St Peter, Oxford, St Peter-in-the-East, Oxfordshire

Description
The church of St Peter-in-the-East is situated in central Oxford, within the old city walls, in a quiet lane off the High Street. The church was closed in 1965, and in 1969-70 was converted into the library for St Edmund Hall next door. The sympathetic conversion left the wide array of sumptuous Romanesque features unspoiled. The oldest part, perhaps 1120-30, is the groin-vaulted crypt or lower church. It has a nave with two aisles of five bays, with two rows of four squat piers with scallop capitals, some with figurative sculpture. Most of its original arched windows survive, and inside are five arched doorways, one of which opens into a confessio or relic chamber, the others all having stairways that led to the upper church. One of these doorways now provides access to the churchyard.

The chancel, directly above the crypt and on the same foundations, is almost entirely Romanesque, c. 1150. At its corners are clasping buttresses with pepperpot turrets, retaining round-headed lancet windows. A Perpendicular E window has replaced the Romanesque ones, but traces of their jambs remain. They were probably similar to the present S and N chancel windows, shafted with decorated capitals and arches both inside and out. Originally the chancel had a chamber above, running its whole length, and remains of the tiny windows lighting it are visible in the E gable. Wall passages within the chancel walls, visible at window level interiorly, led to staircases within the corner buttresses, and also to those from the crypt. On the S side of the chancel, the original ragstone rubble wall largely survives and there are traces of blind arcading. There is an external stringcourse of billet. Part of the external corbel table remains on the N wall. The mid-12thc. S nave doorway has continuous orders of chip-carved crosses, beakhead and chevron. A N aisle was added in the 13thc. The nave originally ended just beyond the S door, but it was extended westwards when a W tower was added at the end of the N aisle in the 14thc.

On the interior, the chancel is rib-vaulted, of two quadripartite bays. Ribs of the E bay are decorated with a chain design, each link bearing two carved motifs. Ribs of the W bay are of deep-cut multiple chevron. Some of the supporting nookshafts have figurative capitals. The internal stringcourse is of zigzag. The original chancel arch was replaced by a wider one in the 13thc.
History

When the library conversion was made, Sturdy (1972) found the footings and floor levels of a stone and timber church of the 10thc. on the site, and similar footings of a stone 11thc. one. An aisleless stone church was recorded in 1086 when it was held by Robert d’Oilly, the Governor of Oxford, and at this time St Peter’s was already the mother church of Holywell and Wolvercote. The present church is believed to have been completed by 1152. In 1154-56 the advowson was granted to Oseney Abbey, but it was not effected. It had already been acquired by Henry d’Oilly, son of Robert. From Henry it passed to his son, John of Oxford, its first known rector (VCH). The medieval rectory was the wealthiest living in Oxford, largely from tithes from Holywell and Wolvercote. On John’s death the living passed to the Crown, and in 1266 to Merton College.

There have been suggestions that that the church was originally named San Pietro in Vincoli, after the 5thc. church in Rome said to house his chains (Lyne, 1927; Dyson, Croft and Kent, 1961). There seems to be no documentary evidence of this, but the chain motif of the chancel vaulting might indeed be an allusion to it. Because the church was near the city’s east gate, the name was changed to St Peter-in-the-East to distinguish it from the Oxford church of St Peter-le-Bailey.

The Lady Chapel, added early in the 13thc. to the N of the chancel, was probably the first addition to the Romanesque building. It is said to have been paid for by Edmund of Abingdon from the proceeds of his teaching. He gave his name to the college and later became Archbishop of Canterbury.

The crypt was used as a bone repository in later medieval times. In the 17thc. it was let to a vintner as a store. By the 19thc. it had become a charnel house again, and it was not until 1931 that it was cleaned out, repaired and a pavement laid.

Features

Exterior Features

Doorways

1. S nave doorway
Round-headed, three orders, continuous. Probably reset.

**Dimensions**

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**First order**

A continuous order with voussoirs of chip-carved crosses and saltires with pellets, mostly two per voussoir, lateral to the face. Most pellets pierced. Several basal jamb voussoirs damaged on L, and blank on R side.

**Second order**

Continuous with thirty-eight voussoirs visible, those near ground level unreadable. Possibly more exist below paving level. All readable voussoirs bear a single beakhead, except for voussoir 21 that bears two. All beaks grip the continuous roll moulding that occupies c. 50% of the voussoir. Most beaks are keeled, but some are chamfered, presenting a flatter dorsal surface and two lateral surfaces. Piercing is often in rows, particularly each side of the keel. Most heads have small pointed ears, patterning on the brow, and large round or slanting teardrop-shaped eyes, shallowly pierced. A few have smaller oval eyes. At the root of the beak, just above the roll moulding, most show a chiselled edge (referred to as truncation), below which the beak protrudes at a lower level. Above beak level, the heads are of diverse grotesque forms (human, beast or hybrid). Only six beakheads are judged to be traditional bird heads, with a smoother contour from brow to beak tip. The voussoirs are finished at the outer edge by a quirk and a narrow fillet. Details below, voussoirs reading L to R:

**Voussoirs 1-5**, damaged, unreadable.

**Voussoir 6**, large pierced eyes, visible truncation but little other detail.

**Voussoirs 7, 8**, zigzag frill on forehead, raised diagonal striations around large eyes, beak more like a tongue, damaged on 8.

**Voussoirs 9-11**, fluting on brow, obvious truncation, longer keeled beaks, large eyes.

**Voussoir 12**, rounded bird head with no ears, zigzag frill on forehead, flutings at root of beak with no truncation, beak with many piercings.

**Voussoir 13**, square human-like head, tiny ears, small oval eyes and a nose, horizontal brow lines, very noticeable truncation, thin beak.

**Voussoir 14**, as 13 but long pointed ears.
Voussoir 15, bird head with a browband of pellets with fluting below, large eyes, the long pointed beak starting immediately under them.

Voussoir 16, eyes high up, little decoration, truncated thin beak.

Voussoir 17, human-like with marked truncation, a central ridge forming the nose.

Voussoir 18, bird head with a fluted fringe on the brow, big eyes with encircling ridges, and a chamfered beak with many piercings.

Voussoir 19, bird head with a deeply cut diagonal pattern on the brow and between the large eyes, a keeled beak with many piercings.

Voussoir 20, human-like, nesting vees on top of head above ears, round pierced eyes, a nose, and a chamfered beak with three rows of pierced holes.

Voussoir 21, same width as other voussoirs but bearing two narrow heads. 21a is a bird head, and 21b is truncated. Both have big round eyes, and smaller beaks with few piercings.

Voussoir 22, a square head, with two rows of raised squares on brow, a nose, and a wide beak with no piercings.

Voussoir 23, a square head, brow as 22, bearing a row of sharp teeth.

Voussoir 24, bird head with round eyes like 12 and 21a.

Voussoir 25, pierced round eyes, a nose and a pierced beak.

Voussoir 26, head has small horizontal eyes and wears an inverted T-shaped nose strap, like a captive bear, above the truncation, with a pierced beak below it.

Voussoirs 27, 28, damaged but truncated beaks present.

Voussoirs 29–31, unreadable, beaks replaced.

Voussoirs 32–35, unreadable, beakheads damaged on their outer ends, where a medieval water stoup has been inserted. Beaks replaced.

Voussoirs 36–39, unreadable, difficult to differentiate.

**Third order**

Continuous with two rows of bold tubular chevron with hollows, lateral to the face, mostly two centrifugal chevrons per voussoir. On the inner edge, small pyramidal spaces on the soffit each contain a pierced pellet. Between first and second rows of chevron lies a row of fine pellets. Outside the tubular chevron is a hollow and a row of ridged zigzag. This order is missing on the lower R side where a water stoup was inserted.

2. Crypt, internal round-headed doorways
Five internal doorways open out of the crypt, each with jambs and arch of dressed stone. Those opposite each other on the S and N, and the central one in the W wall, have the arch filled in with a lintel and a slightly recessed plain tympanum. S and N lintels show signs of having been repaired, and none of the lintels or tympana are now monolithic.

Windows

Chancel lancet windows

Located in the E wall and corner buttresses, remains of eight round-headed lancet windows, all small, plain and of similar size.

E wall. High in the gable, four lancets set in a diamond pattern. The upper unglazed in the gable, and the other three, set just below, blocked.

NE buttress, E side. One about halfway up, the other just below turret level, both blocked.

SE buttress, S side, halfway up, one glazed lancet; E side, just below turret level, one blocked lancet.
Opposite each other, on S and N walls of the chancel, round-headed and shafted windows, of two orders, inside and out. Externally, the sills of the windows sit on the stringcourse at the E end of the chancel wall, between the corner clasping buttresses and the buttresses to the W of them. Internally the sill sits on the stringcourse in the E bay. The deep splay (approximately 1 m) contains wall passages running towards the E end of the chancel, now blocked after about 1 m.

1) S window, exterior

First order, continuous and plain.

Second order. L nookshaft. Base of two convex mouldings, the lower damaged. Shaft engaged, plain and round. Necking plain. Capital, a single cushion to E and S faces, with a plain shield above an incised V. Impost, with a chamfer below a vertical with a quirk, wraps around both faces and extends along the S wall beyond the capital to the outer edge of the hood. R nookshaft. As L, base and shaft badly eroded, latter possibly decorated.

Arch. Two rows of stepped thick chevron, lateral to the face, followed by a row of fine beading, a hollow and a further row of incised zigzag. Hood of carved raised zigzag, damaged and incomplete. All chevrons and zigzags aligned and centrifugal.

2) S window, interior

First order. Plain and continuous except for an interruption at capital level by the impost and a capital-like projection from the second order, that bears a curving scroll decoration on outer and inner faces, separated by a sharp arris. L impost bears a row of raised knobs like undefined nailheads. R impost plain and chamfered.

Second order. L side. Base with two convex mouldings. Engaged round nookshaft carved with scrolling patterns, all with beading. Necking plain. Capital a plain cushion, with a shield and a triangle beneath it demarcated with incised lines. Imposts plain and chamfered. R side, as L but with no decoration on the nookshaft.

Arch, as exterior.

3) N window, exterior

First order, exterior, as S, but window sits on a string course restored as zigzag instead of billet.

Second order, exterior. Shafts eroded. To accommodate the roofline of the later vestry, the shaft bases have been moved to a higher level, approximately one-quarter up the window. Stepped chevron damaged. Zigzag hood moulding restored, except for a short length at R.
4) N window, interior

First order, interior. Continuous and plain on L. On R, a capital with a projection, as S. R impost decorated with raised joined triangles.

Second order, interior. L and R sides. No decoration on nookshaft or on the plain chamfered impost. Arch well preserved and complete.

Crypt windows

Located on the chancel walls below ground level, in shallow lighting wells, seven small round-headed windows. Each window slightly set back from the outer rubble wall, with a narrow plain surround. On the interior, deep splays of c. 1 m. have a dressed stone surround over the larger arch on the inner crypt wall.

E crypt wall. A single window on each side of a later large central window.

S crypt wall. Two pairs of windows on either side of the present access door to the crypt, the two of each pair set c. 1 m apart.

N crypt wall. One window close to the NE corner, visible only from the interior, due to the addition of the N vestry.

S nave window

Over the S nave doorway, concealed by the room over the porch, and now visible only from the interior. A round-headed lancet with an internal splay that is shallower than those in the chancel.

Exterior Decoration

String courses

Billet stringcourse

Located at the level of the sills of the chancel windows, c. 4 m above ground level, a double row of cylindrical billet separated by a quirk.

E chancel wall, course broken by the Perpendicular window. Here, the billet of one row is aligned with the spaces in the other.

S chancel and nave walls, course broken by buttresses and a 14thc. window, continues up to the S doorway. Billets not aligned as on E wall.
N chancel wall, billet absent. Under the chancel window a short length of zigzag replaces it.

Arcading
Blind arcading, S chancel wall

Fragments on S nave wall at stringcourse level, interrupted by the 14thc. window.

E fragment. Two plain cylindrical engaged nookshafts, inset and flush with the nave wall. Bases damaged. Necking and cushion capitals plain. L nookshaft, little remaining due to inserted window. Two pairs of intersecting arches visible, no decoration.

W fragment. Three engaged nookshafts, as E fragment, with two westernmost showing signs of decoration similar to the chancel windows. All bases damaged. All capitals damaged. Arches as E.
Located at the top of the N chancel wall, beneath the parapet, a series of Lombard-like arches extends from the E end to the N chapel extension. The lower ends of the arches each bear a corbel, many eroded beyond recognition and some broken.

**Corbels, reading from E to W (L to R)**

**Corbel 1** Unreadable.

**Corbel 2** Top shows little ears, human-like eyes; lower part missing.

**Corbel 3** Missing.

**Corbel 4** Modern grotesque head with ears, eyes, nose and a wide grin.

**Corbel 5** A coiled serpent beneath, and possibly a bird’s leg and wing above.

**Corbel 6** Unreadable, half missing.

**Corbel 7, 8** Unreadable.

**Corbel 9** Top half of head with ears and eyes as corbel 2, base missing.

**Corbel 10** A coil as 5, with an eroded beast above.

**Corbel 11** As 10, but corbel wider.

**Corbel 12-14** Unreadable.

**Corbel 15** Modern replacement, a human head.

**Miscellaneous**

**Chancel, jambs of original E windows**
The positions of jambs of earlier windows are marked by two vertical rows of three large dressed stones, with a lower one at right-angles, above the stringcourse on either side of the central E window. Originally, there may have been two or three windows, probably as the S and N chancel windows.

**Interior Features**

**Wall passages/Gallery arcades**

**Gallery**

**S and N chancel walls**

The deep splays (approximately 1 m thick) to the chancel windows house wall passages that run for approximately 1 m towards the chancel E wall on each side before being blocked. They are approximately 3 m above floor level internally, and would be equivalent to a gallery/triforium. They were part of a more extensive system of passages leading from the crypt (see Comments).

**Vaulting/Roof Supports**

**Chancel**

**Columnar supports for quadripartite ribs**
Although the two bays of quadripartite rib vaulting have different designs, the diagonal ribs are supported on similar small nookshafts at the four corners of each bay, some with decorated capitals. The W bay carries the transverse rib separating the bays, and this is supported on projecting responds with half-shafts, halfway along the chancel walls.

**Vaulting supports, E and W bays**

S and N responds, between E and W bays similar. The half-shaft engaged with a dosseret stands proud of the nookshafts tucked into the angle on each side. Base of two square plinths, the lower chamfered and the upper plain, with two round convex elements above. Half-shaft and necking plain. Capital double-scalloped on its central face, with single scallops to E and W, defined by tucks. Imposts, and those of nookshafts, decorated by the stringcourse of raised chevron.

**E bay.**

SE nookshaft. Base, as responds. Engaged plain round nookshaft. Necking plain. Cushion capital, one plain shield on each face, a three-tucked wedge on SW corner.

SW nookshaft. As SE. Cushion capital has shield emphasised by a groove with a vee-shaped groove below, on each face.

NE nookshaft. As SE, but necking damaged. Capital has the head of a bird or an angel on the angle, with well-defined wings on S and W faces, with shallow shields defined by a groove above. Head supported by finger-like processes or hands.

NW nookshaft. As NE, with a carved capital with shallow shields above. A human-like head on the angle, joined on each side to addorsed beast bodies, each with two legs and a lion-like tail that loops under and over the body ending in a tassel.

**W bay.**

SE nookshaft. As SW, E bay, but no grooves on the capital.

SW nookshaft. As SE, E bay, but capital entirely carved with a figure on the angle, a round head with diagonal scrolled processes going in four directions, perhaps representing the wind (as W bay, NW).

NE nookshaft. As SE, E bay, cushion capital with sheathed tucks on the angle.

NW nookshaft. A restored version of the figure of SW, W bay, with wind being blown from his mouth.
In the E bay, the thick ribs appear to divide at intervals and rejoin to form the links of a chain. The rib is made up of \( \frac{3}{4} \) section roll moulding, the centre of which consists of a hyphenated roll, the gaps being filled by two short lengths of similar roll placed on each side of the centre and chamfered top and bottom to form links. Each link bears two small carved panels superimposed on it. Most geometric motifs are constrained in a small square frame, and most floral shapes have a free outline.

In the W bay, the ribs are of three-dimensional stepped chevron. A narrow fillet on the rib soffit has two rows of fine, deep-cut, stepped lateral chevron on each side. All ribs similar and continuous across the apex.

**Rib vaulting, E bay**

SE rib, ten links. Starting with the lowest, a) and b) for each link.

1a) chip-carved saltire with pierced beads containing a tiny cross, 1b) as 1a) but beads with no crosses

2a) saltire with wider arms and pierced circle in centre, 2b) like 2a) but 4 smaller arms added, giving 8-petalled flower

3a) a bigger and looser 8-petalled flower, 3b) 2 narrow saltires on edge with deep gaps between the arms, giving a lacy appearance

4a) 8-petalled flower in square, shallowly incised, 4b) as 4a) but no edging and deeper cut

5a) 8-petalled flower in square, boldly incised, 5b) 4 small 8-petalled flowers in a square

6a) square divided into 8 triangles each containing a bead, 6b) square divided into 4 smaller squares, each with a saltire cross

7a) two squares, one inside the other, separated by 6 beads per side, the inner square containing a raised pierced circle, 7b) square containing 4 diagonal fluted wings with a central pierced circle

8a) saltire, 8b) circle divided radially into 8, with a central hole and 4 ‘leaves’ at the corners
9a) saltire, 9b) a square containing two raised concentric circles, pierced

10a) saltire, 10b) 4 small squares, each with saltires

SW rib, nine links.

1a) and 1b) a large diagonal 4-petalled flower with the petals turned in at the edges, within a square

2a) as SW 1a), 1b) with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, no square, 2b) saltire

3a) 8-petalled flower, with diagonal petals longer, 3b) small 8-petalled flower

4a) blank, 4b) square containing 3 circles with beads between outer two

5a) diagonal 4-petalled flower with 3 incised lines on each petal and a tiny central circle, b) saltire

6a) a square, each side with two arcs reaching the centre that contains four plain incised circles, 6b) blank

7a) saltire, 7b) a square containing two concentric circles alternately over- and under-lapped by 4 diagonal petals and a central wavy-edged disc

8a), 8b) saltires with pierced beads, as SE 1b)

9a), 9b) a large diagonal 4-petalled flower with the petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles behind the petals, as SW 2a)

NE rib, ten links

1a) a square containing 3 circles with beads between the outer two, as SW 4b) but deeper cut, 1b) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b)

2a) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b), 2b) square with an oval set diagonally, intersected by a diagonal line

3a) saltire, 3b) blank

4a) saltire, 4b) diagonal 4-petalled flower, as SW 5a) but faint

5a), 5b) damaged, unreadable

6a) saltire, 6b) damaged, unreadable

7a) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b), 7b) square containing two concentric circles with a cable between them, a central piercing and corner ‘leaves’

8a) saltire, 8b) two concentric squares containing a central circle

9a) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a), 9b) 8-petalled flower with alternating long and short petals, as SE 2b)

10a) a small link containing one saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b)

NW rib, nine links.

1a) 8-petalled flower with alternating long and short petals, as SE 2b), 1b) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b)

2a) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b), 2b) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a)
3a) damaged, unreadable, 3b) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a)

4a) square containing two raised concentric circles, pierced, as SE 9b), 4b) square containing a large disc with four radiating petals to corners

5a) a raised circular ring, 5b) square containing two concentric circles alternately over- and under-lapped by 4 diagonal petals and a central wavy-edged disc, as SW 7b)

6a) diagonal 4-petalled flower, as SE 2a), 6b) three arches separated by beads

7a) square divided into four, each containing a cross, as SE 6b), 7b) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a), shallow cut

8a) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a), deep cut, 8b) saltire

9a) saltire with pierced beads, as SE 1b), 9b) diagonal 4-petalled flower, petals turned in at the edges, with two concentric circles showing behind the petals, a central pierced disc, as SW 2a)

At the apex of the vault, each rib ends with an incised V pointing up to a slightly raised central area containing three incised shapes resembling human outer ears.
Groin vaulted symmetrical crypt, with a ‘nave’ of two rows of four squat piers and two side aisles, giving fifteen bays. Ashlar pilaster wall responds support the outward ends of the transverse arches that have plain impost, chamfered below. All piers plain and cylindrical, standing on restored square chamfered plinths. Some have simple decoration on the square bases. Two piers have figurative capitals, the others having variants of scallop capitals. Imposts plain and chamfered below. Piers on S side numbered 1 to 4 from E, on N side numbered 5 to 8 from E.

Piers of crypt

Pier 1. Base square and plain, and above two round convex mouldings. Necking plain. Capital with double scallops on each face, the shields outlined by lightly incised double lines; central and angle tucks.

Pier 2. Base damaged. Necking plain. Capitals with double scallops and pleats at centres and on angles; shields undefined.

Pier 3. Base with corner spurs, SW spur missing. A small grooved strap rides over the moulding in the centre of each face. Necking with cable moulding. E, S, and N faces: scallop capitals with barely defined shields and sheathed pleats in centres and at angles (as image pier 6, N face). Bases bear a raised inverted shield. W face with the upper part covered by overlapping fish scales pointing upwards, and at the base two shields, as on the other faces. Superimposed on this, a symmetrical cross design that might represent a figure, consisting of a diamond-shaped head, horizontal drooping arms and pleated clothing on the vertical body. There is a large volute on the NW angle, and each fore-arm ends in a volute.


Pier 6. Base with spurs on SW and NW corners, the other corners damaged. Capital with E and W faces as pier 3, but N face lacking the raised basal shields. S face has a series of conventional overlapping fish scales at the top, and shields as E and W faces below.

Pier 7. Base plain. Capital decorated on three sides, plain on E face. S face with two addorsed half beasts, their heads facing the angles, each with mane and two front legs with claws. A vertical central band, bearing a fleur-de-lys above and below the two bodies, separates them. At the base, a row of inverted double defined scales. W face with a griffon facing S, affronting the W-facing beast on the S face. The griffon’s head has a long snout, an eye with a pierced centre, and two small ears. The long neck wears a collar, and a band of beading runs from collar to wings. Two short wings and two legs with claws. The long tail is knotted and curled at the end, with two incised longitudinal lines. A vertical structure in the centre resembling that on S face underlies the beast’s body, with two inverted scales at its base. N face, the main field occupied by a man riding a beast bareback on his knees. In front of him is another figure, on the W corner. The rider’s right hand holds the neck of the beast, whose head is turned upwards. The other figure has short legs showing beneath breeches, with possibly an arm in the upper part. Little surface detail, and the whole looks unfinished compared with S and W faces.

Pier 8. Base plain. Capital E face as pier 2; S, W and N faces with an additional raised basal shield.

Interior Decoration

String courses

Chancel and nave, chevron stringcourse
The interior stringcourse is of shallow raised zigzag. In the chancel it is now confined to S and N walls, where it wraps itself around the imposts of the nookshafts and responds, and decorates the lower edges of the window splays. It continues along the S wall of the nave, interrupted by the 14thc. window, as far as the S doorway.

**Furnishings**

**Fonts**

*Drum-shaped font*

Located in the crypt, centrally at the W end, a 19thc. drum-shaped font. It is described because in several respects it replicates the original 12thc. font, shown in an 18thc engraving (see Comments). The original font was decorated with twelve arcades housing figures, said to be apostles. Here the arcades are blank, but their structure replicates the original: shafts with attic bases, plain necks, capitals bearing double scallops with tucks and bold shields, and plain imposts. The arches consist of double roll mouldings, separated by a hollow with beading that in the original was sparse and irregular. The spandrels contain a motif resembling a three-petalled flower, larger and more formal than the original’s finely executed forms. Likewise the continuous band of formal scrolling foliage around the rim lacks the lighter free-flowing form of the original. It is not known whether the base resembles the original, although the stone looks older than that of the present bowl.

**Dimensions**

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**Loose Sculpture**

*Beakhead voussoirs*

Four beakhead voussoirs, located on a display shelf in the E bay of the chancel against the S wall.

**Dimensions**

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Voussoir 2, w. at extrados damaged
Voussoir 2, w. at intrados 0.21 m
Voussoir 3, height more than 0.31 m
Voussoir 3, w. at extrados 0.24 m
Voussoir 3, w. at intrados 0.23 m
Voussoir 4, height 0.32 m
Voussoir 4, w. at extrados damaged
Voussoir 4, w. at intrados 0.22 m

Loose voussoirs 1-4

Voussoir 1 bears one head and is the best preserved, comparable to the bird-like heads decorating the S door. It has large round bulging eyes with a raised surround, a boss in the centre of its brow, with a row of pellets and tiny ears above. The profile is smooth, and the beak, with a row of pierced holes each side of the keel, overlies the wide roll moulding, that looks as if it might extend around a soffit. The extrados is incomplete.

Voussoir 2 bears two weathered heads and has a complete extrados with a groove and a vertical edge as on the S doorway voussoirs. The intrados is incomplete and the roll moulding extends little beyond the beaks, being chamfered to meet a vertical face at right angles. The L head seems to have a truncated edge, whereas the R does not. Both heads have prominent pointed ears (L ear on L head is missing), but the eyes differ and are in different relative positions.

Voussoir 3 bears two heads, but structurally it resembles voussoir 2 with a thick roll. It also has an incomplete extrados. Both heads are bird-like with diagonal ridges on the brow, ears missing on the L head, ringed bulging eyes and beaks with multiple piercings.

Voussoir 4 is weathered but almost complete at both extremities, showing that the wide roll moulding, similar in all, occupies c. 50% of the voussoir height. The L head is probably truncated, and the R is probably a bird head. Eyes damaged, ears small and distinct.

Stone with incised decoration

Located in the chancel, in the E bay by the S respond, a large block of stone bears a geometric design of an incised circle containing arcs forming four ‘petals’ of a flower, with similar smaller arcs within them. The design is not central on the stone, which is slightly tapered and damaged at the lower R corner.

Comments/Opinions

The plan and scale of the crypt and chancel indicate that the church was being prepared as a place of pilgrimage (VCH). The crypt has three aisles, of which the outer ones could serve as an ambulatory. The present doorways led to four access stairwells, those to N and S apparently leading up to the wall passages at window level in the chancel, acting as a sort of triforium, that connected to stairs to the chamber above the chancel, and to roof level in the E corners. The staircases at the
Wend led directly up to the nave, from each side of the confessio. This was a well organised, sophisticated arrangement for the controlled movement of pilgrims. This design is well known in cathedrals, but is rare in parish churches. As part of this plan, it is believed there may have been a triple chancel arch with central piers resting on the solid masonry of the W wall of the crypt. However, there seems to be no evidence of the church possessing any relics or of becoming a place of pilgrimage, and in the 13thc. a single large chancel arch was inserted.

The crypt shows parallels with the early Romanesque crypt at Lastingham, Yorkshire, that has groin vaulting and piers with plain cushion capitals. The rich figurative sculpture on two of the capitals at St Peter’s may reflect its slightly later date. Fish scales are the major motif, appearing either way up and often with a double edge. The dimensions of the crypt are given by Dyson et al. as: length 36 feet, width 21 feet and height 10 feet (11.0 m. x 6.4 m. x 3.0 m.)

The E façade of St Peter-in-the-East bears a strong resemblance to the façades of some Romanesque churches in Western France. For example, the church of Notre-Dame-la-Grande in Poitiers, and the cathedral at Angouleme, have W façades with pepperpot turrets at the upper corners and a gabled pediment in between.

In the chancel, the rib vaulting of the E bay with chain links is unusual. The links are constituted of lengths of ¾ section roll moulding. Of the link motifs, the commonest is the chip-carved cross and variants of it, associating the sculpture with that of the S nave doorway. Stylised flower shapes also feature, and there are a few unique designs. All motifs would have been relatively simple to execute.

Sherwood & Pevsner (1974) believe that the chevron vaulting of the chancel W bay was altered in the 19thc. This may well be so, because the finer workmanship and three-dimensionality does not match the heavily moulded chevron elsewhere in the church, or the chain links in the E bay, all typical mid-century work. A heavy type of chevron rib vaulting is found in chancels at Iffley, Oxfordshire, and Elkstone, Gloucestershire. These churches feature stepped lateral chevron with complex carved apical bosses with head masks facing each rib. St Peter’s has no apical boss.

The Romanesque decoration of the S doorway with its chip-carved crosses and beakheads is unlikely to be earlier than 1150. Many of the beakheads lack the smooth contour of most bird heads where there is no break between head and beak. Most beakheads here have a distinct, apparently chiselled, break above beak level. This style of beakhead also occurs at St Ebbe’s, Oxford, and one head in particular, wearing a nose strap or bridle, is very similar in both churches. Possibly masons from the same workshop may have contributed to both churches (Halsey, 1988). Truncated beakheads also occur on the tower arches at Iffley, near Oxford, yet all the heads on the earlier W portal are bird heads. Truncated heads dominate at Lincoln Cathedral and Tutbury Priory.

Sherwood and Pevsner (1974) suggested that the S doorway had been reset and that the loose beakhead voussoirs might be from another doorway. Since three of the four voussoirs bear two beakheads, this is possible. There is only one voussoir with two heads on the S doorway. However, their view that the loose voussoirs were smaller may be mistaken because the height dimensions given here come within the range of those of the S doorway, averaging 0.29 m. The widths of all voussoirs vary considerably. As the loose voussoirs do not appear to taper, it seems likely they are jamb voussoirs. Loose voussoir 4 has the same conformation at its outer edge as those of the S doorway, and the other three might have been the same. If the doorway was reset, it is possible that its configuration is not as the original, and that all the voussoirs might have come from the one doorway.

Sturdy (1972) mentions the finding of a late 12thc. or early 13th. coffin in the excavations prior to the library conversion, and Sherwood and Piper (1989) report seeing a large stone coffin lid with a cross between four circles of probable 12thc. date. It is not known whether this relates to the decorated stone block now in the chancel. As the incised design on the block is similar to the motifs within the chains of the ribs, although on a different scale, it might be of similar date.

The original Romanesque font is known from two engravings by Michael Burghers (c.1657-1727) (reproduced in Theobald, 1770). One shows a narrow thick-sided bowl from an oblique angle, without a visible base, and the other gives a panoramic view of the sides with twelve arcades containing figures, said to be apostles. The amount of detail varies, and two figures are badly damaged. The arcades have columns with double cushion capitals, with a roll moulding over the arch with an outer band of uneven pellets. There are three-pointed motifs in the spandrels, and a band of leaf decoration round the rim, apparently all finely and freely executed. The design is in the tradition of twelve-arcaded fonts, as at Dorchester-on-Thames...
(in lead), and at Rendcomb, Gloucestershire (in stone). However, this font was relegated to the churchyard later in the 17thc. (Gough, 1792; Dyson et al., 1961), and was replaced by one in wood (by Grinling Gibbons and still in existence). The wooden one was replaced by ‘a plain stone one before 1843’, made as a memorial to Vicar W.K. Hamilton who left St Peter’s in 1841, later to become Bishop of Salisbury (Dyson et al., 1961).

The plain stone font presumably refers to the present one, that might be called plain in that it lacks the figures in the arcades. This accords with a handwritten account of the church that describes ‘a fine old Norman (sic) font, its bowl ornamented with arches and bead moulding’, with no mention of figures in the arcades (Green, 1905). This is the only account seen by the author that seems to give a description of the 19thc. partial copy that now resides in the crypt.

In 1927, it was reported that part of the old ‘polygonal font’, removed in the 17thc., is preserved in the sill of the W window of the porch (Lyne, 1927). This seems to accord with the 1961 report that ‘part of the original, with chevron decoration and figures of Apostles under canopies, was found in 1894 and returned to the church’, to be mounted in the sill of the W porch window (Dyson et al., 1961). Since then, Sherwood and colleagues (1974, 1989) report font fragments ‘largely of vertical zigzag’ in the S porch. Engravings of the original font show no sign of zigzag or chevron, and moreover these authors make no reference to the present font. The origin of these fragments remains unknown.

**Bibliography**


R. Gough, ‘XXIV. Description of the old Font in the church of East Meon, Hampshire, 1789: with some Observations on Fonts’. Archaeologia X (1792), 188.


J. Theobald, ‘Some Account of St Peter’s Church in the East, Oxfordshire, from an old MS.’, Archaeologia, I (1770, 1st edn), 151-155, plate II.

Victoria County History: Oxfordshire 4 (1979), 398-401.
Exterior view, tower and nave from SW
Exterior view, chancel from SW
Interior view, from W

**Location**

Oxford, St Peter-in-the-East
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