mediaeval liturgy and ritual and the Cambridge Camden Society, through its journal *'The Ecclesiologist'* (1839–1868) and equally inspired by the neo-Gothicism of Pugin, was influential in determining the resulting style of church building and restoration. Affluent Church of England clergy, firmly directed by the evangelical Bishop of Winchester Richard Sumner (1827–1867) to reside in their parishes, were often keen to leave tangible as well as spiritual evi-

dence of their incumbencies. Church building and restoration contributed to a more than ten fold increase in the architectural profession between 1820 and 1870 (Thompson 1965, 271).

PENTON MEWSEY

Penton Mewsey is a small parish of only 1,044 acres, located two miles north west of Andover. By the latter half of the 19th century it was a closed parish with resident squire, predominantly agricultural with a typical downland 'sheep and corn' economy. Its population had decreased slightly from 215 in the first 1801 census to 210 in 1851, growing to 305 by 1871. An unusual feature was and is that the village street largely marks the boundary between Penton Mewsey and the next parish of Weyhill, but more properly called Penton Grafton. The hamlet of that name occupies the ground on the other side of the village street, but its inhabitants were supposed to attend the church at Weyhill a mile and a half away.

PENTON MEWSEY CHURCH

Holy Trinity Church, Penton Mewsey, for perhaps four centuries remained essentially the simple 1360s nave and chancel it had always been. Of typical Hampshire flint walls, its fenestration and interior stonework were good examples of flamboyant Decorated style and its western gable supported a contemporary bell turret, one of only eight other mediaeval examples. At some uncertain date during the late 18th or early 19th centuries, prompted possibly by the arrival for the first time of a resident squire, radical changes were made,



Fig. 1 Penton Mewsey church with Rectory in background c. 1898 by Percy Buckman

summed up in 1844 by the visiting Winchester architect Owen Carter, as follows (Carter 1844):

The church has been lately repaired with deal, and adds another to the many unhappy attempts of a similar description so common at the present day. The ancient north window has been destroyed and a communication formed with a monstrous erection in the shape of a gallery or "Pue" (sic), furnished with carpets, chairs, curtains and open fireplace with all its noisy appurtenances. This abomination has been lately removed, and in its place a sort of transept has been formed and furnished with seats as above mentioned ... The eastern wall is of comparatively modern flint work, and the east window has been lately embellished? with some wretched examples at stained glass..

CHRISTOPHER DODSON

These last changes were largely motivated by Christopher Dodson. In 1832 Dodson, a Cam-

bridge graduate, was installed as Rector and was to so remain until his death in 1876. He marked his arrival by pulling down Penton's old rectory and building a replacement (reputedly designed by his wife) described by Pevsner as 'grandly Victorian' (Pevsner and Lloyd 1967, 371).

The new rectory into which he then moved lay barely fifty yards from the church. Three storeys high with elevations of flint and yellow brick, its high pitched roof elaborately gabled, its bulk may have seemed to the villagers a brash and unsympathetic juxtaposition to their simple church (Fig. 1).

The churchwardens' accounts from 1802–1843 (HRO 2M/72/P02) show repeated and increasing repairs which must have borne heavily upon a small parish. It seems likely that Carter's visit prompted Dodson to further and more radical surgery. That year a subscription was opened with the Church Building Society as main donor to re-pew the church with a mixture of free seating for 156 and family pew space for 'others' of a further 50 (Vickers 1993, 204). As the accounts also

show, an old gallery in the west end disappeared, stone work in many windows was replaced and the bell turret, which until then had been crudely boarded up was again exposed to view. *'The Ecclesiologist'* might have had mixed feelings about the internal rearrangements: facing choir benches yet priest's stall still in the nave, and the pulpit hiding the original piscina to a pre-Reformation altar to St Katherine. Other original features, including a memorial brass of c. 1510, were probably destroyed at the same time (Cook 1983, 26).

Dodson, an authoritarian of increasingly conservative temperament (Anstruther 1973; Tempéro 1997, 10) then appears either to have become so High Church, or, as village tradition has it, to have become so lazy in conducting services that in 1865 'a public lecture hall and reading room' was built with the support of Miss Anne Harcourt, a daughter of the Archbishop of York as 'an evangelical Church of England protest against the Oxford Movement' (Dewar 1983). Its trust deed's latitude to the trustees to discontinue Sunday evening services 'if such ... shall be held in the ... parish church ... provided it consist of evening prayer according to the liturgy of the Church of England and a sermon' supports the village tradition. The 'scripture reader', who was paid from an endowment by Miss Harcourt, was to be a person 'professing ... the 39 Articles ... and in the Westminster Confession of Faith commonly known as Evangelical' In the small village of Penton, the Church of England was indeed a broad church with places of worship for both 'high' and 'low' tastes.

Increasingly infirm, Dodson's signature is missing from Vestry minutes for the last two and a half years of his life until his death in early 1876.

THOMAS HARGRAVES

Dodson's successor, after a vacancy of several months, was Thomas Hargraves. A graduate of Sydney Sussex college, Cambridge (B.A. 1871) he was ordained deacon in 1873 and appointed curate to a parish in Kent, becoming a priest the following year (Crockford 1877, 401).

It is not hard to imagine, after the moribund later years of Dodson's incumbency, the young

new Rector taking charge of his first parish, determined to place his stamp upon it.

Hargraves had a vision of a new and much larger church to be built at the far end of the small meadow adjoining the existing church. Evidently this plan was hatched with the approval of the squire, Sir William Humphery. The Vestry minute for 12th July 1877 records the following unanimous resolution:

Whereas the Church of Holy Trinity in the Parish of Penton Mewsey stands greatly in need of repairs, and also requires enlargement and whereas in carrying out the necessary works the greater portion of the present structure would have to be taken down and many graves would be disturbed and when so restored and enlarged the church would not be an entirely satisfactory work, It was resolved at a meeting of the said Parish duly convened and held on the 12th day of July 1877 that the Rector be requested to apply for a faculty to pull down the said church in order that a new one be built on a new site which has been granted for the purpose.

Those present, in addition to the Rector and his squire, were a farmer, the publican, two small tradesmen and the parish clerk, all of them tenants of the squire and hardly in a position to defy him.

Subsequent village reaction can be judged from a letter published in the local newspaper two years later from Catherine Hedderley, wife of another farmer and villager, James Hedderley. Writing from Penton Grange she asked (AA 16.5.1879):

Is it not usual before pulling down parish churches to ask the parishioners if they consent to such proceedings? Yet this has not been done in Penton Mewsey so far as I am aware. There was a notice given for a Vestry to be held to consider the question on 12th July 1877 at 11 o'clock in the forenoon but when that day and hour arrived it was found the notice had been altered the day before to half past nine, of which only a few were aware and the meeting had consequently been held, seven persons only being at it and four of these were officially connected with the church viz. the Rector, the two churchwardens and the Clerk, so that there were only three independent parishioners present. I do not write this letter with any other motive but that of informing you that

there are many here who see no necessity whatever for a new church and who think that a little repair of the present one is all that is necessary.

It is significant that Mrs Hedderley had been companion to Miss Harcourt when the latter was also living at Penton Grange in 1865. James Hedderley was one of the trustees of the 1865 deed and a substantial and independent farmer.

WILLIAM MORRIS AND S.P.A.B.

Fortunately for the village, by the time this letter was written, the threat had already come to the attention of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).

On 22nd March 1877 William Morris and nine of his pre-Raphaelite friends had met and resolved to found the Society. It was a direct result of a letter Morris had written to the Athenaeum, prompted by Giles Gilbert Scott's 'restoration' of Tewkesbury Abbey and calling for protest against such destruction of other buildings (SPAB News, Vol. 15 No.3 1994, 13). Their inspiration came from Morris's early mentor, John Ruskin, whose 1849 warning was adapted by the Society the following year into its Manifesto which still stands today and reads in part:

... the civilised world of the 19th century has no style of its own amidst its wide knowledge of the styles of other centuries. From this lack and this gain arose in men's minds the strange idea of the Restoration of ancient buildings ... which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that and the other part of its history – of its life that is – and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living and even as it once was ...

From the outset the Society set itself the ambitious target of locating all ancient buildings left unrestored. Buildings must be conserved, preserving as many as possible of their original features, not restorations where architects exercised license in conjecturing what might have once been with consequent falsification of a building's true evolution (Cunnington 1993, 132). Demolition was taboo. It was agreed to write to bishops and other 'custodi-

ans' of ancient buildings and to alert local antiquarian societies (McCarthy 1992, 377). It was probably through Mrs Simcox, the mother of the Rector of the adjacent parish, that the Society was first alerted to the situation in Penton Mewsey. As early as 30th August 1877 (SPAB minutes) she wrote:

... It (the church) is much appreciated in its neighbourhood...and has been visited by people interested in such studies. Its special points of interest I am afraid I cannot tell you but its proposed destruction is looked upon with horror by everyone in the neighbourhood except the new Rector, whose new broom is very active and Sir William Humphery whose place is within the parish and whose ear the Rector has got. The former Rector who has lately died over 80 was very proud of the church ...

In the Society's early years its committee met weekly with Morris, as Honorary Secretary, normally in attendance (MacCarthy 1995, 416). Until its second year, when a secretary, Newman Marks was appointed, Morris apparently dealt with correspondence personally. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a man who when he died was declared by his doctor to have done the work of ten (Drake 1996, 1), SPAB's file on Penton Church shows gaps, but its earliest surviving letter is a draft reply, signed by Morris, to Mrs Simcox dated 31st October 1877:

Dear Madam,

Since I last wrote you I have been in communication with the Bishop of Winchester respecting Penton Mewsey Ch. He replied to my first letter stating that he had at once written to the Rector to know what was being done, as he (the Bishop) had heard nothing about the proposed demolition. After some little time I again wrote on behalf of the Committee to the Bishop asking him if he could furnish us with any further information respecting the course the Rector was about to pursue. I enclose a copy of the Bishop's reply & am directed by the Committee to ask you whether a protest from this Socy would be of any use in case a faculty is asked for.

Penton Mewsey therefore must have been among the earliest of the Society's concerns.

THE CAMPAIGN

The Society had willing local scouts. The file contains letters and drawings from the Reverend Alfred Walters of Winchester, who, describing himself as 'ex architect' also alerted the Society to the threat in a letter dated 4th October 1878. He made a careful ground plan sketch on 17th March 1879 and also sent in a drawing of the much admired bell turret. Walters also sensed potential legal difficulties with the ownership of the preferred site for the new church and made suggestions for persons to be lobbied, including the Reverend Simcox. The latter wrote on 15th November 1878 to Newman Marks:

... I am glad to know the Society is doing what it can ... but I am afraid there is not much help to be got from the Parishioners. The great man of the place is Sir W. Humphery, who is the leader of the plan for the rebuilding. I don't imagine that Mr Rowden or Mr Hedderley, substantial farmers living in the village, would care to oppose him. It would scarcely be legitimate to appeal to the Puritanism of the latter, who I am afraid is not very sympathetic with the Rector, on points where the latter is more discrete than on those of the church fabric.

It was one of Hargraves' arguments that the existing church was too small, but Mr Walters had tested this personally:

... tho indeed I found the chancel stuffed full of children, there were plenty of spare places ... both on the morning and evenings of the 2 & 3 Sundays in August 1877 when I officiated in the church and I also observed the self-same thing on the two Sunds. in August of this present year!! Moreover, be it noted, altho' the Hamlet of -? another & distinct Penton is situated close to the Penton Mewsey Ch. But - why sh'd this active restless Rector provide Ch. room for another man's parishioners!! ... From what I heard on the spot, I fear vanity is at the root of the whole matter. He (H) is, or fancies he is a good preacher ...

Outspoken Walters certainly was. Occasionally in his pursuit of his opponent his focus strays riskily from the perceived goal. In another letter he refers to the 'present restless demeanour of an often

busy Incumbent of vicious tastes and mischievous tendencies' and dismisses the squire as 'a better judge of horses than of churches!'. The architect engaged for the new church, William White 'really ought to know better.' White designed at least ten other Hampshire churches, several using salvaged parts from buildings they replaced (Pevsner & Lloyd 1976, 371). Walters ends with a short account of carol singing in the village accompanied by the Rector, copied from the Hampshire Chronicle of 29th December 1877, and noting that the choir afterwards adjourned to the White Hart, 'where a hot supper was provided'. Walters explodes:

A queer way of keeping Christmas Eve this! Odd and eccentric Ritual - alike unknown to & unpracticed by - "High Ch." - "Low Ch." or "Broad Ch."!! "a hot supper on a solemn Fast!! The Choir & Rector adjourned to "the White Hart"! Not to the Ch:!!

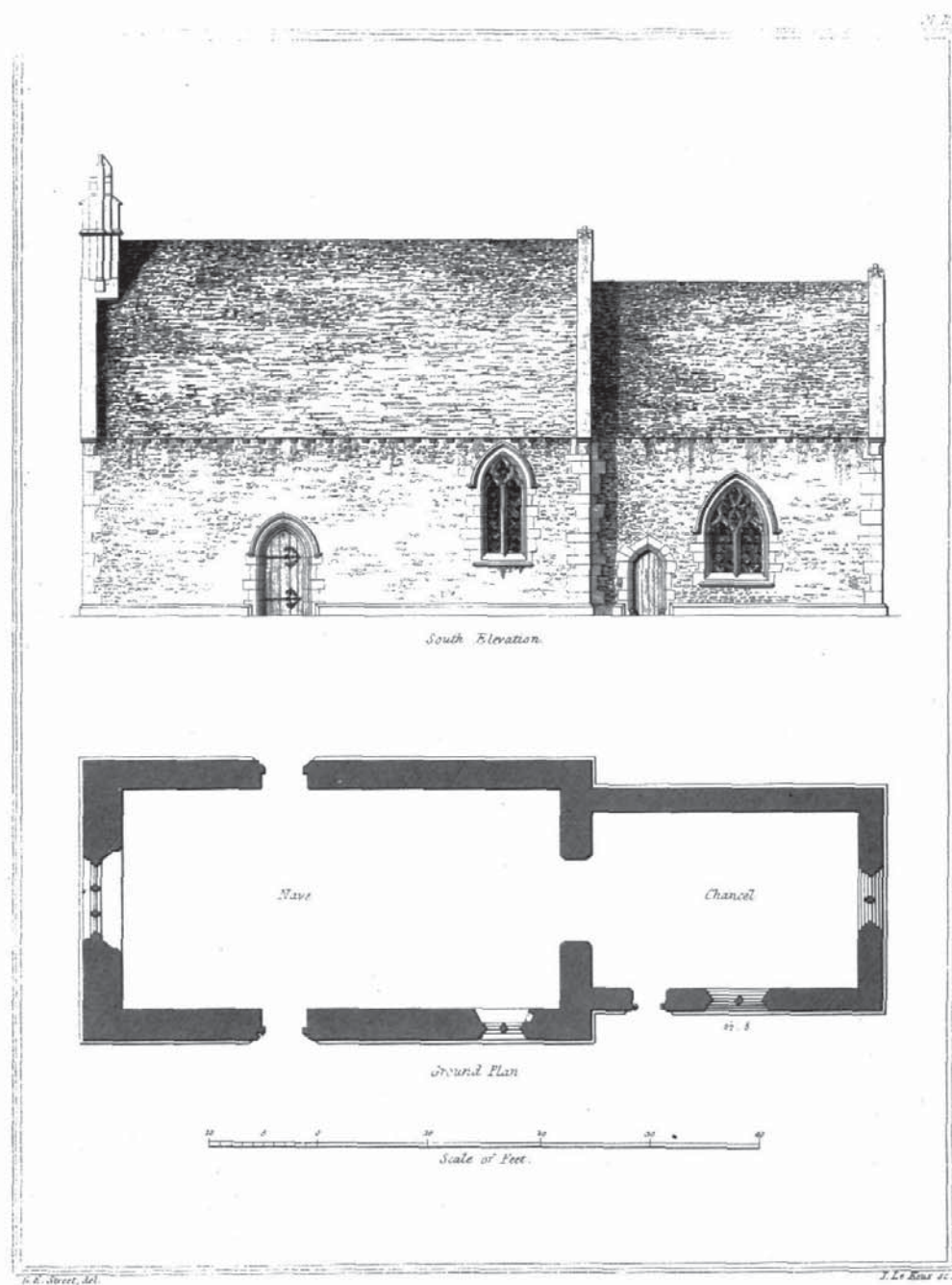
He ends with the appeal:

Surely Mr Street the Diocesan Architect will not allow this Ch: to be destroyed?

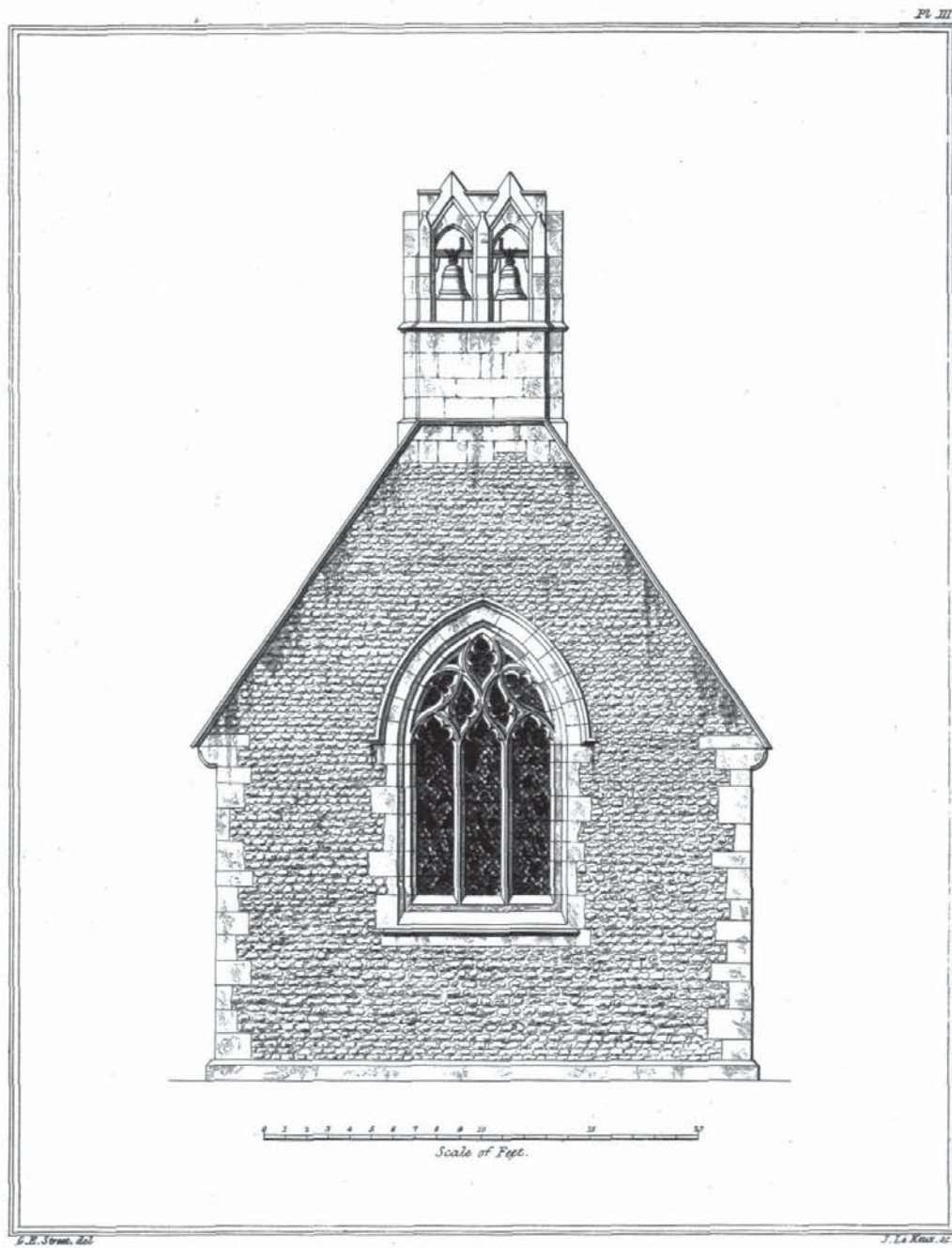
George Edmund Street was then 53 and at the height of his powers and influence with a thriving architectural practice based in Oxford. Morris himself had been articled to him for a year or so in 1856 before pursuing his many other interests. Perhaps it was Walters' rhetorical question which stirred Morris next to write to his old principal. He must have done so with some misgivings as he was equally critical of his old master's lucrative restorations and not averse to 'ferocious public confrontation' which greatly hurt the older man (MacCarthy 1995, 378).

Luck intervened. What Morris could not have known was that years earlier, in 1843, when Street himself was training in Winchester under Owen Carter, both had visited Penton Mewsey and made careful measurements, and drawings (afterwards engraved) and published (Carter 1844) (Figs 2 & 3). Street recalled it as:

... a singularly good little church & to the v best of my belief at that time in unusually good repair..



Figs. 2 & 3 Copies of engravings from Weale's Quarterly Papers of 1844 of Penton Mewsey church



Figs. 2 & 3 Copies of engravings from Weale's Quarterly Papers of 1844 of Penton Mewsey church

He would write to the Bishop 'urgently'. Good as his word, he wrote to Morris again only five days later, relaying the Bishop's somewhat unhelpful reply:

I do not know what is to be done about Penton Mewsey. I know there has been some considerable talk about rebuilding it. I do not know to what extent the scheme has been carried. If a faculty has been issued I suppose I cannot stop it. Such things are not issued by me, but by my Chancellor.

Seemingly Walters was advised of the Bishop's equivocation. It was a clarion call to action on several fronts, typical of the Society's developing tactics. Mrs Hedderley was contacted again and evidently urged to form an action committee, as she wrote back on 14th July 1879 '...you can imagine how few would like to go against the (squire and the Rector)'. An appeal for subscriptions was drafted, printed and widely circulated. It was substantially repeated in a letter signed by Newman Marks but probably drafted by Walters, to the *Hampshire Chronicle* dated 7th March 1879. To this Hargraves responded on 10th March with a long letter questioning whether Marks had ever seen the building, and suggesting it was as beautiful as he described as 'nonsense'. Stung by this, Walters struck back by drafting a letter published under Marks' name (HC, 20.3.1879):

To say the members of SPAB are astonished at the letter of the Revd. Mr Hargraves - Anger is a very mild way of expressing their feelings ... Mr Hargraves says 'It does seem strange that if the church is so beautiful, such a "gem of art" and "such a charming example" so little attention has been given to it by its admirers 'til within the last two years. Now sir, what is to be said to this extraordinary statement in the force of the following facts ...

The letter then details Carter's drawings and their publication and mentions other illustrations by Mr Pettit in *'The Archaeological Journal'* and *'The Glossary of Architecture'*

Now sir, I would simply ask, did not G.E. Street R.A. consider it nonsense to look upon this as a

beautiful church when he made as many as twenty different drawings illustrating every position of the building (except one or two modern additions, which Mr H. is quite at liberty to pull down if he wishes) Now I would simply ask the question, who are the better judges as to the value and beauty of an ancient church, Mr Street, Mr Carter and Mr Pettit and the members of SPAB - or Mr Hargraves? The Society does not in the least object to Mr H. building a hundred new churches (and) a new church at Penton if he likes and can get the money to pay for them and if ... he is of the opinion that an old church is "unfitted for ... worship" pray let him show the world what is fitted for worship!

Others wrote from Andover and Winchester and also Street himself. All strongly supported preservation and were critical of Hargraves.

In the face of this onslaught, and a personal visit to Penton by a SPAB committee member, the Hon. Percy Wyndham M.P., squire and parson evidently began to weaken and seek a compromise. On 20th April 1879 Sir William Humphery wrote to the Society offering not to pull down the old church if the Society could raise £330 to compensate the parish for its salvaged materials to be used in the new one.

Hargraves was also running into the legal difficulties in acquiring the new church site that Walters had sensed might exist earlier. Penton's resident 'mole' Mrs Hedderley wrote again to the Society in June 1879:

The matter however is in abeyance here and it is confidently stated that nothing will be done this year & the opinion gains ground that noone would be sorry to give up the scheme except the Rector & he is not likely to proceed very fast for two reasons

1st that there is not sufficient money forthcoming
2nd that it is doubtful whether the site proposed can be legally obtained.

She went on to explain that the apparent freeholder (a Mr Meadows) lived on the continent, had no heir and was believed to have a life interest only. It was 'therefore doubtful that he can alienate his portion.' Meadows was Lord of the Manor and Mrs Hedderley recommended writing to his

steward, Thomas Paxton of Bicester : 'who is no friend of the Rector and not favourable to his schemes.' She then perceptively comments:

I cannot help thinking that the Society which you represent should hesitate before they offer to purchase the old church, or they may help to facilitate that which they desire to prevent.

This advice appears to have been heeded. Penton Vestry never applied to the Diocese for any faculty to demolish and build anew. There is no further correspondence on SPAB's file until March 1881 when Walters writes again to the Society (by now signing himself as 'Local Secretary and Agent':

... the Revd. T. Hargraves, the Rector of Penton Mewsey, (who lately gave us so much trouble & alarm by proposing to take down and rebuild this gem of Flamboyant art) has resigned and is leaving the place, I could not refrain from announcing to the Society this welcome intelligence; altho' we shall probably have to keep a watch upon the actions of his successor in the Rectory.

Appropriately perhaps, Hargraves' final attendance at a Vestry was on April Fool's Day which followed, but that controversy raged long after his departure is evidenced by an application on behalf of the Vestry, but motivated by Hedderley, dated 24th July 1885 to the Winchester Consistory Court to remove:

...a brazen Cross, two candlesticks and two vases of brass introduced by the former Rector Thomas Hargraves without sanction of the parishioners and placed by him on the Communion Table ... as a breach of the Second Commandment.

THE AFTERMATH

Thus ends an unusually well documented example of SPAB'S early campaigning methods. It clearly illustrates the force with which the committee acted to protect buildings, the outspokenness and persistence of the members and reliance upon local support. As a present day member has commented (*SPAB News* Vol.15 No.3).

They had to be (outspoken) in order to be heard. In spite of this (the Society) had problems, made many mistakes and had many failures. At times they must have been dejected and exhausted, but they also had many successes, broke new ground, forced discussion, increased their following, and above all made life for restoring architects and their patrons extremely difficult.

In Penton's case there is a twist in the tail. Had Street but refreshed his memory of the notes Owen Carter wrote in 1844 to accompany publication of his drawings of the church, to which Street himself had contributed, he would have found that while some features were indeed admirable, Carter had roundly condemned others, including the 'monstrous pue' quoted earlier.

Nor, sadly, were Walters' final warning words for vigilance to be heeded. By 1886 there was a new squire, whose Rector, though an antiquarian himself, happily records (Clutterbuck 1898, 194):

By the liberality of Captain Francis Sutton a complete and thorough restoration, which at the same time rendered the ancient church perfectly fit and convenient for its sacred purpose was carried out in 1888. The floor was raised to its proper level by a bed of concrete. The wretched dilapidated transept almost entirely rebuilt. The seats and stalls of pitch pine and the pulpit (a very fine example of carving) introduced ...

Other work included returning the original chancel north window, which had been inserted in the east window and making an imagined reproduction of the latter based on fragments found while the work was being done. The east end of the chancel was completely taken down, although Clutterbuck notes that:

... as the stones were numbered and replaced in their original positions, the "restoration" is properly so called.

That this probably dashed SPAB's supposed triumph is best summed up by Pevsner's curt entry: 'Nearly entirely Victorian (1888), but there are indications that the church was indeed Dec. as the restorer made it' (Pevsner and Lloyd 1976, 371).

CONCLUSION

Had Street revisited Penton again during the campaign, or Morris visited it at all, it is interesting to speculate if either would have fought the campaign to save its church as vigorously as they did. SPAB's tactics undoubtedly were successful and the direct and indirect methods employed during

its campaign provided a model for saving buildings and other works of art that are followed to this day. When the battle seemed won, the outspoken Walters was right to urge continued vigilance. The absence until 1947 of any civil legislation to protect historic buildings, was powerless to prevent the further major surgery of 1888, once the Society's guard was lowered.

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