



Charles Tracy B.A. Ph.D. FSA
Church furniture specialist

St Mary's Church, Watford,
Hertfordshire

The nave and chancel timber furniture.
A significance assessment

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13 Ann Street, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 3PD Tel: 01473 421657 email:ctracy@onallday.com

www.charlestracy.co.uk



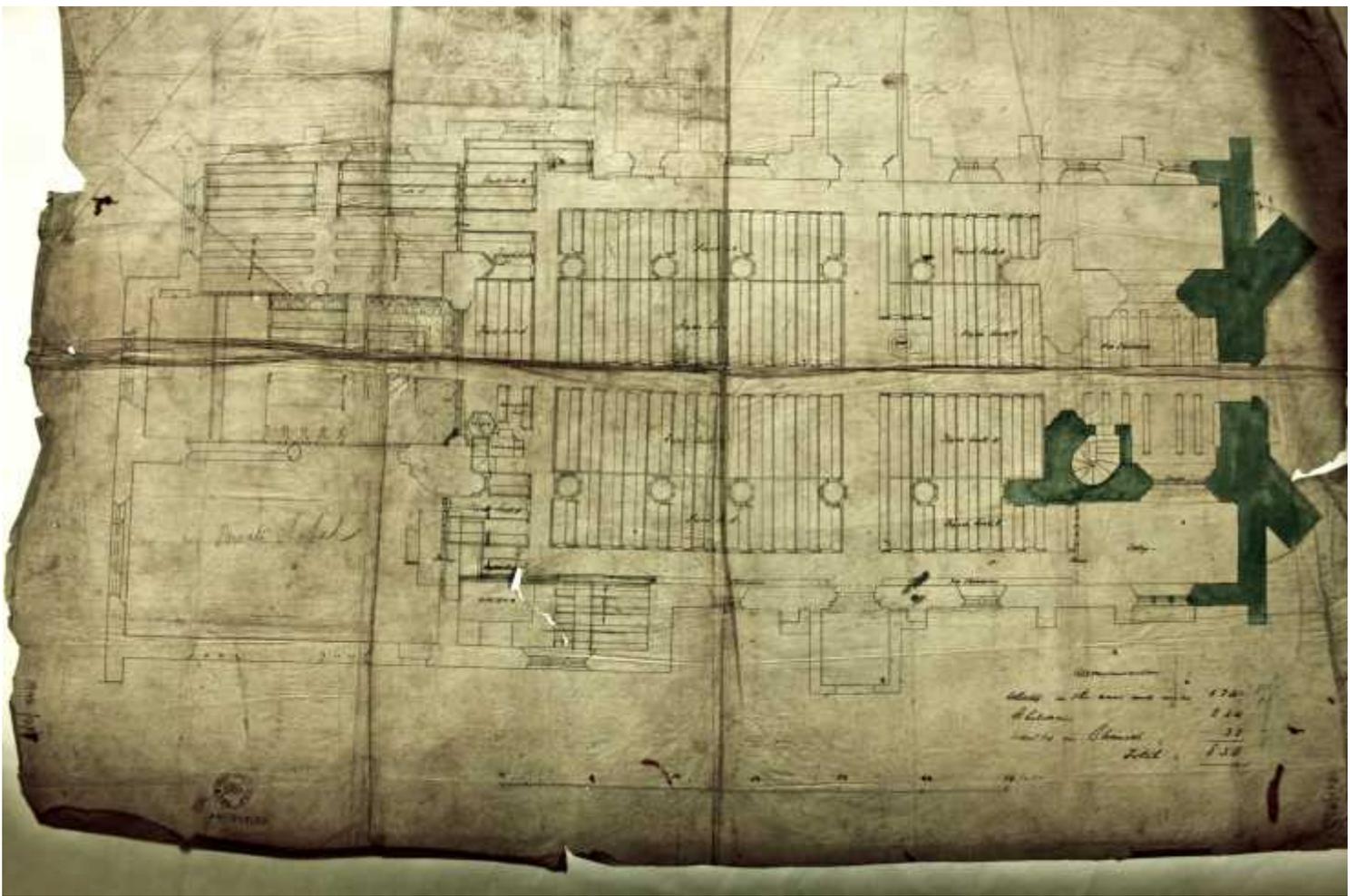
INTRODUCTION

Watford parish church is rich in mid and late-nineteenth-century oak timber furnishings, including nearly a complete set of nave pews, as well as its choir-stalls, and choir aisle and stall backing screens.

The purpose of this report is to estimate the art-historical significance of this material, based on its aesthetic qualities, as well as its stylistic and historical context. This is a challenge, given that documentary evidence is almost completely lacking.

The following chancel components, of lesser importance, are mentioned only in passing:

1. A single undated clergy seat poppy head on the north side, depicting two of his curates, carved by the Rev. Richard Lee James, in post 1855-1916.
2. New choir-stall desking erected in 1923.
3. Carved oak altar-rail erected in 1928.
4. The block of pews placed *c.* 1871 in the north transept, following the removal of the organ. The design is a well considered copy of the *c.* 1850 nave furniture.



‘Watford (Herts): Church of St Mary. Design for restoration and refitting.’ Plan, with table of accommodation (Total 856). Inscribed ‘Watford’ in pencil. Pen and blue work on tracing paper.¹
 Courtesy RIBA Drawings Collection

THE NAVE PEWS

In spite of the indubitable evidence that Scott designed and erected a complete set of nave pews for the church *c.* 1850, and the survival of the contract ground plan (above), nothing is known about the scheme’s chronology or the architect’s working practices at Watford. Nonetheless, from both Suzanna Branfoot’s meticulous study of Sir George Gilbert Scott’s restoration and conservation work in English churches and cathedrals, we can reasonably deduce that the furniture was designed by him, and sub-contracted to a specialist firm of ecclesiastical joiners and their specialist carvers, such as Rattee & Kett, in Cambridge.²

We also know that The Hon. William Robert Capel, vicar of St Mary’s from 1799-1854, instigated the restoration of the church, this being recorded in the Vestry Minutes, when: ‘The Vestry met on March 3rd, 1848, to consider removing the Galleries and re-pewing the Church’.³ Capel’s pride in his project to restore the nave and chancel, which proudly protected the bones of his ancestors, is evident in the engraving of the furniture’s projected appearance, that he

¹ RIBA Sir George Gilbert Scott collection (Project No. 144). Provenance G. G. Scott & J. O. Scott (1975). Catalogue of Drawings Collection, *The Scott Family by Geoffrey Fisher et. al.* (1981), 75.

² An enormous amount of information on Scott’s working practices, including a list of works by county is included in Suzanna Branfoot’s formidable Ph.D thesis, ‘A Plea for the Faithful Restoration of our Ancient Churches. A re-appraisal of the restoration and conservation of mediaeval churches and cathedrals by George Gilbert Scott’, The University of Reading (2004).

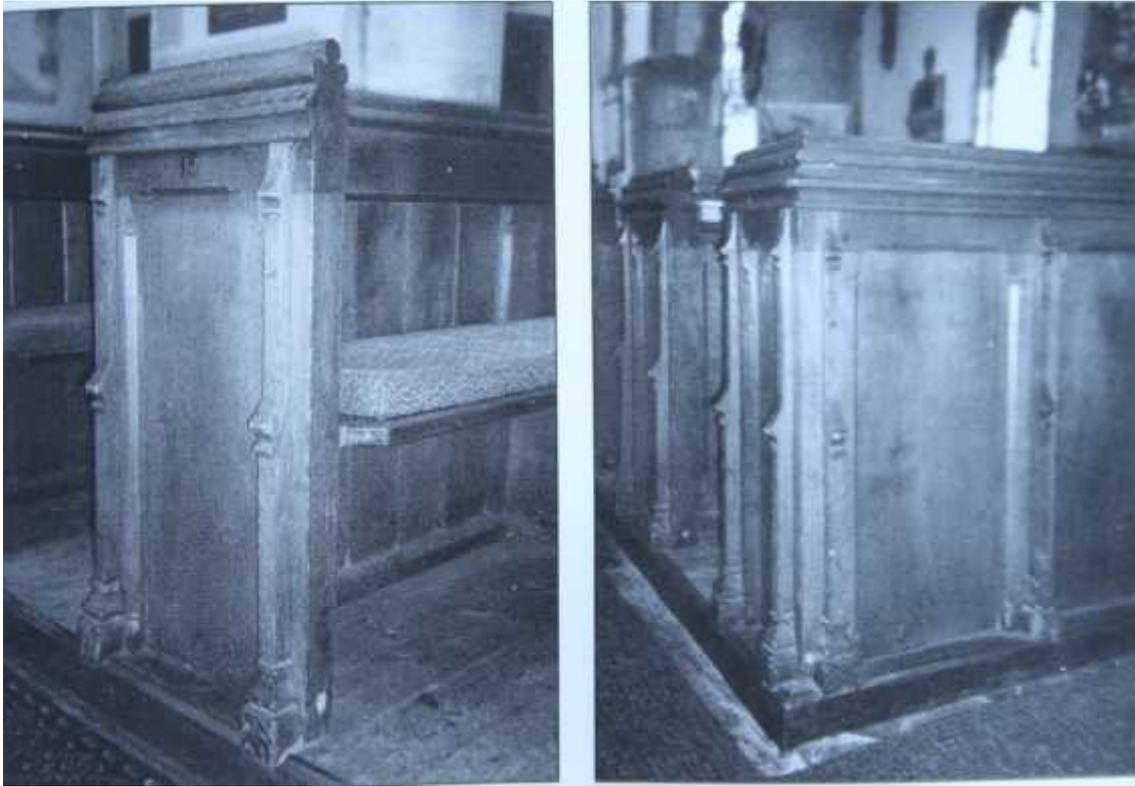
³ Hertfordshire Archives and Local Services (HALS) DP 117 8/3

St Mary's nave seating adheres to Scott's precept that in a Gothic church modern pews should as far as possible utilise the ancient designs. These pews closely resemble the medieval 'Midlands' style, commonly met with in Hertfordshire and neighbouring counties, well exemplified at Houghton Conquest, Bedfordshire. This 'house style' is topped off horizontally, instead of using poppy-heads, as in East Anglia, the bench-ends consist of a series of plain rectangles, emphasised by the generous Perpendicular-type moulded capping. For the grander churches the carvers were able to elaborate the style, with fancy multi-level plinths and subtle variations in the spandrel tracery.



Houghton Conquest, Bedfordshire. Medieval pew back. Author

Scott put these principles into practice at the parish church of Iver, Buckinghamshire, which parish cannot have been affluent. There only the skeleton of the style is on offer; just plain panels on the bench ends and fronts with no tracery and simple stripped down plinths and mouldings. On the other hand, he provided an inexpensive means of adding visual variety, by using an array of grooved vertical boards for the backing.



Iver Church, Buckinghamshire. Details of bench end and bench front. ⁷

The pews at St Mary's Watford were on a larger and more affluent scale. The fronts are double-bayed, with English Decorated-type tracery heads and foliate spandrels. They have doubled buttresses on the front pew returns, a memory of the same motif on the pew fronts and backs at Houghton Conquest. The bench-ends elaborate the architectural style with buttresses on the fronts, but also elegant stopped chamfers on the sides, finished with neat triangular stops above and below. These beautifully carved and learned motifs of themselves provide a lesson in English medieval ornament, a subject that Scott had studied for many years.⁸ A similar, almost trademark motif, is to be found in the re-entrant corners of each panel on every bench back. It typifies Scott's eye for detail and his obsession with truth to a period style.⁹ Moreover, the furniture is fitted together with consummate forethought and skill.

⁷ After S. Branfoot, Fig. 5, T. Cooper and S. Brown, *Pews, Benches & Chairs* (2011), 260-61.

⁸ Scott was asked to write the *Guide* to the *The National Museum of Architectural Art*, in Tufton Street, Westminster, which was opened in 1851. This institution was designed to provide a place for artisans to repair to in their free time, to study and copy the minutiae of architectural ornament.

⁹ See my reference to similar features on the 15th-century pews at Haddenham, Buckinghamshire in C. Tracy in T. Cooper and S. Brown, *Pews, Benches & Chairs* (London 2011), 123-25, Figs A6-A8.

St Mary, Watford. Nave pews. The ubiquitous detail of the medieval-style stopped chamfer on the top rail and vertical struts on each end of every bench back.
Author



MISCELLANEOUS PEW DETAILS





Pew back.

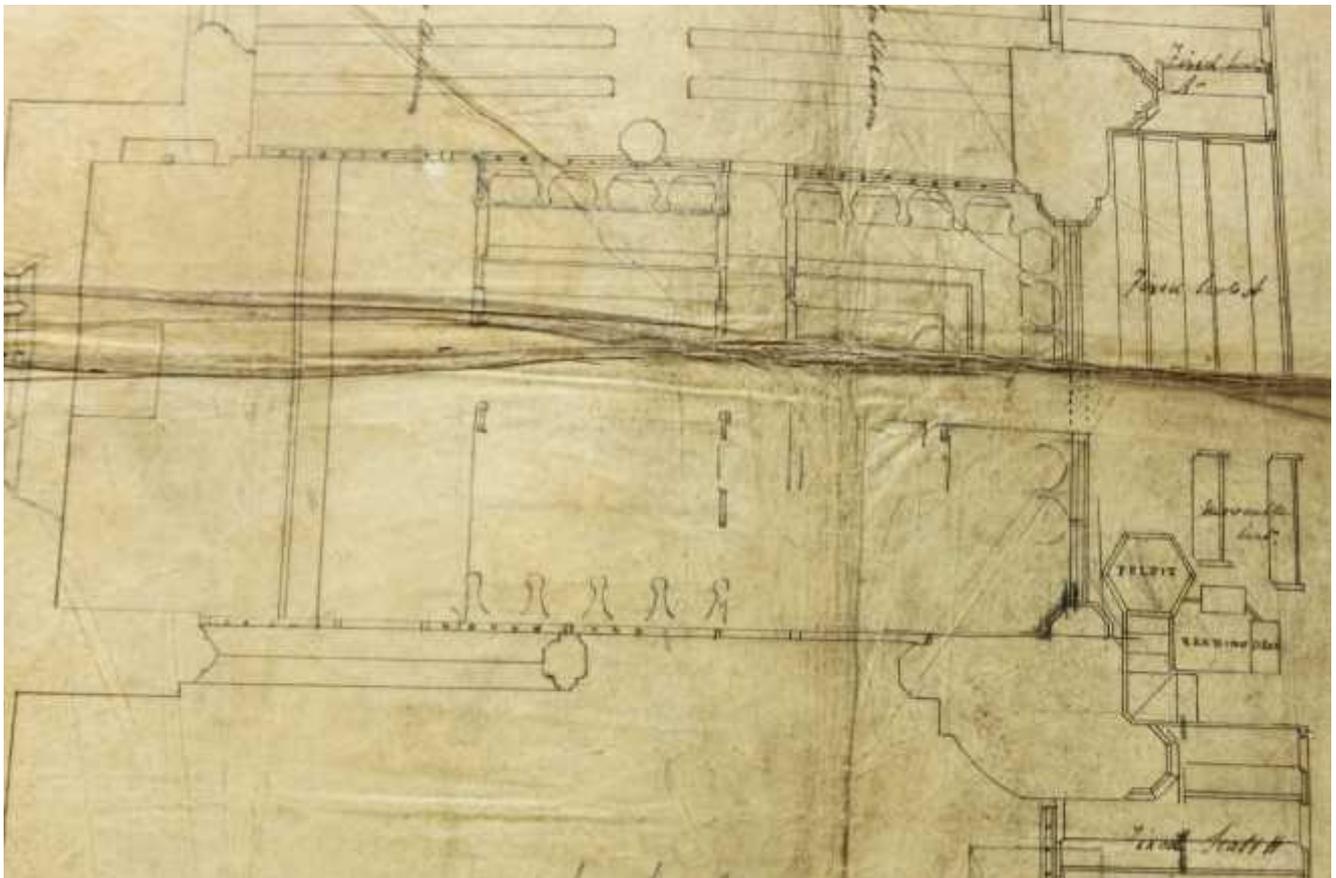


Spandrel carving

CHANCEL FURNITURE



St Mary, Watford chancel from west. Author (top), 1848 George Gilbert Scott contract plan (detail). RIBA Drawings Collection



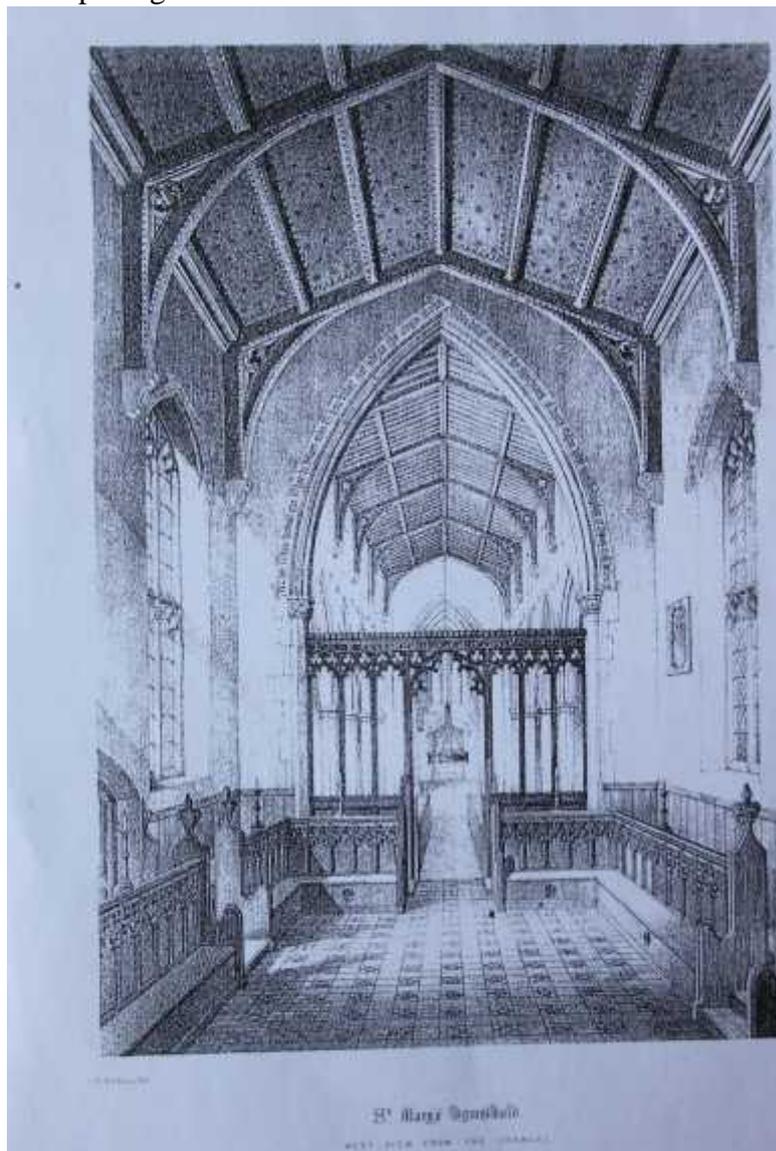
On the face of it, Scott's contract plan-drawing of a Gothic choir arrangement at St Mary's, with twenty-two stalls, six of them returned east of a choir screen, and the extant chancel furnishings with just eleven stalls arranged at the west end of two full length benches, with no return stalls, is in stark contrast to the extant fittings. This raises the question as to whether the arrangement represents an originally unanticipated change of plan or is possibly secondary.

The components are several and disparate. As a backdrop, the distinguished parclose screens feature pairs of Perpendicular-type tracery lights rising from the same multi-cusped and depressed ogee arches in the late-14th-century manner, already encountered on the nave pew fronts. The tracery ribs are deeply articulated, there are foliate spandrels, and a frieze of fleurons, topped with an ambitious machicolated cornice. The tracery style is well suited to a monument on this scale, and does not occur again within the church. Nor is there any precedent for it in Watford's window tracery. The dado section consists of butted planks, a technique often employed by Scott, as at Iver, and Aylesbury.

A single row of desks quasi-choir-stalls is set up on both sides, now eleven in total, with five on the north side and six on the south. The stalls themselves are located at the west end, but the structure continues to the altar steps as a plain bench. There may originally have been six stalls on the north side, but it is not clear whether the easterly standard delineates another or, alternatively, indicates an intended access point through to the Morrison/Capel chapel behind, which is unlikely. There is now a bench to the rear and immediately in front of the screen. The latter of five bays, is only half as long as that to the south. It is set relatively further back than its counterpart on the south side (by *c.* 29 in), and sits behind the central column of the double arcade. Also at the west end on the north side there is a wider clergy stall at the extremity, with five, or four, stalls to the east. There never have been any return stalls.

Scott faced the problem that the line of the stalls could not be accommodated by the variable alignment of the western and eastern portions of the chancel wall, the latter lying some 10 in. further back than the former. An unsightly gap inevitably opens up at its east end, which he camouflaged by the insertion of a timber shelf and cupboard underneath. This helps to distract the eye. But how much harder would it have been if he had attempted to follow his original intention to use the design of the traditional Gothic choir-stall. This would have threatened a far more noticeable bodge, and possibly a slur on his reputation, at a time when his career was about to take off with many prestigious cathedral commissions.

The final design is a long way from the traditional Gothic pattern that Scott is generally known for, and which he habitually used for his most prestigious commissions in cathedrals. In the 1840s, although by then a seasoned expert in the decorative vocabulary of English medieval woodwork, he was still relatively inexperienced as an architect. There is some evidence that he was experimenting in parish churches with alternative joinery designs and techniques, with the aim of developing simpler and less expensive ways of assembling a continuous row of seating. This can be studied to advantage here, where the standards seem to emerge fully formed from the pseudo-seat-capping rail complete with their Perpendicular mouldings. The minimalist lines cleverly conceal the admixture of traditional solid timber joinery and lamination technology. We are witnessing a fresh approach to timber furniture design and manufacture, also shared by Scott's contemporary, Augustus Welby Pugin.¹⁰ The nicely wrought desk-ends are of a correct Gothic type with poppy heads, flaunting a touch of modernity with their florid lines and the unusual decorative moulded cones. There is also tracery and foliate carving on the fronts, implying that, whereas they served as seats for the choir, they were also for aesthetic enjoyment, front desks never having been intended.¹¹



St Mary, Wymeswold, Leicestershire. Chancel from east. From A History and Description of the Restored Parish Church of St Mary, Wymeswold (1846)

¹⁰ A.W.N. Pugin, 1812-52, G.G. Scott, 1811-78.

¹¹ Helen Rudd's suggestion that the Watford stall desk ends were copied from the pews at Great Brington, Northamptonshire is untenable, as Brington's pews are quite different in style. The idea that the head of an archbishop on the poppy-head on the north side at Watford may have been inspired by Chichele's image at Great Brington is certainly possible, although that is probably 19th-century as well. In fact the Watford version is very different, appearing to be secondary, and a cack-handed late-19th-century addition. Watford's other poppy-heads are integral with Scott's work and nicely done. They could well have been inspired by something spotted in a more local church, such as Houghton Conquest, Bedfordshire.



St Mary, Watford. South chancel chapel. Fragment of Scott's low chancel screen. Author

In this connection one could do worse than summon up Pugin's scheme for St Mary, Wymeswold, Leicestershire in 1845. Here there is a fully-returned single row of six integral stalls on the east side of the chancel screen. Otherwise the lateral seating is benched. Any desking in front was never intended. The parallel with Scott's scheme at Watford is telling, where the accommodation is predominantly benched, and for the use of a robed choir. Both chancels were suitably appointed for use in the Anglo-Catholic liturgy, with a western screen but importantly at Watford it was only of dado height. In 1847, at Aylesbury, and in probably several of his early important parochial schemes, he inserted a low chancel screen with central gate, similar to the one provided at Watford.¹²

¹² It has not been possible to illustrate this, but the image is available at Historic England, Swindon.



St Mary, Watford. Chancel from east, before 1928. Courtesy St Mary, Watford PCC.

CHANCEL FULL HEIGHT SCREENS

CHANCEL AISLES

Both chancel screens are stylistically identical and five-bayed, but on the north side the arrangement is symmetrical, but asymmetrical on the south side. The style is English Decorated mid-14th-century, with cusped arches and foliage below and similar crockets and finials above, against cusped single lights and spectacular encircling cusped mouchettes. This is generally reminiscent of the tracery on the nave pews and chancel stall fronts.



St Mary's, Watford. South chancel aisle screen. Author

CHOIR PARCLOSE SCREENS



St Mary, Watford. South choir parclose screen. Detail of tracery from south. Author

The style of the choir parclose screens is a different matter. Its tracery is that of the mature Perpendicular style, as opposed to the Decorated style, which we encountered elsewhere on the furniture. This is better suited for a monument on a larger scale. All four screens share the use of grooved boarding for the dado sections, which also makes an intermittent appearance within the pews. For the springing arches the cusped depressed arch is again used in these cases.

THE SCREENS UNDER THE TOWER

There are two sets of screenwork under the west tower, which do not seem to be part of the c.1850 campaign. Their design is not in Scott's strict Gothic mode, and the style is more utilitarian. The incised quatrefoil decoration is also different, and, whilst the workmanship is decent enough, the screens represents a relative falling off in quality. Only one screen is shown at the west end in Scott's contract drawing, so they were probably inserted as part of the 1871 restoration campaign.



St Mary, Watford. North-side screen under tower. Details. Author



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1. At the beginning of the 1850s, Sir George Gilbert Scott was awarded the contract to fit out the nave and chancel at St Mary, Watford. Disappointingly, the only internal piece of corroborative manuscript evidence that Scott was formally appointed is the surviving contract plan-drawing for the scheme passed down through this family and presented in 1975 to the Royal Institute of British Architects.

2. It is difficult to find other evidence for such an ambitious and complete set of Gothic parish church fittings by Scott at this early date. St Mary, Aylesbury, a prominent contemporary Scott commission, has lost all of its 19th-century fittings, although valuable photographs of his reordering exist. These show the low front screen, similar to that surviving at Watford, which was probably a common feature of the architect's work at this time. Subsequently, in parish churches, Scott preferred to utilise what he called 'open seating', instead of the time-honoured Gothic style he used in his early work, and later on in the cathedral commissions.

3. For whatever reason, Scott changed his mind about the form that the chancel choir-stalls at Watford would take. The later design is of great interest and significance. It has the architect's imprint upon it, in the innovative style, and on, the south side at least, the observed significant attachment to the adjacent magnificent parclose screen.

This a historically important set of church furnishings by England's foremost and pioneering Gothic Revival architect,

