

A Brief History of St Peter's Church

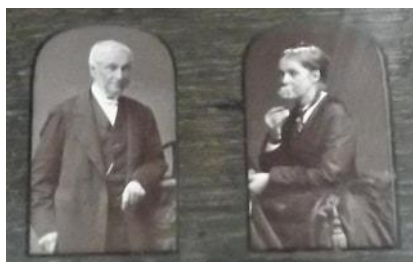
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Pre 1914: Before the First World War

For centuries, the everyday life of the Cathedral and City of Ely depended upon the River Great Ouse. In the Middle Ages, clerics and pilgrims came from far and near, landing on the riverbank and taking the steep paths - now Fore Hill and Back Hill - up to the monastery. Goods came to the Ely docks by barge from King's Lynn in the north bearing timber, coal and iron products. From Peterborough came bricks and from Cambridge and the south came other types of merchandise. Out from Ely, especially to King's Lynn, went exports of baskets, malt and grain. River traffic was considerable even in the late 1920s. In 1845, the railway was extended to Ely and the station was built at the foot of the hill by the river.



Thus, a large part of the city's population lived in Ely's riverside area, south of the Cathedral, as it was usual in those days for workers to live as close as possible to their places of work. Many small dwellings were crowded together in the narrow flat space between the river and the Cathedral precincts but there was no place of worship nearby. The Cathedral was away up the hill and served an entirely different need. The City of Ely was divided into two parishes and both churches were on the hill: Ely St Mary served the district to the west of the Lynn Road whilst Ely Holy Trinity served the area to the east of it and to the south of The Gallery. This latter parish included Broad Street and the riverside area but its principal church, housed from 1566 to 1938 in the Cathedral's Lady Chapel, seemed remote from the needs and life of the workers living along its southern border.



In the late 1880s Catharine Maria Sparke, widow of Canon Edward Bowyer Sparke, was looking to provide a fitting tribute to her husband's memory and, knowing that he had been keenly aware of the need for a church in Ely's riverside district, decided upon such a venture. The church was to be a mission church within the Parish of Holy Trinity. Already, before its foundation, there existed in the parish a Guild of St Peter which offered to ordinary working people a simple rule of Christian living. Thus, its dedication was decided and presumably it was envisaged that members of this Guild would form the core of the new mission church's congregation.



The new church was built at a cost of £5,000 on land which had previously been an orchard. On St Peter's Day, 1889, the foundation stone was laid and, on Monday 30 June the following year, the church was dedicated to St Peter by the Bishop of Ely, Lord Alwyne Compton, and opened for worship. Mrs Sparke established two endowed Trusts: one for the building and establishment of the church and the other for the provision of a Priest or Curate, under the direction of the Vicar of Holy Trinity and his successors, who would be responsible for holding services in accordance with the Doctrines and Liturgies of the Church of England.

From the outset the church, designed by Messrs St Aubyn and Wadling in the "Gothic" style of "the middle decorated period", had some high-quality furnishings made of "wainscot oak" in the Chancel and a marble mosaic pavement in the Sanctuary featuring the "Ely Lily", executed by De Goëlle and Co. of Naples. Further rich adornments were to follow.

Recent research by Canon Dr Nicholas Thistlethwaite has demonstrated that the pipe-organ in the Chancel, built by the distinguished firm of Hill & Son of London, was purpose-built for St Peter's in

1891. It was the gift of the Upcher family, that is, of Maria Hester the daughter and heiress of Canon & Mrs Sparke, her husband, Henry Upcher, and their four children.

Then, in 1892-93, a young Curate of Holy Trinity, The Revd Salisbury Price, who had taken an interest in the St Peter's project both before and after the church was built, transformed its internal appearance by commissioning an East Window from the celebrated firm of Charles Kempe and a Rood Screen from the up-and-coming young Ninian Comper.



1914-1929: St Peter's as a daughter-church to Holy Trinity



The fact that the First World War was deeply traumatic for Ely's riverside district, as much as for all Europe, is painfully evident from the War Memorial recording the names of the twenty-one young men killed in the battles of 1914-1918 who had learnt their catechism at St Peter's. During the War, because most of the younger clergy had left to become Chaplains to the armed forces, St Peter's was left in the care of, at first, the Vice-Principal of the Theological College and then Canon Goudge, its Principal, who was later to become Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford. His daughter, the novelist and children's writer, Elizabeth Goudge, recalled in her autobiography the cramped living conditions which she and her father encountered when visiting in the Broad Street area.

Dating from the year 1926, a fine photograph shows a flourishing robed choir of men and boys assembled with their lady organist near the church porch during the curacy of The Revd Frederick Bywaters. Little did they know that St Peter's was soon to experience a crisis threatening its very existence. Its Victorian financial endowments had by then lost much of their value and the Church of England in general was suffering from a lack of adequate funding for its numerous clergy.



Soon, Parliament's rejection of the 1928 proposal for a Revised Prayer Book was to cause consternation to many people of a more or less High Church persuasion including the then Vicar of Holy Trinity, Ely who was a staunch advocate of it. He left Ely for a living in Scotland; the Priest-in-Charge of St Peter's also left soon afterwards and an interregnum ensued in which the Bishop

seized the opportunity to amalgamate Ely's two parishes, Holy Trinity and St Mary's, thus cutting costs while achieving, so it was hoped, "concentration of effort".

Exactly how St Peter's, in its perilous financial state, escaped permanent closure at this time would require extensive research to discover but it appears that, once again, a Vice-Principal of Ely Theological College stepped in as "Priest-in-Charge".

1930-1964: St Peter's within the United Benefice of Holy Trinity with St Mary

Until 1938, the Cathedral's Lady Chapel continued to provide a place of worship for the "Holy Trinity" part of the "United Benefice of Ely, Holy Trinity with St Mary" but in that year it ceased to serve as a Parish Church and reverted to forming part of the Cathedral establishment. Wherever it may have been that the former worshippers at Holy Trinity sought a new spiritual home, most probably at St Mary's or the Cathedral, it does not appear from the printed parish report covering 1938-9 that St Peter's experienced any significant increase in congregation-size that year. However, some liturgical furnishings and equipment from Holy Trinity found a home at its former daughter-church in Broad Street and, from 1938 consistently until 1974, a succession of stipendiary Curates continued to be allocated to St Peter's by the Vicar of the United Benefice who had inherited the obligations laid upon his predecessors at Holy Trinity by Mrs Sparke's Trust Deed.

The amalgamation of Holy Trinity parish with St Mary's cannot be assumed to have been popular at St Peter's. A letter of protest against it is extant in the Cambridgeshire County Archives, many of the signatories of which had addresses in Ely's riverside district. However, St Peter's throughout the 1930s and well into the post-war period continued to benefit from access to the multi-functional parish room of Holy Trinity. The Guild of St Peter's seems to have fizzled out before the Second World War but other Church organisations arose in the United Parish which were accessible to members of St Peter's, notably a Sunday evening Youth Fellowship which celebrated its twenty-first birthday in 1959. St Peter's Sunday School, which functioned in Broad Street Girls' Junior School until the early 1950s, joined forces in the middle of that decade with the one run by St Mary's at Central Hall in Market Street.

St Peter's came through the Second World War under the care of The Revd William George Harwood, a practical handyman as well as a priest, whose curacy was unexpectedly extended to cover the years 1940-1947. Around the middle of that period, a sixteen-year-old called John Harnwell arrived at St Peter's and, after having trained as a motor-mechanic during his National Service, rejoined its altar-serving team in 1948 of which he remained a member until his death in 2016. He is greatly missed for the incalculable amount of voluntary work he contributed to St Peter's in that period.



The Revd Geoffrey Alder Field who served as Priest-in-Charge from 1950-1954, left a lasting mark on St Peter's in another way. It was he who extended the high altar to its present, unusually, wide dimensions, donating the new set of altar-frontals required. He also adapted a richly carved credence table, originally from Holy Trinity, to form a Lady Altar set against the Comper Screen.



From the 1950s also date the "Stations of the Cross" plaques around the walls and the pair of statues representing two English Catholic saints of the Reformation Era, "Saint" Thomas More and "Saint" John Fisher - startlingly unexpected ornaments for an Anglican Church. These two, plus a "Sacred Heart" statue abandoned in St Peter's in the 1980s by a former member of the congregation on her final decision to "go over to Rome", once evoked the astonished comment from a Roman Catholic visitor that "This Church is almost pre-Vatican II"!



How far back in its history does St Peter's attachment to Anglo-Catholicism in fact go? Probably we would not recognise the Prayer Book services conducted in the first half-century of its existence as markedly High Church in character. There is no mention of a thurible in the Inventory of 1925. On the other hand, the magnificence of the Comper Screen proclaims the Oxford Movement allegiance of at least one of the earliest clergymen to minister there and evidence also exists in a Register of Services of a push towards more frequent celebration of the Eucharist at St Peter's in the 1920s.



By the time in the 1940s when John Harnwell first remembered it, the church boasted an array of altar-servers which ranged from "Subdeacon" and "Master of Ceremonies" down to "Boat Boy". The personnel were recruited largely from students at the Theological College which maintained a close association with St Peter's until its closure in 1964.

1964-1994: Thirty years of decline and difficulty



The departure of the theological students from St Peter's and likewise, the young women who attended the church out of admiration for them, came as a severe blow. Also detrimental to the flourishing of St Peter's in the subsequent period was a marked decrease in the population of the neighbourhood. Many properties were left derelict as businesses were closed down and old family homes abandoned as beyond repair. Large areas of the riverside quarter were given over to car parking, goods storage, a timber yard, a coal yard, a large supermarket and garages providing car repairs and maintenance.

The congregation of St Peter's dwindled over the next thirty years and retreated from the nave into the choir stalls. A tiny nucleus of lay people, comprising members of the Vince family plus John Harnwell and his wife Nellie, Gladys Redditt (a former Sunday School teacher) and Doris Baker, the organist for fifty-four years from the 1930s to the 1980s, kept St Peter's open by sheer determination through the difficult years that followed. A bleak two-year period in the late 'eighties is remembered when repair of the heating system could not be afforded. However, help was at hand.



Since 1974, it had no longer been young stipendiary curates who were assigned to St Peter's by the Vicar of the United Benefice of Ely but retired clergy living locally. One of these, The Revd Jack Lisney died in 1993, soon to be followed by his widow, Margaret, who in her will bequeathed a large sum of money to St Peter's, sufficient to put the finances of its Trustees on a firm foundation again and enabling the church to purchase the house at No.59 Broad Street next door to its precincts, now a valuable asset both for the church and the community it serves.

Throughout its years of difficulty, St Peter's maintained the staples of High Anglican worship: congregational singing of the Merbecke setting of the Communion Service with a range of traditional hymns, latterly from the New English Hymnal, and the use of incense was retained from the glory-days of the Theological College. Core members of the small congregation were members of the Society of Mary and had an attachment to Walsingham and this presumably accounts for the inclusion of Marian devotions ever since as an introduction or appendix to the Sunday morning Eucharist.

St Peter's congregation in the late twentieth century generally disliked modernist tendencies in the Church, steadfastly resisting suggestions from St Mary's that it should install a nave altar or

remove pews and put in toilets. The Trustees' Minute Book also reveals great anxiety in the 1990s about what was considered an "untoward" innovation: the Ordination of women to the Priesthood of the Church of England. However, as a [Proprietary Chapel](#), St Peter's was not allowed to pass any Resolutions on this issue independent of its Parish Church and the Team Rector of what had become the Ely Team Ministry was known to take the opposite view to that prevalent at St Peter's. Indeed, very soon after, his wife received Ordination and other women Priests were later to receive appointments within the Team which had now expanded to include the villages encircling Ely.

1994 to the present day: Interesting times

St Peter's remained under the aegis of the Team Rector until 2013 when, in an interregnum, the Bishop of Ely took action and arranged for care of St Peter's to be transferred to the Dean and Chapter of Ely Cathedral. However, after five years, this arrangement was brought to an end. As a consequence, it was decided that the Trustees should seek to appoint and finance a part-time stipendiary Priest for St Peter's who would be directly responsible to the Bishop of Ely, normally with the local Archdeacon as intermediary. Eventually, in June 2019, The Revd Canon Dr Paul Andrews was licensed as Priest-in-Charge of St Peter's by the Venerable Hugh McCurdy, Archdeacon of Huntingdon and Wisbech.



More photographs of the Licensing Service may be found [here](#).

In 2019, one could fairly state that the congregation of St Peter's had been growing slowly but encouragingly, since the 1980s. It had become a very diverse group of individuals from a variety of backgrounds and Christian traditions: it still included members who felt unable in all conscience to accept the ministry of women as Eucharistic celebrants whilst our newcomers tended to be untroubled by this issue. Most of our regulars were resident in Ely, some very locally but by no means all and their occupations might take them all over the world or, at the other extreme, be confined to their own homes. Typically they had come to St Peter's searching for a special something that they may have felt lacking elsewhere.

After a long decline, Ely's riverside area had at last been recognized as having many advantages as a place to live: the beauty of the walks along the river and up the hill towards the Cathedral has no equal for many miles around and the proximity of the neighbourhood to the railway station is a huge attraction for anyone needing to travel regularly to Cambridge, London, East Anglia, the Midlands or further north. Pollution from the old Gas Works no longer blights the area; industrial enterprises had been encouraged to move further from the historic centre of Ely and this century's redevelopment has, as a matter of policy, included much new house building on brown-field sites near the riverside. Slum-clearance by demolition had been replaced by the conversion of old properties into desirable residences and a new public park has been laid out where there was once a timber yard. The city of Ely has been growing rapidly for some years and the population-figures of St Peter's original catchment-area have now possibly returned to something like those of the late nineteenth century.

St Peter's could and still can, claim to be a well-maintained church with a firm financial foundation and St Peter's Rooms, established in the house next door that was purchased thanks to Mrs Lisney's legacy, has become a great asset to the local community. The church has also become known as a popular venue for literary evenings and concerts.

However, some nine months after the licensing of Canon Andrews, an unexpected set-back hit St Peter's in common with all places of worship in this country, namely, the emergency measures taken by our government to counteract the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. In March 2020, an

unprecedented national “lockdown” began during which churches were entirely closed while everyone's working lives and social activities were severely constricted. There was a resumption of relative normality in the latter part of the summer that year until a further, only slightly less restrictive lockdown in November 2020 was followed by a brief respite over Christmas; then a renewed lockdown in the early part of the following year. St Peter's reopened for regular Sunday services on Passion Sunday 2021 and since then has remained open. The Church Rooms, since the summer of that year, have also returned to regular use.



As a result of the lockdowns, our congregation was suddenly plummeted into the digital age. It was a mercy that, starting from Easter 2020, at times when normal worship in church was banned as dangerously unhygienic, those of the congregation who possessed computers or smart-phones were able, thanks to the Internet, to watch while our Priest-in-Charge celebrated the Sunday Eucharist at home in his study in company with Judith, his wife. Soon, even our after-church meetings for refreshments were replicated online so that it became possible, virtually, to "meet" and chat sociably with congregation-members who, in reality, were isolated at home. Weekly newsletters were meanwhile also sent out to everyone in the congregation, by old-fashioned, non-digital means if necessary.

These are strange times, in which, even though we have now returned to worshipping in Church, we have not until very recently, been allowed to sing. We have become all too familiar, during the pandemic, with mask-wearing and self-isolation, and many people remain, with good reason, too fearful of the threat of infection to revert to habits of living which once seemed entirely normal – and that includes churchgoing. In these circumstances, it is hard to make plans for the future of our church, to compose mission-statements, express hopes or devise strategies. Rather, it is a time for praying for courage in adversity and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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