



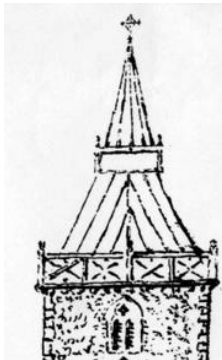
News and events

- The British Association for Local History one-day conference **Crossing Counties: Transport History in Herts, Beds and Bucks**, will explore coaching inns, canals, airships, archaeology and buses, on **Saturday 11 October** at Barton-le-Clay Village Hall, MK45 4JY. <https://www.balh.org.uk/beds25>
- Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 15 October** when Elaine Saunders will tell us about **Policing Wheathampstead before 'the police'**.

St Helen's Church

The recent consultation about the proposed improvements at St Helen's Church, including an extension on the north wall, was a reminder that the last major alterations to the fabric of the church were overseen in the 1860s by the rector the Reverend Canon Davys.

There will of course have been many lesser repairs and works since the church was built in the 13th and 14th centuries. For example, the Churchwardens' Accounts of 1784 show that an ironwork frame was installed "round the tower of the church". Mr W. Wright was paid 52 pounds, 5 shillings and 11 pence to make this frame together with other works involving large quantities of "oak slabs", 82 pounds of spikes and nails, 1 gross of "strong skrews" and other materials. The daily rate for labour was 2 shillings and 6 pence with, delightfully, "allowance for



beer". It seems likely that the frame was the one shown in this sketch of the church tower and spire, drawn by Canon Davys and dated 1864.

Canon Davys's works were far more substantial. The specifications drawn up by the architect, Edward Browning*, in April 1864

start with "Take off the roof of the nave, transepts and chancel, also the sacristy and south porch and west lobby" and continue "Clear away the building now in front of the south porch and used as an engine house"; "take down the upper part of the north and south walls of the chancel...for the fixing of the new high-pitched roof...". Over more than twenty pages, there are detailed instructions to the builder about replacing the roofs, raising the walls, cleaning the internal masonry, taking down the monuments and memorial tablets and replacing them when the work is finished, removing plaster and replacing ashlar where necessary, repairing window mullions and

replacing entire windows. The font "is not to be disturbed" though the paint is "to be cleaned off". "The whole of the walls of the interior of the church to be stripped of the old plastering" and then "to be plastered in good and sound three coat work". The types and quality of the stone and timber to be used in the works are specified throughout, including re-using any old oak that is still in good condition.

There is no detailed specification in this document about the work to be done on the tower but it refers to "a new spire containing 380 ft cube ... framed and braced and secured to the present framing with wrought iron bands and bolts



weighing 12 cwt. The present balcony and rafters to be carefully taken down...". This must refer to Mr Wright's work a century earlier. Canon Davys's sketch shows the tower and spire in 1866 after restoration.

Another document, dated 10 March 1865 and signed by the Bishop of Rochester, grants a licence for the works as specified by the architect, with

detailed instructions about the removal of "the tablets, gravestones and vaultstones" and replacing them as near as possible to their original locations.

The price agreed for the works specified, to be carried out by Thoday and Clayton of Cambridge, was £2420. An eight-page document dated 1866 lists in minute detail all the "Extra Works" that had to be done, amounting to at least another £250.

Canon Davys's *Guide to the Church* (2nd ed. 1912) includes a brief account of the works. <https://tinyurl.com/5n8udeha>

*Edward Browning was a distinguished architect based in Stamford, Lincolnshire, who had restored many other churches.