



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST

# CHURCH OF ST PETROCK

Parracombe, Devon



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1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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*Parracombe, Devon*

# CHURCH OF ST PETROCK

*by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas*

## HISTORY

St Petrock was a Cornish saint who is believed to have died at Bodmin on 4 June 564. There are four churches in Cornwall and eight in Devon bearing his name, and one of them may well have stood at Parracombe from soon after his day, though the reading of the name as a corruption of 'Petrock's combe' is a mistaken derivation; suggested meanings include 'valley marked by an enclosure' and 'the pedlar's valley'.

References in Domesday Book may be taken as evidence that there was a church here in the 11th century, and local tradition as embodied in previous guides is that the present church was built by William of Falaise, a near relative of William the Conqueror, late in that century, the tower being added in 1182 and the chancel in 1252.

*Front cover: Interior looking east  
(Christopher Dalton)*

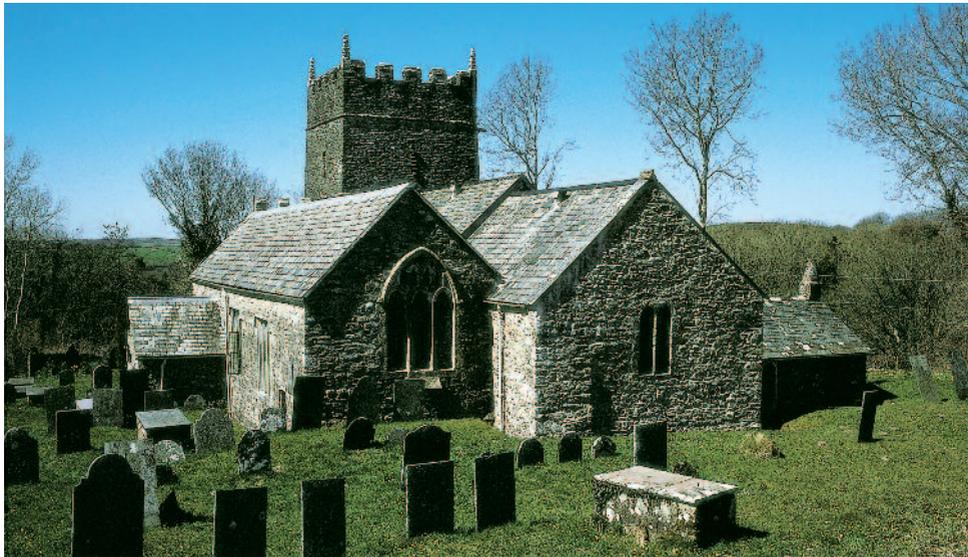
*Left: South aisle looking west  
(Christopher Dalton)*



## EXTERIOR

St Petrock's consists of nave, chancel, south aisle, south porch, north-west tower and north vestry, with walls of local rubble under slate-covered roofs. The chancel may certainly be attributed to the 13th century, as the east window clearly witnesses, and at least the lower stage of the tower dates from the same century, but the remainder of the building as seen today appears to have been a rebuilding in the late 15th or early 16th century. The nave and the south aisle, separated by an arcade of four bays with depressed pointed arches, are in the Perpendicular style; possibly the south aisle was then added to the old building.

The tower measures internally 10 feet (0.9m) square and externally 18 feet (1.7m) square. It has diagonal buttresses at the lower two stages only. The south-west buttress has built into it a stone bearing a quatrefoil which is thought to have come from a former churchyard cross. There is no west door, with the consequence that the tower can be entered only from within the church. The stages of the tower are marked externally by three string courses. The belfry has two narrow round-headed windows. It contains one bell supplied by Mears and Stainbank in 1908. The old bells were transferred to the new church built in 1879.



The south wall has a square-headed window of two lights west of the south porch and two square-headed windows of three lights each east of the porch. The porch has a depressed pointed arch. The east window of the south aisle is of three lights. The 13th-century east window of the chancel has two lights. North of the chancel is the vestry, lit by two windows of two lights each to north and south. The north wall of the nave has a window of three lights near to the vestry and a window of two lights farther west, both square-headed.



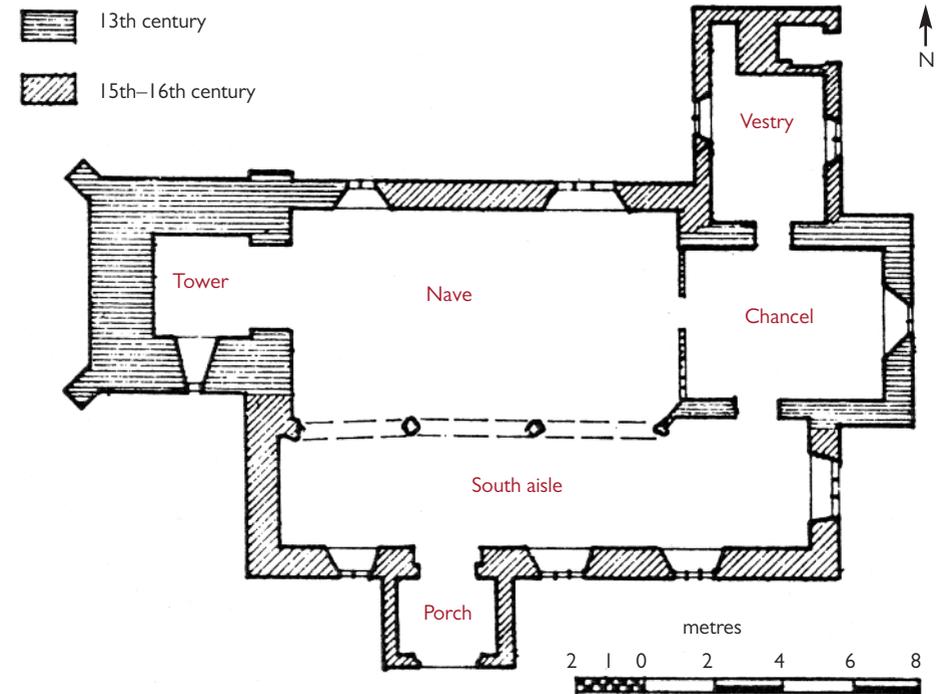
## INTERIOR

On entering the building the visitor sees an arcade of four bays with depressed arches of three orders separating the south aisle from the nave and a length of the chancel. The four piers have simple standard leaf capitals. There is an opening from the chancel to the south aisle.

The small plain font standing opposite the south door near the second pier from the west is of an early mediaeval type, probably Norman (it was originally at the church of St Martin, Martinhoe and rescued from the Rectory garden

by a rector of Martinhoe who gave it to St Petrock's). The circular bowl, which has a modern cover, is supported by piers standing on a base.

The nave is separated from the chancel by an unusual screen of the same early type as is found at Molland, also in North Devon. It consists of a number of narrow identical lights – four on the north side of the opening, six on the south – each terminating in a cusped ogee arch with tracery above. The screen has a straight upper



edge above which is a solid tympanum, formed in timber and boarded, with the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed painted in four panels and the Hanoverian royal arms centrally above. The names of Walter Lock and Richard Harton appear as churchwardens on the tympanum under the Creed, and the churchwardens' accounts show that in 1758, when they were the wardens, £1 11s. 6d was paid for cleansing the Commandments.

A chief interest of the interior is that it has been unaltered for two hundred years and shows the fashion in church furnishing that prevailed in a simple village church in the late 18th century. Indeed, the description of St Petrock's in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest describes it as the most interesting of all the churches in this part of Devon, with a completely unspoiled Georgian interior.

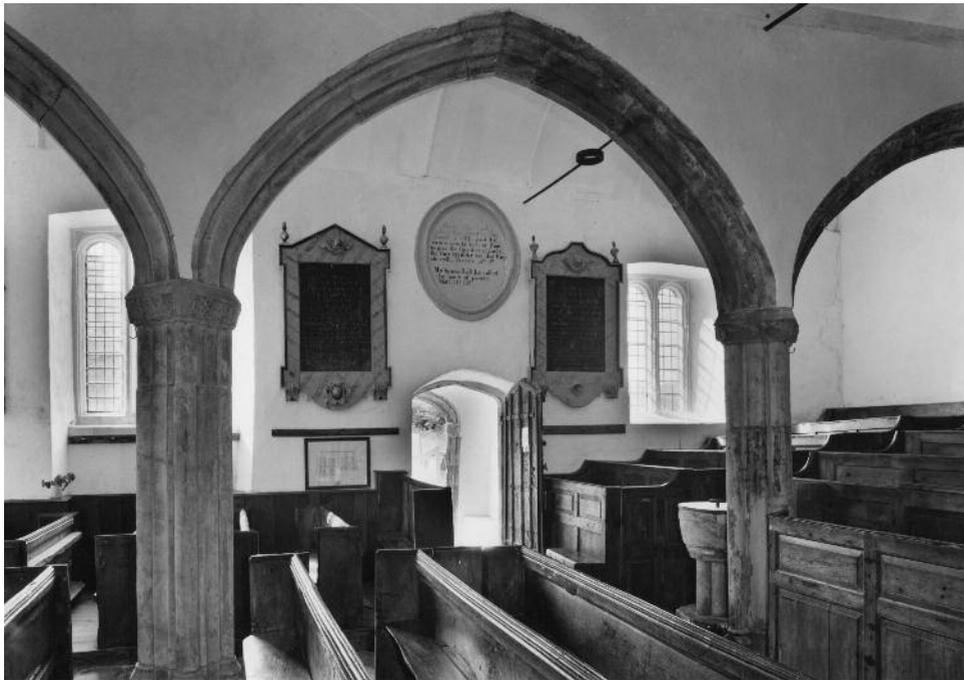
The communion table is enclosed by rails on three sides. The pulpit is of the three-decker type with the minister's reading desk and clerk's seat attached. The seating consists of a mixture of box pews and oak benches. The high box pews were the 18th-century way of keeping out draughts. The benches are mainly plain, probably all from the 16th century, but there survive six carved benches preserved by the care of a former rector, John Frederick Chanter. At the west end of the nave the box pews in which the band of musicians sat rise in the manner of a theatre. One pew has a piece cut out to allow room for the bow of the bass viol. St Petrock's is believed to have been the last church in Devon in which the singing was supported by a band of musicians.

The ceilings both of the body of the church and of the south aisle are wagon-shaped, with simple carved bosses at the intersections of the ribs and purlins.

In 1879 fears were expressed for the stability of St Petrock's, and it was proposed that the building should be demolished and a new church built on the site. The suggestion produced a wave of protests throughout the country, led by John Ruskin, who offered £10 towards the cost of building a new church on a different site if such an 'act of vandalism' was not perpetrated. Ruskin's counsel and donation were alike accepted. St Petrock's was left standing and

Christ Church was built in the centre of the village. Though regular services in St Petrock's ceased, the traditional annual service in honour of St Petrock, known as the Revels, continue to be held here at Whitsuntide. The churchyard remained open for burials until 1971.

In 1908 the tower was repaired after damage by lightning. This may account for the difference in appearance between the upper and lower



stages. After storms in the winter of 1946-47 further repairs to the fabric were carried out, and at the same time the Pilgrim Trust made a grant for the repair of the screen, tympanum and altar rails. However, the fundamental instability noted in 1879 does not appear to have been corrected, and in 1969 the south aisle roof was shored to prevent collapse and to halt the tendency of the nave roof to spread. At that time one of the piers in the south aisle could be rocked. The cost of this work was largely borne by the accumulated offerings of visitors; St Petrock's is one of the most visited churches in the country.

The church was declared redundant on 25 November 1969 and was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust on 25 June 1971, being the first church in the country recommended for vesting in the Trust by the Church Commissioners for the Church of England. This is a measure of the importance with which the church is regarded nationally.

General repairs and strengthening of the arcade were carried out at this time but in 1982 it became apparent that the church was again in need of extensive structural repair. This later work has been carried out by Messrs Stansell of Taunton under the supervision of Mr John Keeling Maggs.

St Petrock's registers of baptisms, marriages and burials date from 1597, with gaps. They may be consulted at the Devon Record Office,

Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter EX2 7NL where the Churchwardens' Accounts from 1712 to 1803 are also deposited. There are references to Parracombe in the Register of Edmund Lacy, Bishop of Exeter 1420-56.

Outside the church, built partly in the churchyard, two old cottages converted to a single dwelling now represent what used to be the church alehouse, where beer was brewed to refresh worshippers.

St Petrock's stands within the western boundary of Exmoor National Park and to the south-west are the grounds of the National Trust's property, Arlington Court. In the village the earthworks which the visitor may notice are not ancient but are the vestiges of the former Lynton and Barnstaple narrow-gauge railway, which was closed before the Second World War.

# THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 335 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk).

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

**NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF**  
St Martin of Tours, Elworthy  
13 miles NW of Taunton and 5 miles  
N of Wiveliscombe off B3188

St James, Luffincott  
7 miles N of Launceston off A388

All Saints, Otterhampton  
5 miles NW of Bridgwater off A39

St Peter, Satterleigh  
4 miles SW of South Molton off B3226

St Thomas, Thurlbear  
3 miles SE of Taunton off A358

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Right: Chancel screen and pulpit (Christopher Dalton)

Back cover: Memorial tablet in timber to David Lock (d.1786) on the south aisle wall (Christopher Dalton)