



**Charles Tracy B.A. Ph.D. FSA**

**Church furniture specialist**

**St Nicholas, Stevenage, Hertfordshire**

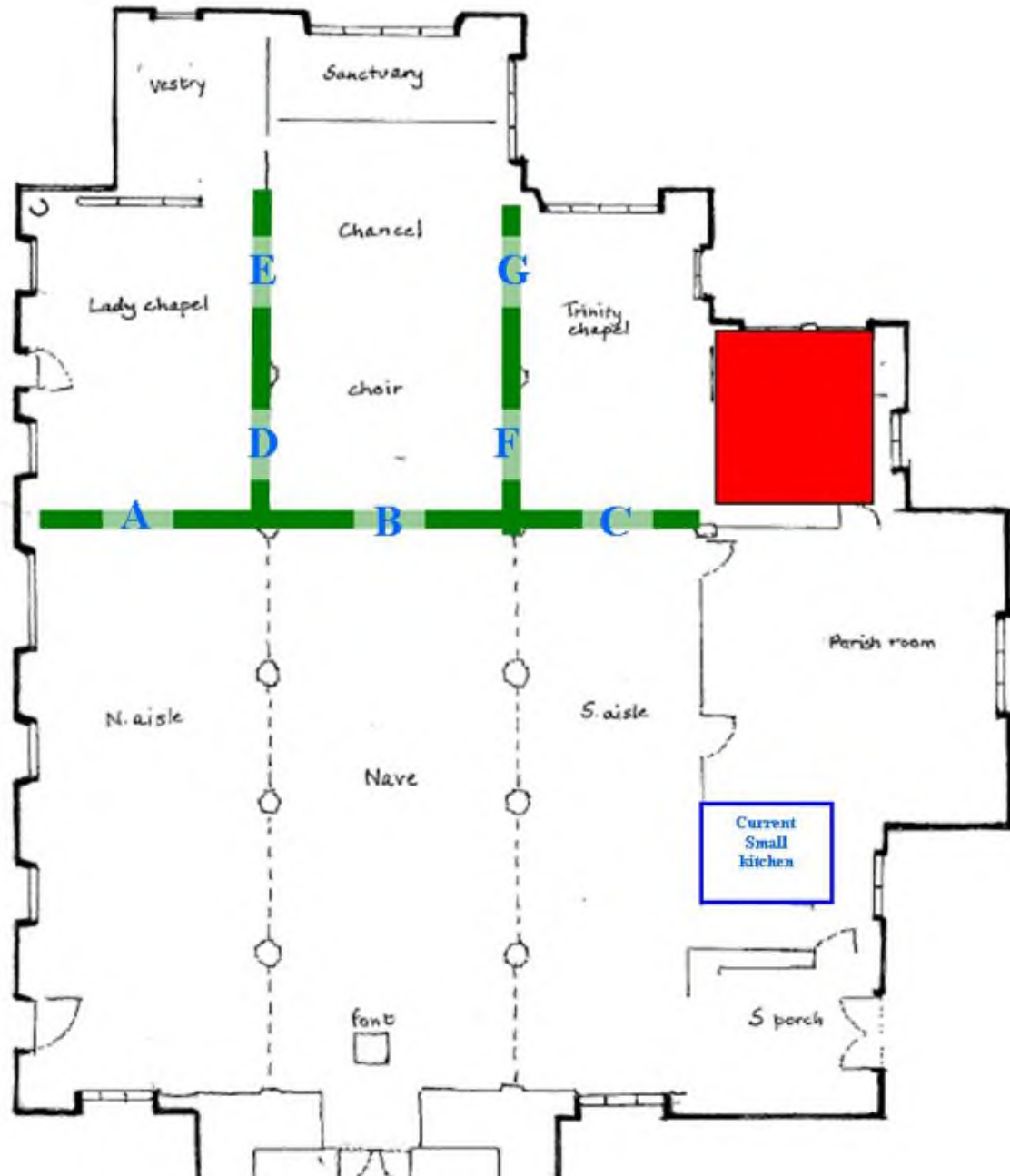
**A significance assessment of the  
historic timber furnishings.**

**1 February 2013**

**13 Ann Street, Ipswich, Suffolk IP1 3PD Tel: 014730421657**

# ST NICHOLAS, STEVENAGE, HERTFORDSHIRE

## GROUND PLAN



**Key:** A. Lady Chapel entrance screen, B. Chancel Screen, C. Trinity Chapel Screen, DF. Western parclose screens, EG. Eastern parclose screens

## INTRODUCTION

This light and airy church is unified by the recent lime washing. Moreover, its nave and choir arcades, although of slightly different date are homogenous in their architectural style. The limestone paving at the east end of the nave, which opens up in front of the chancel screen with a variety of repositioned indented ledger slabs, adds to the sense of spatial unity. From west end, the climax of the perspective is the soft gilt and lemon colouring of a theatrical altar reredos, complemented by a superb embroidered frontal. A late-Victorian photograph published in the *Victoria County History* for Hertfordshire (vol. III, 1971), see below, shows the chancel altogether bereft of a screen, which suggesting that the latter was probably removed even before the onset of the Gothic revival in the 1820s, and that this may have occurred even as early as the late-18th century. It appears that it was the antiquarian curiosity of Canon Blomfield (1834-78) which led to the monument's chance supposed re-discovery in a tithe barn. It was later restored with substitute decorative carvings, and re-erected as a memorial to the rector, probably in the early years of the 20th century. The range of good quality timber fittings, in the church, evidently of mid-20th-century date, is exemplified by the neo-Georgian altar rails, the pulpit, the choir-stalls and the nave pews. They are probably of the same period as the high altar ensemble, already mentioned, and evoke the revival of interest in church fittings stimulated by the work of the architect, John Ninian Comper (1864-1960), who designed the spectacular interior at St Mary, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, some thirty miles distant.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage, Hertfordshire. Chancel screen.*

## CHANCEL SCREEN

St Nicholas's rood-screen is by far the most distinguished example of medieval timberwork in the church. It is 108 in. in total to the top rail, but regrettably, from below the dado rail (42 in. high.), it is not ancient, although of excellent modern manufacture. Some remains of the screen are said to be housed in the Stevenage Museum.

The sensitive reconstruction includes the replacement of several lost components of the architectural ornament. It is important to record from the outset that the screen exactly fits within the arcade piers. The genuine ornament is carved in the spirit of the early Perpendicular style, *c.* 1350-75. There are four open bays above dado level on either side of the entrance arch, topped by cinquefoiled, cusped and crocketed archlets. Higher up there are two symmetrical pairs of pierced lights leading up to a frieze of pierced quatrefoils and trefoils. The design of the original foliate carving and the mouldings are typical of the third quarter of the 14th century (it is striking that a simpler version of this architectural formula is also recognisable on the later choir-parclose screens in the chancel itself). It is a considerable pleasure to be able to admire this distinguished piece untainted by the darkening and varnishing typical of the 19th century. In this respect, the screen's confinement to a tithe barn was a good thing. Moreover, there is still plenty of evidence for the original chalk ground and the ancient polychromy, particularly on either side of the entrance posts. The foliage used on the arch crockets seems to have alternated between the characteristic voluted-trefoil and maple leaf types, both typical components of the Decorated foliage repertoire.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Detail of the tracery above the rood-screen entrance.*



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Three northern bays of rood-screen. Note precise fit of design at both ends, and foliate and human mask bosses across convexity of the architrave.*



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Flat east face of rood-screen. Note survival of the lead stars below electrical cabling.*

Whilst wanting to find a convincing comparison for the Stevenage screen, such as at Grundisburgh, Suffolk, or Beeston, Norfolk, the temptation to introduce East Anglian examples has been rejected, as they are mostly probably later, and in any case not particularly helpful. Notwithstanding, we find excellent antiquarian comparisons in the county by the early-19th-century draughtsman, J.C. Buckler, in the former rood-screen at St Mary, Welwyn, and in the tracery-heads incorporated into desk fronts at St Peter and St Paul, Little Gaddesden. Unfortunately, it is difficult to date the 14th-century furnishings in either of these churches, due to the thoroughness of the later restorations. Whilst the tracery at Welwyn is not exactly the same in all respects, an unmistakable cousinage is clear. The traceried bench fronts at Little Gaddesden are very similar to that behind the main ogee arches at Stevenage. Even though the upper part of the Stevenage screen has been tactfully restored, and the original dado section replaced, this monument is still essentially medieval, and a remarkable survival in a county only rarely exhibiting fittings of this period.



*St Mary, Welwyn, Hertfordshire. Rood screen. J. C. Buckler, 1834. Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS). D/EBg/4.<sup>1</sup>*

Judging from the excellent workmanship of the medieval screens in the north and south choir aisles at Hitchin, the loss of the rood-screen there in 1776 is regrettable. Pevsner stated that, although there are still plenty of surviving chancel screens in Hertfordshire, there are not many distinguished ones. Unfortunately, it appears that many of the better ones have been lost, making Stevenage's survival, of comparable quality and

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to HALS for allowing their material to be reproduced in this report.

date to that at Welwyn, important.<sup>2</sup>



*St Peter and St Paul, Little Gaddesden, Hertfordshire. Detail of bench front tracery on north side of nave. J. C. Buckler, 1832. HALS, D/EBg/1.*

Given the proselytising of John Bunyan and James Taylor, from the late 17th century, as well as the activities of the Baptists, Congregationalists and Quakers, the county has always been considered a hot bed of non-conformity. The removal of many medieval rood-screens may be ascribed to the influence of this culture.<sup>3</sup> Today, many would concur that the county could ill afford to lose any more, especially of such rarity and architectural distinction. The pre-modern drawings of artists like J. C. Buckler and H. J. Oldfield evidence that there must have been many ecclesiastical furnishing schemes in Hertfordshire, now lost to us, for instance at Anstey, Little Gaddesdon, Wheathampstead, Ashwell and Welwyn.

---

<sup>2</sup> On a very rough initial head count, I have found up to twenty-five churches in Hertfordshire, recorded as having lost their medieval chancel screens, including Hemel Hempstead, Anstey, Abbots Langley, Berkhamstead, Hitchin and Royston. There are probably many more.

<sup>3</sup> For the historical non-conformity in Hertfordshire, see R. Hine, *The History of Hitchin*, 2 vols (London 1927-29).



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Medieval Lady Chapel /Trinity Chapel screen from the west.*

## CHANCEL SCREEN WORK

The discussion at Stevenage is complicated by the medieval chancel-aisle screen on the south side, which, with the four parclose choir-screens, whilst, matching the architecture of the rood-screen to some extent, are of a later period of manufacture.<sup>4</sup> One might have expected the mid-14th-century rood-screen to have been accompanied by lateral choir-aisle screens *ensuite*, although there is, of course, no evidence for any such today. It is likely that they were replaced, if they ever existed, by the identified pair of early-15th-century screens, illustrated in two drawings in the Oldfield collection at the Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford (see below), and the surviving screen

---

<sup>4</sup> Images in the early 19th-century compilation of watercolour drawings by H. G. Oldfield in the Hertfordshire archives indicate that the ancient screen, now at the west end of the south chancel aisle, was originally in the comparable position on the north side of the church (see below). The present north choir aisle screen is modern.





*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Watercolour image of the original north aisle entrance arch, c. 1800. Oldfield Watercolour Coll., MS. 173, HALS.*

on the south side still extant today.<sup>5</sup> The early-15th-century ancillary screens must have been part of a radical re-ordering some fifty years later than the 14th-century rood-screen. The comparatively narrow tracery heads in the bay divisions, and the stylish treatment, of the south chancel entrance arch with its cusped and sub-cusped divisions, are markedly later in style than the earlier rood-screen. The identical tracery-head design with narrow

---

<sup>5</sup> Oldfield Watercolour Coll., MS. 171, HALS. The lost screen entrance on the south side is MS. 173.

lights can be seen on the upper level on the south side of the St Alban's watching chamber, which has been dated to the early-15th century<sup>6</sup>



*St Alban's Cathedral. Watching Chamber. North end of loft on south side.*

The former rood-screen at Ippollitts has a very similar cusped arch over the entrance, as well as the trademark narrow tracery lights already mentioned. The Stevenage south chancel-aisle screen shares a stylistic cousinage with the four chancel parclose-screens, where the mouldings are similar, and a feather-edged panel system is employed throughout. This indicates that all the later screen work is all by the same workshop.



*Ippollitts Church, Hertfordshire. Upper part of roods-screen entrance. Loose photographs, CV 380, HALS.*

---

<sup>6</sup> C. Tracy, 'The St Albans Abbey Watching Chamber: A Re-Assessment', *British Archaeological Association Jnl*, CLXV (1992), 104-11.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Pre-1878 photograph of chancel space.*

Early photographs, show that an early-Victorian reordering took the congregational seating up to the penultimate bay of the chancel, and that later, when the rood-screen was reinstated to its present position, the medieval chancel arrangement was reinstated. Unfortunately, we cannot now discern any ancient fixing marks on the bay piers, but can only assume the present and more westerly arrangement to be the medieval one.<sup>7</sup> The westerly pair of chancel-parclose screens must have been stored away when the congregational seating was moved forward, the first bay on the south side being reserved for the organ.

All four of the chancel parclose-screens appear to have been moved at some time or another, and subsequently reinstated. From a comparison of the images of the north-easterly and south-westerly screens below, it will be seen that some boxing-in at the sides was resorted to, sometimes conveniently for recognition in a lighter colour, to camouflage an unsightly gap when the screen was later reinstated. Other clumsy 'bodges', and modifications will be found elsewhere to support this hypothesis.

---

<sup>7</sup> It would help a lot if it was possible to ascertain the date of the reintroduction of the ancient rood-screen.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. North-easterly choir parcloset-screen from south (above).  
South-easterly screen (below). Notice lighter-coloured boxing-in.*



It is certain that this probably early-15th-century screen work is authentic. The surviving antiquarian drawings and photographs of the interiors of Hertfordshire churches confirm this, at Ippollitts, where the rood-screen entrance is similarly handled, and also at Little Gaddesden, Therfield, Wallington and Sandon. Although the enclosure at Stevenage is damaged in places, and often badly restored, it still represents a distinguished and valid medieval arrangement, dividing off the former Lady Chapel to the north and, the Holy Trinity chapel to the south.<sup>8</sup> The 'Oldfield' early-19th-century watercolour drawings of both the 15th-century lateral 'rood-screens is invaluable supporting evidence. As for the western pair of parclose screens (D, F), the matching sets of mortises on the inside of the architraves indicate the former existence of some sort of decorative feature, such as a painted or lettered board (see below). This would have insured that the uniqueness of the setting was adequately characterised. The easterly pair of screens (E, G) places a special emphasis on the archways leading into the sacred spaces in the north and south chapels, which are dignified by a variety of carved foliate spandrels (see below).



**St Nicholas, Stevenage. South face of westerly choir-parclose. Notice mortises in top rail.**

---

<sup>8</sup> Note that the robust scantling of the joinery at Stevenage confirms that the screen work is still relatively early.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Two carved spandrels from the easterly pair of choir parclose screens.*

## **CHOIR-STALLS**

There are six choir-stalls placed unconvincingly on the east side of the rood-screen, lacking any physical evidence that they were ever physically attached. If they had been part of the mid-14th-century arrangement, they would have matched the architecture in some way, which they do not. The style is quite alien to the sophistication of the screen, and begs comparison with the furniture one might expect to find in a remote parish church of a slightly earlier period. They are too wide to have ever been intended for this space, and there is no guarantee that the massive plain capping rails were ever supposed to be a match for the thin moulded stall standards. G. C. Druce, provided the somewhat

flattering provenance for this furniture of the Augustinian priory at Little Wymondley, founded by Henry III.<sup>9</sup>



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Choir-stalls. North side*

Another surprise is the massive misericords, which lack any carved supporters (see below). The 'Green Man' carving on the north side, is an interloper from the end of the 15th century, which does display supporters, a virtually ubiquitous feature of English medieval misericords. The foliate carving of the others was dated by Druce to the first quarter of the 14th century, and are of exceptional rarity and interest. Like the capping rail, they are massive, being carved in the solid from a very large piece of oak. By the same token, they lack any mouldings to speak of, and the carvings spread almost completely across the front of the seat, offering a bellied profile. They stand out as unusual and good-quality examples of early-14th-century-type, displaying vine and oak foliage. For variety, one of them displays an angel with outstretched wings with a pair of leaves underneath.

---

<sup>9</sup> G. C. Druce, *Stalls and Misericords in Hertfordshire, East Herts Arch. Soc, Trans.*, X, Pt II (1938), 131-40.



***St Nicholas, Stevenage. Early-14th-century misericords.***

The Stevenage stalls are regularly compared to those at Anstey, Hertfordshire, of around the same date, mainly on account of the similarly thick un-moulded capping rail. Anstey's misericords are comparable in profile, but their carving style is different and they use supporters. The prolific foliage carving at Stevenage puts one in mind of the 14th-century foliate frieze above the arcade at the east end of Wheathampstead Church (see below). This is by far the best of only a handful of surviving Decorated churches in the county, where 'Nothing else of the Decorated style (in the county) except for the east end at St Alban's is quite so rich'.<sup>10</sup> This carving is redolent of that on the Stevenage misericords.

---

<sup>10</sup> N. Pevsner and B. Cherry, *The Buildings of England, Hertfordshire* (Harmondsworth 1953).





*Wheathampstead Church, Hertfordshire. East end arcade.*

## TRACERY HEADS

The set of six well-made modern desks, placed in front of the choir-stalls, utilise restored early-15th-century tracery heads of excellent quality (see below). Their provenance is of some interest, and it is possible that, as at Little Gaddesden, they may have decorated a set of 15th-century choir desk-fronts. The restoration has been meticulously done, and the missing foliate cusp terminals tactfully replaced. It would appear that some of the flanking architectural muntins are also ancient. From the earlier remarks about the treatment of the western chancel-parclose bay (D,F), it seems likely that the new scheme probably incorporated accommodation for a choir and clergy here, for the practice of polyphonic singing. That these surviving tracery heads must originally have constituted an integral part of an entire suite of choir-parclose furnishings is confirmed by a comparison of their spandrels with those in the easterly pair of screens (E,G).

The church possesses another tracery-head, incorporated into a handsome 19th-century arm chair. It is more stylised than those on the choir-stall desk-fronts, and is probably of the early 16th century.



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Two surviving choir-stall desk fronts.*



*St Nicholas, Stevenage. Priest's chair's reused early-16th-century tracery head.*

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The mid-14th-century rood-screen at Stevenage is both historically and aesthetically the most important component of the church's collection of medieval timber furnishings. I have not been able, so far, to identify a close English *comparandum* of this date, quality and condition. In any case, the monument is extremely rare, and particularly so in Hertfordshire.

It is regrettable that the original dado section is missing, but at least the early 20th-century restoration, including the replacement of the architectural and decorative detailing, was both skilfully and sympathetically managed. Crucially, we have J. C. Buckler's drawing of the Welwyn screen to confirm that there was originally at least one other comparable mid-14th-century rood-screen in the county. This was a period when rood-screens were still being introduced, and it is not impossible that, in this case, there never were any matching lateral screens. The impression given is of containment.

2. The surviving 2-bay assemblage of chancel-parclose screen work, as well as the chancel entrance on the south side (originally on the north side), together with Oldfield's drawings, and other antiquarian evidence of *both* chancel entrance screens, underlines the authenticity of the ambitious early-15th-century joinery campaign at the east end.
3. The choir-stalls at Stevenage are a valuable early-14th-century survival of unknown, but probably, local provenance. The lavish foliate carving on the misericords is an importance record of the Hertfordshire period carving style, now so poorly represented by a handful of over-restored 14th-century parish churches. The preservation of these stalls is fortuitous.

4. Stevenage's collection of six ancient early-15th-century tracery heads helps to identify the function of the westerly of the 2-bay chancel-parclose bays as a clergy/choir liturgical space. This interpretation is also supported by the existence of a series of mortises on the inside *only* of the screen top rails.
5. The single early-16th-century late-Gothic-style tracery-head, fitted into the modern priest's chair, cannot be accounted for and may be an import from elsewhere.