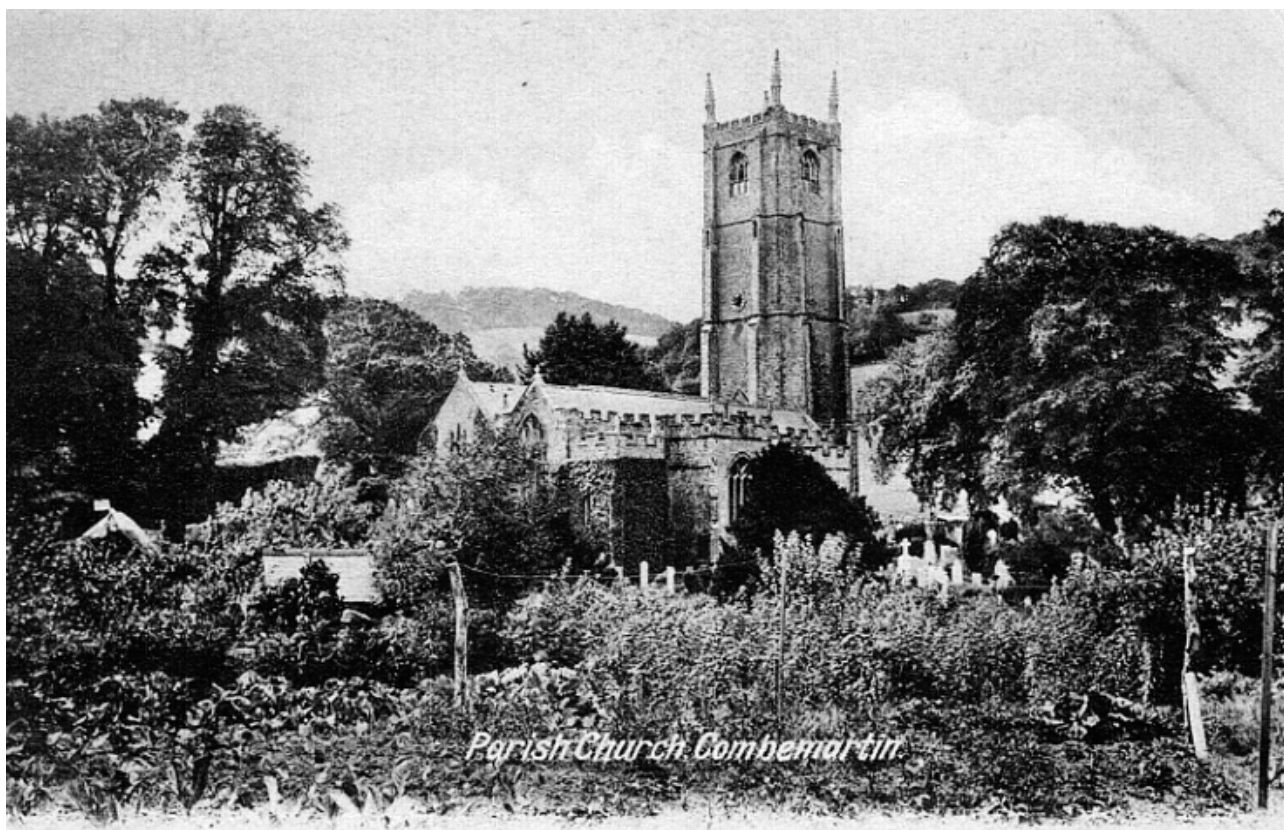


COMBE MARTIN ST PETER AD VINCULA CHURCH



Including Architectural Historian Allen T. Hussell's Early Twentieth Century Descriptions of Combe Martin St Peter ad Vincula Church, North Devon UK

Allen T. Hussell, F.R.I.B.A. (Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects), was an architect, architectural historian and author, known for his studies on church architecture in North Devon. He published works such as "North Devon Churches: Studies of Some of the Ancient Buildings" in 1909 [1901].

His research and writings have contributed significantly to the understanding and appreciation of the architectural heritage in the region.

The view from the top of Combe Martin's Gothic St Peter ad Vincula church tower is one of the finest in the area. From this vantage point, the formation of the expansive, sunny, and fertile valley can be seen in its entirety.

A long row of houses lines Combe Martin valley where, from the late nineteenth century, strawberry and vegetable gardens bordered each side. To the north-east, the Great and Little Hangman hills rise up, forming an impressive backdrop that reaches the western edge of Exmoor.

Allen T. Hussell's descriptions highlight the intricate and decorative nature of St Peter ad Vincula church's architecture, and its evolution up to 1909 ¹.

Combe Martin Anglican Parish Church is dedicated to St. Peter in Chains and consists of the following:

- A nave with a north aisle
- A chancel with a north aisle
- North and south transepts
- North and south porches
- A vestry
- A western tower

Hussell measured the combined length of St Peter's nave and chancel at 70 feet, and the width across the nave and north aisle at 34 feet 3 inches. This parish church was restored in 1881 at a cost of £500. The parish registers date from the year 1736, and the church had 450 sittings in the early twentieth-century.

Certain features indicated to Hussell that an Early English church, built perhaps around 1200 (during the reign of King John), formerly stood on the site.

Hussell stated that Oliver de Tracey, rector of Ilfracombe, who died in 1273 (during the reign of King Edward I), was said to have founded a shrine in St Peter's church. Presumably this was to a saint or religious figure, perhaps to the martyr Thomas Becket.

In 1333, Philip "Lord Columbers" 1st Baron Colomers of Nether Stowey, born about 1282 in England, and Eleanor de Columbers founded a chantry here in the reign of Edward III (1312-1377). Hussell judged that this was probably the south transept of the existing church.

The intention was to have masses conducted for the souls of the founders and their families. This practice was thought to aid their souls in the afterlife, especially by shortening their time in Purgatory.

Similarly, the south transept of Mortehoe Church is supposed to be the chantry founded by the rector William de Tracey in 1308 (during the reign of King Edward II). Eleanor was probably Eleanor Martin, Baroness Columbers, born around 1282 in Combe Martin.

Her father was William III Fitz Martin, 1st Lord Martin of Newport and Cemais. Her mother was Eleonor FitzReynold. Her family, the Fitz Martins (descendants of Martin de Tours) were Lords of Combe Martin from the late 11th century until the 14th century.

Eleanor married Philip V Colomers, 1st Baron Colomers of Nether Stowey (Somerset) around 1306, also in Combe Martin. She passed away on December 13, 1342, at the age of 61, and is buried in Barnstaple, Devon.

The Early English Combe Martin parish church (1154-1300) may have been built by Devon knight Robert Fitz Martin (c. 1095 - c. 1159), or the first Martins who built many churches in South Wales.

It would probably have consisted of the bulk of the present nave and chancel, as well as the south transept. Hussell thought it may have also featured a western or northern steeple.

As architectural styles developed, preferences for various forms and structures shifted. At certain times, the more robust and commanding presence of towers was preferred over the slender and delicate appearance of steeples.

The roofs of St Peter ad Vincula church nave, north aisle, and chancel aisle feature moulded stone corbels positioned just below the wall plates. These corbels might have once supported carved wooden angel figures, similar to those found in the roof at Northam church and others including Ilfracombe's Holy Trinity and St Peter's.

When the fifteenth-century builders started work at Combe Martin St Peter's, probably around the year 1410 (during the troubled reign of King Henry IV), they left the chancel and the south wall of the nave, as well as the south transept.

St Peter's tower would then have been built, the north wall of the nave and chancel opened out, and aisles built to each, along with the north porch. Other construction work carried out would have been the roofing throughout, likely not plastered as it is now, but open-timbered to the rafters.

In c.1410, the windows in the south wall of the nave and south transept were likely lancet windows. These were probably left intact, as records indicate that the lancet windows in the south wall were widened to allow more light and then filled with Perpendicular tracery. These are the windows that remain today.

Between the fifteenth-century renovations and the widening of the nave windows, the window immediately east of the south porch was modified to a Perpendicular style, a phase of Gothic architecture that emerged in England around the late 14th century and lasted until the early 16th century.

A portion of the exterior arch is still visible. This window was later altered again to match the other enlarged nave windows.

The lancet windows in the south wall of St Peter's chancel are likely restorations of the original ones. Based on the wall construction, the east wall of the chancel appears to have been rebuilt, the triple lancet window reinstated, and the chancel extended eastward by about a foot and a half

This reconstruction provided more space around the altar, where the door of the parclose screen is located.

Before the chancel's extension, the east wall would have aligned with the east wall of the vestry, which now shows a setback of about 18 inches. The south porch was constructed in 1724 during the reign of King George I (r. 1714-1727).

The nave arcading consists of three bays, with arches spanning 12 feet 2 inches. The piers are set diagonally, with half-columns at the angles and shallow wave mouldings between. The half-columns and mouldings end under the necking of the carved caps or bands.

These caps are excellent examples of Early Perpendicular carving and are quite distinctive. The hexagonal bases of the piers are also notable and typical of 15th-century craftsmanship.

In the Lady Chapel, there are some interesting old oak seats with carved ends. These bench-ends date from around 1500 to 1550, with some showing Early Tudor work and others reflecting the emerging Renaissance style.

For example, there is a combination of Tudor Gothic and Renaissance, with the latter style evident in the scrolls in the upper panels.

On the top rails of several bench ends are some damaged carvings, with fanciful representations of birds and animals including an eagle and a dragon.

The vestry door is ancient and probably from the 15th century. It measures 6 feet 2 inches by 2 feet 8 inches, is studded with several rows of large square-headed nails, and features a plain sanctuary ring and plate, as well as a curious "safety" lock with two keyholes.

The door would first be locked with a large key, then re-locked with a smaller one for double protection. A hinged flap covers the smaller keyhole, presumably to hide it, and may have been secured with a pin or other device, as the flap has two holes near the keyhole.

The south entrance door also has a sanctuary ring and plate, similar in design and size to that on the vestry door of Barnstaple Parish Church. The aged door at the foot of the tower staircase is also evidently from the 15th century.

The ground floor arch of the tower, opening into the nave, is boldly moulded and quite tall. The jamb and arch mouldings and the bases are similar (though larger) to those of the nave arcading.

The caps terminating the half-columns are semi-octagonal but are rather debased examples of the usual Perpendicular octagonal caps. This is unusual, given that the remaining details are so true to the style.

The archway, as a whole, though smaller, resembles in general effect and detail the celebrated lofty arch of Hartland Church tower, built around 1400 during the reign of King Henry IV.

St Peter's north transept features an Early Tudor four-centred arch, and there is evidence that its ceiling was worked on during that period.

The great fifteenth-century western tower—the finest feature of the church—is 99 feet high to the battlements, measuring 14 feet by 14 feet (interior measurement) on the ground floor. It is of four stages, finished with an embattled parapet, with a lofty crocketed pinnacle 12 feet high at each corner. In 1901, the tower contained a clock and six bells.

A crocketed pinnacle is an architectural feature commonly found on Gothic church towers and spires. It consists of a tall, slender pinnacle or finial that is decorated with a series of crockets, ornamental projections that resemble curled leaves or vegetation.

The crocketed pinnacle serves both a decorative and a structural purpose, adding strength, visual interest and ornamentation to the pinnacle, contributing to the overall Gothic style.

Crocketed pinnacles are a hallmark of Gothic church architecture, especially on the towers, spires, and rooflines. They add a sense of verticality, decoration, and structural integrity to the overall design. The presence of these intricate, carved pinnacles is a defining feature of the Gothic aesthetic.

The windows which occur in the various stages of the tower lend much interest to the overall design.

The flooring at the east end before the chancel screen appears to have been lowered at some stage. It used to be customary for burials to take place in churches, with each person's grave being usually near the seat occupied during life.

This custom is known as "in-church burial" or "churtyard burial." It often involved placing graves near the pews or altar, symbolizing a connection to the church community.

Reasons for in-church burials in English Churches

- Proximity to Worship: Being buried near the altar or pews symbolized a lasting connection to the church and community.
- Spiritual Significance: Interment in a sacred space was believed to provide spiritual benefits, including an enhanced chance of salvation.
- Status and Legacy: Families sought to be remembered and honoured in both life and death; burial within the church often reflected social status.
- Community Ties: This practice reinforced community bonds, as families were frequently buried together, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.
- Protection of Remains: Churches offered a more secure and respected environment for the deceased compared to secular burial grounds.

The apparent lowering of the east end flooring may have had something to do with in-church burials. The remains of persons so buried were possibly removed from beneath St Peter's church and reburied elsewhere. The floor was then relaid at a lower level.

St Peter ad Vincula Church font is a good example of Early Perpendicular work, dated around 1415 (during the reign of King Henry V). It consists of an octagonal basin, stem, and base, with a pretty effect obtained by the four little outstanding pillars on which the basin partly bears.

The font basin is ornamented on each side, except the west, with shallow sunk tracery panels representing the various periods of Gothic tracery, from Early English to Perpendicular.

The west side has been disfigured, with the tracery being cut completely away, but it retains traces of some colouring. The coving below the basin has carved paterae worked on it, with a four-leaved and quatrefoil design.

In architecture, a patera refers to an ornamental circular or elliptical bas-relief disc used to decorate friezes and walls. These decorative elements can be found in various styles of architecture, including Roman and Gothic.

Additionally, in planetary nomenclature, a patera is an irregular or complex crater with scalloped edges found on celestial bodies.

In the south wall there is a stoup, formerly a receptacle for holy water, at the right-hand of the south door on entering. It is a plain pointed recess measuring eight inches deep.

In 1901, the pulpit was made of stone, in the Decorated style which is a phase of Gothic architecture that flourished in England from around 1290 to 1350. The previous pulpit was a three-decker.

A three-decker pulpit is typically of three levels: the lowest for the parish clerk, the middle for the reading of scriptures, and the highest for preaching. This design was common in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The reredos forms a massive and handsome feature in the Early English style, showing arcaded work with trefoil-headed arches and pillars between, surmounted by a moulded cornice with dog-tooth enrichment, the whole being richly decorated in colour.

A carved grotesque figure of a monk holding a glass is to be found on the exterior of the church, just below the parapet on the north-west corner of the nave aisle.

In 1901 the church possessed seven stained windows, with the east one of the north aisle being very good and representing the Ascension and scenes from the life of St. Peter.

In the south wall of the chancel, next the screen, was a stained window, the centre portion of which consisted of genuine old glass, representing the seraphim of Isaiah vi. 2 and the wheels of Ezekiel i. 15-20.

The oak chancel screen, likely dating to around 1450 (during the reign of Henry VI), retains its original bays and panelling. It measures 34 feet 3 inches in length and 11 feet 2 inches in height. The screen consists of nine and a half bays, featuring closely reticulated tracery heads of exceptionally neat design.

Below the tracery, the panelling contains painted figures of saints. Although these figures are coarsely and conventionally rendered, they remain very picturesque and valuable as examples of old figure painting.

A Perpendicular semi-octagonal pilaster or mullion can be seen in the east wall of the chancel aisle, being all that is left of a probable former stone-panelled end or reredos to this aisle, which was at one time a chantry chapel.

The extreme east pier has a niche and remains of a pedestal, both defaced, and no doubt at one time containing a carved figure. In the extreme north-east corner of the chancel aisle is a recess, 3 feet wide and 1 foot 9 inches deep, with a pointed arched head.

The church organ was erected in 1905 as a memorial to Rev. Humphry William Toms, M.A., who served as the rector of Combe Martin from 1842 to 1904. It was located in the chancel aisle and now stands in the Lady Chapel.

In the late 18th century, St Peter's church choir and instrumentalists were situated in a gallery at the west end of the nave, known as "West Gallery" music. The tower archway appears to have been plastered over, and for unknown reasons the window in the west wall of the tower was filled with slates.

There are two items from the churchwardens' accounts relating to the orchestra:

- [sic] 1797: To William Willis for repairs of Musickel Instrument: 15s. 0d.
- [sic] 1799: To William Willice for repairing the Bass Viol: 12s. 6d.

Each of these repair costs would have equated to a week's wages in this period. Bass violins are much larger than a standard violin, and stand up to six feet tall.

"West Gallery" music is also known as Georgian psalmody. The genre includes sacred music such as metrical psalms, hymns, and anthems. It was performed in English parish churches and nonconformist chapels from 1700 to the mid 1800s when it was abolished by the Victorians.

To solve the issue of limited performance space in churches, galleries were quickly built at the west ends of parish churches, leading to the term “west gallery music.” Initially focused on psalms, hymns soon followed, often paraphrasing biblical texts like ‘While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night.’

The works of hymn writers such as Isaac Watts (1674-1748), and brothers John (1703-1791) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788), later inspired village composers, creating a vibrant and distinctive form of English music.

In the late 1980s, West Gallery music experienced a revival. Today, it is sung by several west gallery “quires” (choirs).

¹ English church architecture has evolved through several distinct periods, starting with the Anglo-Saxon era.

1. Anglo-Saxon (c. 600-1066): This period saw the construction of simple, often timber-framed churches, later transitioning to stone. Key features include round towers, pilaster strips, and triangular-headed openings.
2. Norman (1066-1154): Following the Norman Conquest, churches became larger and more robust, characterised by thick walls, round arches, and large towers. The use of decorative stonework and the introduction of the Romanesque style were prominent.
3. Early English Gothic (1154-1300): Marked by pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses, this period introduced a more vertical and light-filled aesthetic. The use of lancet windows and intricate stone carvings became common.
4. Decorated Gothic (1300-1400): This style is known for its elaborate window tracery, ornate stonework, and the use of ogee arches characterized by their double-curved shape, forming an “S” curve. Churches from this period often feature richly decorated interiors.
5. Perpendicular Gothic (1400-1600): Characterized by strong vertical lines, large windows with intricate tracery, and fan vaulting. This period saw the construction of many grand cathedrals and collegiate churches.
6. Tudor (1485-1603): While not as prominent in church architecture, this period introduced elements like four-centred arches and decorative brickwork. Churches often retained Gothic elements but incorporated Renaissance influences.
7. Stuart and Georgian (1603-1830): This era saw the influence of classical architecture, with the use of columns, pediments, and domes. The Baroque style also made its mark with dramatic, ornate designs.
8. Victorian (1837-1901): A revival of Gothic architecture, known as Gothic Revival. Architects including Augustus Pugin and George Gilbert Scott led the movement, emphasising medieval styles and craftsmanship.

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Studies of some of the ancient buildings

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