

A Short History of the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Battle



After the foundation of Battle Abbey the town of Battle grew around it, at first servicing the abbey, finally obtaining its own momentum to grow even bigger. There was a need for markets, forges, tanneries, shoemakers, bakers, masons, farmers and every other trade.

The spiritual needs of the population would at first have been provided by the abbey. At first the abbey would have shared its church with the people, but as Battle grew larger the increasing numbers of thronging the nave would have interfered with the abbey's religious purpose as a Benedictine monastery. So the abbey started building a chapel for the town sometime between 1102 and 1107. The monks, during the inter-abbacy of 1102-1107 or otherwise abbot Ralph immediately after his appointment in 1107 would have taken the active decision to provide the townsfolk with their own church building. The monks would have serviced the church at first but in 1115 a priest Humphridus, was appointed by the abbot to be their vicar. We even know where Humphridus lived, which was the 89th messuage belonging to the abbey estate, three properties to the east of St Mary's in the borough of Sandlake¹ (on the north side of the present Upper Lake). The priest was expected to pay seven pence per year for this dwelling and also provide at least one day's labour.

From this point (1115) forwards, according to the Chronicle of Battle Abbey (CBA), the chaplain of St Mary's Church was a secular priest and not a monk. Hammond's interpretation of the CBA is that the monks said that the appointed priest *'should be acquainted with the affairs of the monastery, as if he were one of the monks....Being the one who has to act as Dean.'* This was because the incumbent was in charge of a secular court dealing with civil matters, but may also have acted as a neutral Dean of the ecclesiastical court in the Abbey. This is probably the reason the title dean arose for the rector of St Mary's.

In later mediaeval times, from c.1300 to the time of the reformation, this church would have been a pictorial wonder to its congregation. Internally the walls were extensively painted, with characters from the bible, stories of saints' lives, dooms, and processions of souls and of devils. From the evidence left today most of the paintings were done with great skill possibly under supervision from the abbey. These were re-found in 1845, but re-covered with whitewash until 1867, when they were partially restored by E Ward RA. E C Rouse did further work in 1976-78.

An album of W H Brooke's watercolours, commissioned by W H Beresford-Hope of Bedgebury Park is now held at ESRO². An interpretation by E C Rouse of the watercolours of the lost wall paintings is repeated in Vere Hodge's booklet. Rouse provisionally dated them as between the 13th and early 14th century in origin, with the window splay figures possibly being 16th century. It is a great shame that some of the originals have been lost forever and others damaged. E C Rouse did further new restoration work in 1976-78 on the remaining paintings. A few examples of digital copies of the watercolours from 1845 and a recent photograph from 2010-11 are in this paper but there is a very much larger selection in 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches' (Foord, 2011) and also some in 'A History of the Parish Church of Battle, (Braybrooke, 2009)

The main series, between the clerestory windows on the north side, of c.1300 shows the life of St. Margaret of Antioch in two tiers, each scene in a frame. The series starts at the right hand (east) end with the upper row and reads leftwards to the end, then down to the lower row when the scenes

return rightwards. They show in order 1-24 the birth of the Saint, her being handed over to her Christian nurse, the approach of the Roman provost Olybrius and her subsequent tortures, finally her execution, burial, and her soul being received into Heaven. In the splays of the clerestory windows are large figures, though only Moses in the westernmost opening can be identified for sure. Over the chancel arch, above the procession, was a Doom with three living and three dead, slightly unusual in that one of each set of characters is sitting.

To the right of the easternmost northern clerestory window, partially hidden behind the organ is the start of a scene of a great procession of Blessed Souls about to be received into heaven by St Peter, part of the Last Judgement. This is obscured but it is the first part of a long wall painting which extended right across the nave wall to be reflected on the opposite wall, finishing left of the easternmost south wall clerestory window. At this point St Peter is seen seated in front of the gates of Heaven with souls kneeling before him.

In 1531 king Henry VIII declared himself to be supreme head of the Church of England. After this the royal coat of arms was hung in churches to symbolise this. This pronouncement was legitimised by two Acts of Parliament in 1532 and 1534, which declared Henry VIII and his successors head of the Church in England and gave the Crown straight away one year's income of every church, cathedral and monastery, to be followed by 10% of their incomes per annum (this would previously have gone to the Pope).

Obviously Henry VIII wanted to know just how much he was getting and he set up a survey – the *Valor Ecclesiasticus temp Henry VIII*. Having learnt the value of the monasteries Henry then decided to plunder them. The Dissolution of the Monasteries began in 1536 and by 1540 all the monasteries of England and Wales were closed.

After the dissolution of the abbey by Henry VIII in 1538 the last abbot of Battle Abbey, John Hammond, lived on in Battle for a further eight years. He requested in his will that on his death he be buried beneath St Catherine's aisle (see below: he would probably have regarded at that time the small south chapel as of St Catherine). He left in his will, to be preserved in the south chapel, *'my two chasubles and that belongeth to them, also a chalice and paten double gilded and a scutcheon of silver in the foot of it.'* These no longer exist in Battle.

After its dissolution the abbey and the advowson of St Mary's was passed to Sir Anthony Browne. He died in 1548 and he was buried in a vault at St Mary's. His fine alabaster tomb with effigies of himself and his first wife Alys can be seen in the Lady Chapel.

When Henry VIII died in 1547 his son Edward VI (1547-53) succeeded and the Church of England became more obviously Protestant. The changes were great and included the destruction of images - so wall-paintings were obscured and statues and rood-screens removed. Lady Chapels, with their references to the Virgin Mary, emblematic of Roman catholicism, were either removed or converted to other use.

The simple Protestant liturgy also made many church objects redundant, so in 1552 the Crown promptly confiscated these church goods too. This generated inventories of plate for every church. These inventories can be seen to this day in the National Archives. So Battle parish church changed. Its extensive medieval wall paintings were lime-washed over, not to be seen again for nearly 300 years. Anything to do with Roman catholicism was removed. Its valuables ended up in Henry's coffers.

The vicar or dean until now had been a catholic priest and this too changed with the appointment of a protestant Church of England dean under the patronage (advowson) of the new lord of the manor.

On the plus side a new house was built soon after 1538 for the new incumbent and this fine Elizabethan deanery, which is now in private ownership, stands behind and below the church. The dean now lives in a modern deanery on Caldbec Hill. The old deanery was built soon after 1538 of red brick with stone quoins for the incumbent of the church, but a dean's flower garden is recorded in 1304 and there were presumably earlier buildings on this site. In 1669 Dr William Watson added stables and re-arranged the interior in 1677 and in about 1863 Dr Edward Neville Crake made alterations to the rear and built a porch. There are two lead rainwater pipe heads with the date 1669, the initials WW, and a fleur de lys.

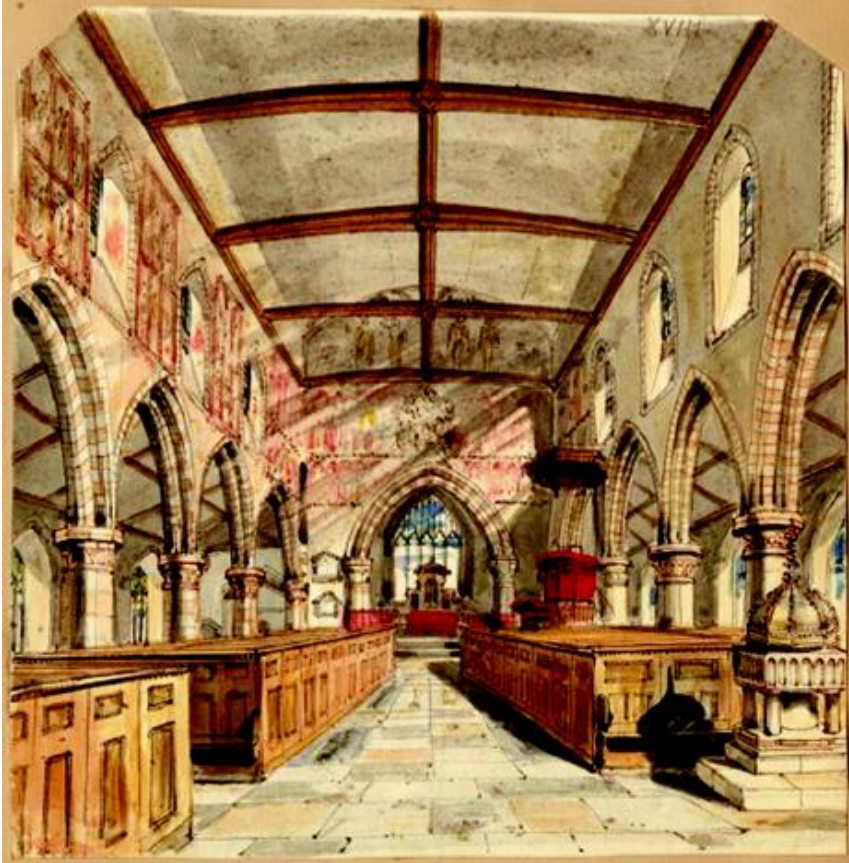
A gallery was erected at the west end of the nave of the church in 1666. Perhaps it was a project to celebrate the 600th anniversary of 1066? This stayed in place for 202 years and an organ, purchased in 1837, was situated there when seen by J Vidler in 1841, until the gallery was demolished in the major renovation of 1868. The gallery can also be seen in Brooke's watercolours of 1845.

In 1867-69 William Butterfield restored the whole church except the tower. He was aiming for a Victorian Gothic appearance. He removed the gallery, replaced most external stonework, with little change except at the east end, where the 15th century window gave way to three stepped lancets in a single arch. He may also have altered the pinnacles to give them what he considered a more 13th century form. All the roofs are his except for the nave, where he inserted iron ties to replace the wooden tie beams.

To improve the sight lines, he recommended widening the chancel arch. This was on the 'wish list' of the church, if it could be afforded, but Butterfield seemed determined to include this if at all possible. From his point of view it was a bonus that the nave arch wall threatened to collapse, possibly secondarily to the removal of the tie beams, and had to be demolished. This caused the loss of all the wall paintings on the walls around and above the nave arch, which is indeed larger than before and now noticeably off-centre. It is now aligned with the chancel whereas previously it was symmetrical with the nave. The ancient wooden tie beams were replaced by steel rods. The nave arch became off centre to the nave (but not the chancel) and there was a complete loss of the wall paintings of the chancel arch wall and on the south wall. The paintings on the north wall are all damaged to some extent.

Dean Youell commented in his booklet on the church – 'It is difficult to forgive Butterfield for denuding the roof of the ancient tie beams and king-posts', although he did understand that some work on the nave arch was needed as the 'wall was falling down'. The final bill for the restoration was £4736 2s 1d, a huge amount at that time and further work to the tower and to the church clock had to be postponed. This and further work took place at one or more later dates.

When the nave arch fell during enlargement of the arch in the course of the restoration of 1868 there was complete loss of the Doom and processional paintings above and around the nave arch, which lost the pictorial continuity of the story being told, which starts on the north wall of the nave and extends onto the south wall.

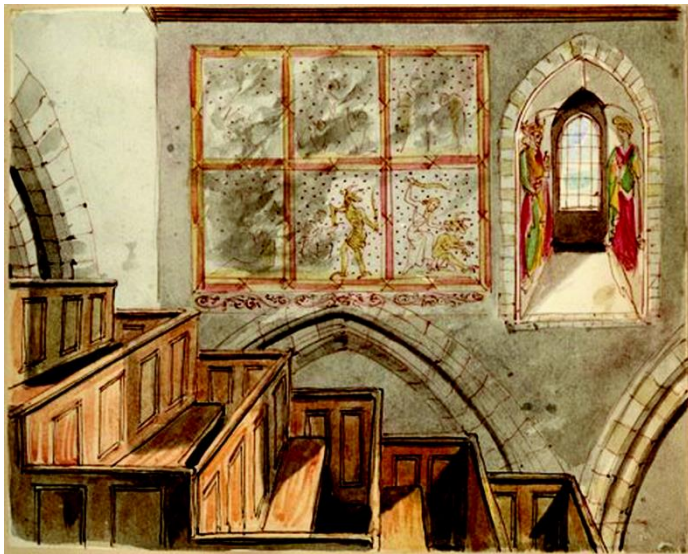


The inside of the St Mary's church viewed from the west door looking east in 1845. ©ESRO

Note the box pews, extent of wall paintings and the 'doom' at the top above the small chancel arch centred to the nave, the old pulpit and tie beams. The font cover is plain, not red as at present.



The same view in 2010. The Victorian roof timbers are exposed, but the tie beams have gone, to be replaced by iron bars. The enlarged chancel arch is now offset left and the wall around and above this are gone. © K Foord



Left: The old gallery at the west end of the church with one set of wall paintings and clerestory window splay paintings as seen in 1845

Below: The same splay paintings as seen in the above photographed in 2011



The organ was moved in 1868 to near the south chapel and replaced in 1950 by an electronic organ. This too was replaced as in 1974 it was decided to buy the redundant organ from the Central Methodist Church in Hastings which was closing. It was refurbished and re-installed in St Mary's.

Interest in this church is understandable both because its history is so closely linked to that of the abbey itself, but also because of its own residual intrinsic architecture and features, even after Butterfield's work which had been carried out with typical Victorian vigour. To this can be added the fact that the original 'Royal Peculiar' status of the abbey covered the church as well (negotiations to secure this are reported in the CBA) and continued to apply to the church after the dissolution. The dean of Battle's Peculiar remained the lowey, liberty, leuga or banlieu (these are all synonyms) of Battle Abbey. Until 1 January 1846 the '*Court of the Peculiar of the Exempt Jurisdiction of the Deanery of Battle*' dealt with marriage licences and received wills and administrations and approved probate within this area, rather than the Archdeaconry of Lewes as would have been the case otherwise. This is another, later, reason that the incumbent of Battle is still styled the dean of Battle.

The church lies in the Diocese of Chichester and there was a question of ecclesiastical authority between the diocese and parish/banlieu which claimed rights as a Royal Peculiar. This was a complex question and the early story of arguments with the bishops of Chichester, which involved abbots, justiciars, archbishops, popes, bishops and kings can be read about in more detail in the two papers about the abbots and the early kings of England. This tussle started in the 11th century and finally came to an end in 1846, surprisingly not in 1538. Until 1846 the bishop had to enter the church at Battle with the permission of the dean. After 1846 the deanery became part of the Archdeaconry of Lewes; after 1912 it was in the Archdeaconry of Hastings. It is now part of the Deanery of Battle and Bexhill, part of the Lewes and Hastings Archdeaconry.

The church fabric is superbly described in great detail by John Allen on his Sussex Parish Churches (SPC) website⁴ and this was copied with permission into 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066', so will not be repeated here. But before moving on there is in particular the font to note – a fine large example of its kind and possibly made from the rare Sussex marble at the same time that abbot Walter de Luci rebuilt the cloister at the abbey in the 1160s using some of the same material.

Its cover probably dates from the 15th century. There is also a slight mystery to solve, and the chapels to each side of the nave will need to be described below as north and south chapels to avoid confusions. This is because it seems that their names have changed over the years. After the reformation it appears that the north chapel was named after St Katherine³ and the smaller south chapel after St Mary or just called the small chapel. Since the minor restoration of 1845 the north chapel has been called the Lady Chapel and the smaller south one St Catherine's chapel. It is possible that this is a reversion to the names before the reformation when all references in Church of England churches to the Virgin Mary such as statues of the Madonna and Lady Chapels were abolished as being redolent of popery. To swap the names of chapels is certainly not unknown. At Rye for example, the parish church exchanged the names of its chapels of St Nicholas and St Claire in Victorian times.

The tower contained eight bells in 1841 as described by J. Vidler (writing as 'The Gleaner'), but at least some of these must have been replaced as the bells at present date from between 1803 and 1890. In 2011 structural repairs were necessary to the medieval roof and beams in the tower and the whole tower was re-pointed. The bells are rung every Sunday and the bell-ringers practice very Tuesday evening. For campanologists the details of the present bells are listed below. Four appear to have been replaced since J Vidler's time (1841) and there is a record of the bells having been possibly rung as a peal in 1739 by a visiting team of bell-ringers from Wye in Kent, but no details can be found of the bells' history before that. As can be seen the largest bell weighs over one tonne.

Bell No.	cwt	qtr	lbs	kg	Tone	Date	Founder
1	5	2	5	282	E flat	1869	Robert Stainbank
2	6	0	24	316	D	1815	Thomas II Mears
3	6	1	18	326	C	1874	Mears & Stainbank
4	7	2	18	389	B flat	1803	Thomas I Mears
5	9	1	17	478	A flat	1803	Thomas I Mears
6	10	3	18	554	G	1869	Mears & Stainbank
7	14	2	0	737	F	1890	John Warner & Sons
8	21	3	8	1109	E flat	1825	Thomas II Mears

Within the church are a few memorials one of which is the Cartwright Memorial to the inventor of the power loom the Rev Dr Edmund Cartwright, DD FRS was originally born in Marham, Norfolk in 1743. He obtained patents on the design of power looms in 1785 and 1787, but resistance to their introduction caused him to be bankrupted in 1793. His patents expired but he was eventually awarded £10,000 by Parliament which enabled him to retire, to Hollenden in Kent at the age of seventy. He died in 1823 whilst in Hastings on a fashionable sea-bathing visit and was only fortuitously buried at Battle as the then dean was a close friend.

Dating from before 1900 there are a number of memorials to valued local people who fell in war, but only after 1900 are the common people remembered. There are two memorials to the fallen of the Boer War plus a memorial to members of the congregation who died in WW2. The Battle War Memorial stands in the churchyard, a gift of Dean Currie and his wife in 1920. Some detail of this and some missing names and minor puzzles over some of the names that are there are discussed in

detail in 'The Brave Remembered – Battle at War 1914-1919' (Kiloh, 2015), a written memorial to those from Battle and district who went off to World War One. The finest memorial is Sir Anthony Browne's tomb and attention should also be drawn to the modern Senlac¹ window which commemorates the battle of Hastings.

The Benedicta Whistler centre was opened in 2012. This contains a meeting room and kitchen as well as improved vestry and toilet facilities.

Parish Priests/Deans

Presumably from its foundation to the appointment of the first priest the church was served directly by monks from the Abbey. Several sources exist for the list below and these have been cross referenced to create this list: These are – The board in the Church, the list given by Lilian Boys-Behren which she would have almost certainly obtained via the Duchess of Cleveland's publications, the list of Dean Youard made sometime between 1924-1946, Chronicle of Battle Abbey, The Clergy of the Church of England on-line database, Harleian MS. 3586 (as per Boys-Behren and Youard), Thorpe's Descriptive Catalogue, Papal Regesta 231 fo.60 (1355). Variations to the Church board data are given in **bold font**. Information about the earliest years including the reluctance of John (1175) to take the post and move to Battle and the appointment of Walter come from the CBA. The precise date of appointment of Humphry (Humphridus) is unclear, but has been generally taken as 1115. The first part of the CBA was written circa. 1155 when he is recorded as living in one of the Abbey's messages. He is known from the CBA to have lived to a good age for the time and calculating from his age backwards gives us c.1115 as his probable date of appointment. This date is now used as the church anniversary date.

Humphridus bef. 1155 d.1171 probable date of appointment 1115

The Chronicle of Battle Abbey records difficulties recruiting a priest after the death of Humphrey and the church was again served by monks from the Abbey.

(John) 1175

John never took up the post, he wished to hold it 'in absentia' and this was never accepted

Walter 1176 - ?

It is highly unlikely that Walter served for 70 years. Again the monks may have served or the next incumbent may have taken over sooner rather than later.

Magister A de R ? – 1246

'Magister' is Latin for 'Master' and the three entries with this form come from the Harleian MS.3586.

Magister C de D 1246 - 1250

Richard 1250 - 1277

John de Wygepain 1277 - **1305**

Magister R de L 1305 - 1330

John de Wyperitye 1331 – 1349

It has been conjectured that the two J de Ws were the same person. If so he would have ministered for 72 years, again highly unlikely - and how would Mag. R de L have fitted in? It may be the J de Ws are related but not the same person.

Geoffrey de Ludford 1350

John de Kele 1350-1

Simon de Brantyngham 1350-1

William de Ludbury³ ?

This was time of plague in Battle. The population of the town fell 50% and 30% of the monks died including the abbot.

Perhaps for this reason the new abbot (Robert de Bello) failed to fill the vacancy for several years. Eventually the Pope instructed the dean of London to appoint John de Torkesey in 1355

John de Torkesey 1355 - 1375
William Baroun 1375 (for four months only)
William (G)Jutherlane 1376 - 1389
John Wotton 1389 - 1390
Thomas Talbot 1390 - 1396
Hamo Offyngton 1397^z- 1406
Nicholas Balle 1406 - 1415
Thomas Rok(e) 1416 - 1433
John Farleigh 1433 - 1439
Robert Maslyn 1439 - 1440
Robert Clere 1440 – 1450 (*brass in church*)
Robert Alleyn **1450 - 1485**
Robert Selrugh/Sebourgh 1486 - ?
William Mille ? - 1501
John Oxenbridge 1501 – circa. 1528
William (Y)Inold **circa. 1528** - 1545
Elizeus Ambrose 1545 - 1572
John Wythines **1572** – 1615 (*brass in church*)
Thomas Bambridge 1615 - 1628
Christopher Dowe 1629 – at least 1636, probably 1643

Robert Acre who in previous publications and on the present (2018) board in the church was ascribed to 1633 – 1642 appears not to have existed at all because his name was misread , almost 180 years ago, on a brass in St Mary's dedicated to Robert Clere, (not Acre) , who was Dean in the mid fifteenth century. See 'Battle in the English Civil War and Interregnum' by Adrian and Sarah Hall, in section J of BDHS Collectanea, published January 2018)

No signature on churchwardens accounts 1643-4. The Civil Wars started in 1642.

Henry Fisher 1644 – 1664 *Henry Fisher has been recorded elsewhere as 'Oliver Cromwell's chaplain' although the author has not been able to confirm this 'appointment' and many others are so designated. It may just be a conformist's way to describe a Presbyteria minister. He must have signed the Act of Uniformity in 1662 otherwise his position would have been precarious. In the Springford file in Battle Museum of Local History there is some thought that Henry was born in Ireland, but baptised at St Clement Danes on 1 April 1613. He attended Christ's College, Cambridge in 1643 and was at Battle from 1644, being 'vicar' 27 November 1657. He resigned on 9 February 1664, and then became vicar of Hooe then also Wartling. He was buried at Wartling 8 September 1680.*

Dr William Watson 1664 - 1689
Dr William Simmons 1689 - 1730
Richard Nairne 1731 - 1760
Thomas Nairne 1760 - 1776
John(s(t)on) Lawson 1776 - 1779

Dr Thomas Ferris 1779 - 1801
 Dr Thomas Birch 1801 – 1836 *also Archdeacon of Lewes from 1823*
 John Littler 1836 -1863
 Dr Edward N Crake 1863 – 1882 *founder of the Church of the Ascension, Telham*
 Dr Edward R Currie 1882 - 1920
 Henry Francis 1920 - 1924
 Wilfrid Youard 1924 - 1946
 Arthur Naylor DSO, OBE 1946 – 1960 *Hon. Chaplain to King George VI*
 Francis Outram 1960 - 1970
 Richard Darby 1970 – 1975 *first Dean to preach in the Baptist Church*
 Rex Bird 1975 - 1984
 John Chater 1984 – 1991
 William Cummings 1991 - 2005
 Dr John Edmondson 2005 –

Keith Foord 2017, updated January 2018 ©BDHS

This paper contains extracts from 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066' by Keith Foord, published in 2011. This book which contains many pictures and photographs of wall paintings and old drawings of St Marys Church, Battle as well as histories of the other churches of the town, is available to order on-line via some on-line booksellers and directly from Battle Methodist Church – www.bmc.btck.co.uk or email battlemethodistchurch@btconnect.com

Endnotes

- [1](#) Sandlake/Santlache is the true origin of 'Senlac' which if used for naming the Battle of Hastings is the use of a retrospective romantic neologism. The name Senlac clearly did not exist in 1066. The original town of Battle was divided along the line of the ridge (taking the Abbey as its centre point) into western (Claverham) and eastern (Sandlake/Santelache) boroughs. Later there would also be boroughs of Middleborough in the area of the High Street and Mountjoy on the northern spur of the sandstone ridge, with Claverham persisting north and north-west of these. The Manor of Marley was created post 1310 to manage the lands of Uckham, Sedlescombe, Bathhurst and Whatlington east and north-east of the banlieu.
- [2](#) AMS/5641/1
- [3](#) Nephew of the abbot of Battle of the same name.

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- SAC. Sharpe Collection. 366 drawings of Sussex Churches, done between 1797 and 1809, mostly by Henry Petrie FSA (Sussex Archaeological Society, Michelham Priory)
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On-line

- <http://www.paintedchurch.org/> (illustrated listings and assessments of mediaeval wall-paintings by Anne Marshall)
- <http://www.stainedglassrecords.org/> (detailed listings of C19 and C20 glass in most of southern England, including Sussex, compiled by Robert Eberhard)
- <http://www.sussexparishchurches.org>
- <http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/> (The Clergy of the C of E -Database)

West Sussex Record Office references (*Ecclesiastical documents relating to all the Diocese of Chichester churches, including those of East Sussex etc. are kept at WSRO, not ESRO*)
Ep II/27/266: All documents relating to the 1867/68 restoration of St Mary's, including architectural drawings attributed to W Butterfield are kept under this file series.

PD 2011-14 : Tracy, Adelaide: Sussex Churches. Four bound volumes of drawings by Adelaide Tracy and other ladies, dated 1848-57, with photographs, printed material and notes (also known as the Borrer Collection).