

A SUSSEX GUIDE

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# 20 SUSSEX CHURCHES



SIMON WATNEY



SNAKE RIVER PRESS



## SNAKE RIVER PRESS

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### **DEDICATION**

*To Mrs Barbara Pollard, with love*

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## ST MICHAEL

AMBERLEY



P erched on its own small escarpment, the picturesque village of Amberley looks out on one side over the Sussex Weald towards the North Downs and on the other southwards across the Wildbrooks, the wetlands of the Arun valley, less wet these days since the river was embanked. The church of St Michael stands just outside the 14th-century castle walls built to enclose an older fortified manor house founded by the Bishops of Chichester and nowadays an hotel. Patched outside with stone and flint, the present church dates from around 1140, with a south aisle which was probably added at the very end of the 12th century, together with a new roof sweeping down to cover both the nave and the aisle. The sturdy west tower was added in the 13th century when the chancel was rebuilt with a typically under-stated Early English-style triple-lancet east window, and side lancets. Inside the south porch the early 14th-century doorway has well-carved capitals decorated with oak, hawthorn and vine leaves.

The most dramatic and memorable feature at Amberley is the tall Norman chancel arch with four bands of energetically zig-zagging chevrons of different widths moving in different directions to very exciting effect. It rests on large stylised leafy capitals, with a single small, cat-like animal-head on the south-east side facing the main altar. The nave windows also have nice upright abstract leafy capitals like those flanking the chancel arch. Together with the decoration of the nave capitals and

arches, this is similar to contemporary work at Steyning. Standing against the west side of the first pier of the south nave arcade is a large, square font typical of the late 12th century. Damaged in various moves, it is decorated with shallow blank arches, four on each side, and rests on a modern slab above a drum with four modern corner colonettes.

Sadly, much wall painting was destroyed during the misguided restoration of the 1860s, when large areas of medieval plaster were painstakingly chipped away, as in so many other English churches, but fortunately a substantial area remains on the south side of the chancel arch. Although badly faded, this shows Christ in Majesty above the Passion-story, including the Flagellation, the Procession to Calvary, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Until around 1865, the most prominent painting in the church was a painted figure of Christ seated on the lap of the Virgin Mary, with a kneeling ecclesiastic below. This was located on the north side of the east end of the south aisle, but of this there is sadly no longer any trace. It is not clear from the old description whether it was a form of *pietà* or a Madonna and Child.<sup>1</sup> On the south wall of the aisle, however, there is still a tiny 14th-century detail from the Visitation showing the heads of St Mary and St Ann. Although much restored, this tends to confirm the suggestion that there was a Lady Chapel at this end of the aisle.<sup>2</sup> On the south side of the east end of the aisle is a faded biblical text painted after the Reformation on top of an earlier scene.

Besides a well-designed brass to John Wantelle (*died 1424*), now displayed on the east wall of the south aisle, and a few slabs now in the porch, there are no old monuments at Amberley. In 1530 local farmer George Rose left instructions for the construction of a tomb by the north door, to be 'paynted wt a crucyfixe and my picture, wt my 11 children', but no trace of this, nor any other old monuments, survived the combined effects of the Reformation, the Civil War and the work of Victorian restoration.<sup>3</sup> Four modest 18th-century tablets cling to the outside of the east wall of the church whence they were exiled in the

1. *The Revd. G.A. Clarkson, Notes on Amberley, its Castle, Church etc., 1865, p.185-239.*

2. *Nigel Foxell, Amberley Church-A Critical Appreciation, 2006.*

3. *E.N. Staines, Dear Amberley: A guide to Amberley and the History of the Parish, 1968, p.36.*

19th century, and there are a few Victorian epitaphs. The best monument is a small tablet at the west end by Eric Gill (1882-1940), commemorating Joan Stratton, who died aged 17 in 1919, with typically good lettering and a sensitive portrait roundel in low relief.

An early 19th-century drawing shows the interior of the church with the lower section of the medieval chancel screen intact with its original doors, together with a full complement of box-pews and a fine 17th-century two-decker pulpit, but this was all swept away in the 1860s, the pews apparently re-used as pig-troughs. The magnificent open kingpost roof was also boarded over at this time, but was opened up in the early 1960s, when the old Horsham-stone roofing was replaced with tiles.

In the south aisle is a beautiful two-light window by Veronica Whall (1887-1970) commemorating Edith Jennings (*died 1931*) with St Edith and two angels. The best glass at Amberley is set into the arch of the former Norman doorway on the north side of the nave. Designed and made by Robert Anning Bell (1863-1933), it commemorates his friend the artist Edward Stott (1855-1918) who lived locally. One of the very best windows in Sussex, it demonstrates the way in which late Pre-Raphaelite taste led to our native form of Art Nouveau. Depicting the Entombment of Christ in a border of demi-angels with animal vignettes along the bottom, the central image derives from a painting by Stott based on Titian's celebrated version of the subject in the Louvre, rethought here in nervily intense early 20th-century terms.

Stott is buried on the west side of the churchyard where there is a substantial carved upright stone monument with a lively bust on top and a delightful relief-medallion of the Boethian hunter Orion playing a lyre, a perfect embodiment of the haunting mood of Edwardian neopaganism one associates with the woodcuts of Gwen Raverat and the short stories of Arthur Machen. By the sculptor Francis Derwent Wood (1871-1926), it is showing ominous signs of weathering.

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**Getting there**

National grid ref. TQ027132

- ① Amberley is 4 miles (6 kilometres) north of Arundel, just off the B2139.
- ② Amberley train station is on the London-Chichester line.
- ③ Open daily. Details on Diocesan website: [www.diochi.org.uk](http://www.diochi.org.uk)

## ST PETER

### ASHBURNHAM



At first sight St Peter at Ashburnham in East Sussex appears to be a typical late-medieval Perpendicular church, but it was in fact re-built in 1665, although retaining the 14th-century west tower from an earlier building. As soon as you begin to look at the details the date becomes more apparent, and it is instructive to compare the lozenge decoration on the north porch to that on the west door at St Mary the Virgin in Goudhurst a little way across the border in Kent, which dates from around 1638. The well-preserved Restoration interior is characteristically cool yet magnificent, with a plain wooden pulpit, a west gallery raised on Ionic columns, and box-pews. There is also a fine large pedimented reredos from the 1670s now positioned on the north wall of the nave. It has paintings of Moses and Aaron in a wooden frame, with superbly carved cherubs and winged angel-heads, recently picked out in gloss white paint, to sadly disfiguring effect. Of a similar date is the large, highly unusual font with an octagonal bowl on top of a big square pyramidal stepped stem. It is so eccentric one suspects the hand of the sculptor John Bushnell is associated with it, especially given his work here in the 1670s. It has a pretty wooden pierced ogee-ribbed cover.

St Peter was the mausoleum church of the Ashburnham family who lived here from the 12th century until the line died out in 1953. The magnificent adjacent mansion was largely demolished between 1959 and 1961 after a fire, and only a squat reminder of its former magnificence

remains as a conference centre. The family is commemorated by two major tombs, the earlier of which is that of John Ashburnham (*died 1671*) and his immediate family. He was the builder of the church and a loyal favourite of Charles I, by whom he was nicknamed Jacko. Set against the east end of the north wall of the north chancel chapel, it is grand yet reticent and very much in the classical courtly style established by the London- and Amsterdam-trained mason-sculptor Nicholas Stone in the early 17th century. Positioned against a large, plain, upright rectangular black back-plate, it consists of a noble canopied marble reredos with a large white pediment supported on black Corinthian columns.

On top is a superbly carved escutcheon proudly proclaiming the family's ancestry, while at ground-level is a beautiful white marble tomb-chest standing on a white plinth raised on a black step, with two groups of small kneeling figures in relief facing one another on the front. Many of their hands are later replacements. On top of the chest is a polished black lid carrying three excellent traditional recumbent white marble effigies with their heads resting on tasselled pillows. He lies in the middle, with his first wife behind him wearing a wimple and a long shroud-like robe, and his second wife in front of him in contemporary dress with long ringlets, and wearing a coronet. All three have their hands together in prayer, those of his first wife also being later replacements.

The kneelers are conceived entirely within a Jacobean convention that was already old-fashioned by the eve of the Civil War, but which took on a new lease of life after the Restoration as an emblem of continuity with the past across the great chasm of the Interregnum. The monument is surely from the same hand as that commemorating Henry, Ninth Earl of Kent, and Lady Arabella, Countess Dowager of Kent, in the De Grey mausoleum at St John The Baptist at Flitton in Bedfordshire, and the monument to Sir John Evelyn at St Nicholas at Godstone in Surrey, the latter being generally accepted as the work of the sculptor Thomas Burman (*1617-74*).

An attribution to Burman is reinforced by the presence of a white marble cartouche set horizontally on top of the tomb-chest to the left of the effigies' heads, a technique strongly associated with the workshop



of Nicholas Stone, for whose son, John Stone, Burman had worked in the 1650s. Burman had originally been trained under the leading London-based mason-sculptor Edward Marshall, whose work may be seen at Horsham, and his influence is felt here in the rather streamlined quality of the effigies. The attribution is further supported by the fact that Burman's most celebrated pupil, John Bushnell, was responsible for the other great monument at Ashburnham, made shortly after his former master's death, suggesting that he may well have inherited the commission, despite a dramatic earlier falling out between the two men. Certainly Bushnell seems also to have taken over another commission at West Dean in Wiltshire after Burman's death.

The second great monument occupies the entire west side of the north chapel and commemorates William Ashburnham who died in 1679, together with his wife Jane, formerly the Countess of Marlborough. Although not himself ennobled, William had royal connections. Born sometime before 1620, he was the son of Sir John Ashburnham (*c.* 1572-1620), had served as a Major-General in the royalist army of Charles II, was Colonel General of the county of Dorset and served as the king's cofferer, or treasurer. Very much a sister to Bushnell's earlier monument at All Saints, Fulham to John, Viscount Mordaunt, Ashburnham's fittingly ornate memorial is set against a huge, plain, dark grey marble background, and takes the form of a grand theatrical tableau, set on its own wide stage raised by two steps, on which stands an enormous pale grey marble sarcophagus with a polished black marble lid. The inscription on the front is in a scrolly frame with scary open-mouthed beast-masks above and below, and is very typical of Bushnell. On top of the lid are two white marble effigies, she demurely semi-reclining on the left, he kneeling on the right with his hands stretched out despairingly. He is however conceived and executed on a different, larger scale to her, creating a most unsettling psychological effect which is further reinforced by the presence of a very anatomically challenged cherub hovering above her head with a wreath.

At the front corners of the slab are two free-standing plinths which echo the profile of the sarcophagus, and support a small white coronet

on the left, and a plumed helm on the right. Behind the figures is a flat white marble curtain under a big baldacchino held open at the sides by two startlingly inept cherub heads. The quality of carving is wildly uneven and, while the initial general effect is magnificent, the cherubs verge on the monstrous. If one looks more closely, the detail is very mad indeed, as is so often the case with Bushnell. The sarcophagus, however, is a fabulous piece of Mannerist invention, and the individual elements (helm, coronet, etc.) resting on their bulgy black plinths are of the greatest beauty and strangeness.



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**Getting there**

National grid ref. TQ689145

- ① Ashburnham is 4 miles (6 kilometres) from Battle just off the A271 to Bexhill. There are buses from both towns.
- ② Open by arrangement with the Revd. S. R. Talbot, tel. 01424 893605.
- ③ Details on Diocesan website: [www.diochi.org.uk](http://www.diochi.org.uk)