

**St Andrews Church, Stanstead Abbots Revisited:  
The Persistence of a Wrong Idea  
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Nikolas Pevsner, in his authoritative series of guides to the buildings of England, has the following brief, rather dismissive, comment on St Andrews Church:

“ST ANDREW, 1880, by Waterhouse. An unimaginative routine design, stone outside, nearly all happily covered by climbers, red brick inside.” *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire*, Nikolas Pevsner, Penguin Books, 1955.

The second edition seeks to expand and update Pevsner’s original comments:

“St. Andrew. 1880 by *Waterhouse*. Perp with low S tower. An unimaginative, routine design. Flint outside (no longer happily covered by climbers), red brick inside.” *The Buildings of England: Hertfordshire*, Nikolas Pevsner 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Revised by Bridget Cherry, Penguin Books, 1977, Reprinted Yale University Press, 2002. p 342.

Pevsner and his reviser are wrong on a number of counts.

Firstly, on the date, which is admittedly only out by a year; the foundation stone was laid on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1880, but the consecration and opening took place on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1881, and the new church officially replaced St James’ Church as the parish church on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1882.

More seriously, Pevsner is wrong on the name of the architect, whom he gives as Alfred Waterhouse, one of the most well-known and successful of Victorian architects. Waterhouse had designed Easneye Mansion for Thomas Fowell Buxton in 1868, and in 1869, the village school (not one of his best, in my humble opinion!)

Buxton provided the land and the money for the church, as he had with the school, and of course his own residence, but he did **not** use Waterhouse to design the church. Rather, he employed Zephaniah King FRIBA (1834-1906), who had a practice in Victoria Street in London, but who came originally from Norfolk, where he had studied at the Norwich School of Art, and where in one case he redesigned some old properties and designed a number of new houses in the village of Holkham, which the local landlord, Viscount Coke, wished to entirely rebuild. (Christine Hiskey Archivist, *Holkham Newsletter*, Winter/Spring 2007 Issue No 13.) Buxton himself was a Norfolk man, born there and often taking his holidays there, so he may have known King, or at least admired his work, and asked him to design the new parish church in Stanstead Abbots. Norfolk has been a centre for the mining of flint for over two thousand years, and knapped flint is widely used there as a building material. Knapped flint is the outer covering of St Andrews Church. More of this anon.

So where did Pevsner get the (mistaken) idea that Alfred Waterhouse was the architect for the parish church, and how do we know that it was Zephaniah King?

There is a persistent tradition in the village even today about Waterhouse and the church.

Previous vicars held the view and it was only hard evidence to the contrary that persuaded the present incumbent otherwise! We do not know if it was this oral tradition which Pevsner heard or whether he was himself the author. He seems to have been the first to record it in print in 1955, and since then others have repeated it on the basis of his authority. The British Listed Buildings website has it (<http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-355892-parish-church-of-st-andrew-church-of-eng> and <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-355893-railings-gatepiers-gates-and-drinking-fo>) as does the Wikipedia site [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ecclesiastical\\_works\\_by\\_Alfred\\_Waterhouse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ecclesiastical_works_by_Alfred_Waterhouse). C.f. also the English Heritage site <http://list.english-heritage.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1078752> and several others. But mere numbers prove nothing, especially if the original reference is wrong!

The idea possibly came from the fact that Thomas Fowell Buxton had used Waterhouse twice before when he had provided land and money, and it was assumed that he had done the same here.

However, the definitive and detailed account of every one of Alfred Waterhouse's commissions C. Cunningham and P. Waterhouse, *Alfred Waterhouse, 1830–1905: biography of a practice* (1992) while mentioning Easneye Mansion and the school, is completely silent about the parish church. The omission from such a list which was meticulously compiled from their records is extremely significant.

It is also the case that the style and facing materials i.e. knapped flint, were not those which Waterhouse used. He favoured red brick and terracotta, as well as sandstone ashlar, but there seems to be only one other of his ecclesiastical designs which used knapped flint, St Mary the Virgin, Twyford, Hampshire, and even there the flint alternates with thick rows of red brick of four layers, with a very distinctive tower, nothing "unimaginative [and] routine"! In fact, very few, if any, of Waterhouse's designs could be called that. Interestingly, the church of St James the Great at High Wych near Sawbridgeworth, designed by C. E. Pritchett and consecrated in 1861, which is "different" and not at all routine is described by Pevsner as "High Victorian design at its most revolting" and "perversely ugly"! (For a description see the Tile Gazetteer <http://tilesoc.org.uk/tile-gazetteer/hertfordshire.html>) Some people are hard to please!

The evidence for Zephaniah King comes from contemporary newspaper reports of the laying of the foundation stone in June 1880 and the consecration and opening of the completed church in December 1881. We all know that newspapers may not be the most reliable of sources (!) but in this case the architect himself had supplied both papers with a detailed handwritten account of every aspect of the building and its construction, probably produced on headed notepaper (One report says, "The architect is Mr Zephaniah King of 3, Victoria Street, London... The following description of the building has been supplied to us by the architect" *Hertfordshire Mercury and Reformer*, January 4<sup>th</sup> 1882), which it then gives in some detail. The *Hertfordshire Guardian* says in its account of the consecration, "We gave

full architectural particulars last week, and have now to record the opening on Thursday”, which it does in considerable detail, including quite a full summary of the sermon preached by the Bishop of St Albans, and concluding with various items of church furniture donated, including “Communion Table by Mr King, the architect.”(*Hertfordshire Guardian, Agricultural Journal, and General Advertiser* January 7<sup>th</sup> 1882). The evidence is surely conclusive.

Regarding the design and appearance of the building, Pevsner is perfectly entitled to his opinion, although it does seem very cursory and dismissive. The architect’s detailed description referred to above gives every indication of careful thought and planning. He was remembered by a colleague as “not only a rapid draughtsman and sketcher, but a very artistic one” (See *Holkham Newsletter* above). Beauty, and its opposite, are in the eye of the beholder, and on this occasion at least, Pevsner’s eye was rather jaundiced: “An unimaginative routine design, stone outside, nearly all happily covered by climbers”. And not very accurate, especially for an architectural expert. “Stone outside”? Of course; what did he expect, wattle and daub? What kind of stone? The answer is “knapped flint”, which he could surely have seen in spite of the climbers. Flint, knapped or not, was a perfectly acceptable building material, widely used, especially in East Anglia. It was used on St James’ Church and St Margaret’s Church nearby, but Pevsner does not make snide remarks about either of these; so why here?

Bridget Cherry, the editor of the second edition, seeks to bring it up to date, and adds a few more details, but does not interfere with Pevsner’s original comments. She notes that the climbers had been removed, thus exposing the flint exterior, and also adds a couple of details about the Perpendicular style and the tower. Unfortunately, both she and the writer of the description on the Listed Buildings website did not notice that the church is actually on a North-South axis, not the more normal East-West one (which St James, St Margarets and St John the Baptist in Great Amwell are), which means that the tower is not on the south, but on the north-west side. Similarly the transepts are on the east and west, and the semi- octagonal stair projection is on the north-east side of the tower, not the west, as mentioned on <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-355892-parish-church-of-st-andrew-church-of-eng>

Neither Pevsner, Cherry, nor the anonymous author on the Listed Buildings website, note the many pleasing and delicate features on the outside of the building, which are very evident in some of the fine photographs on the local website. To quote the architect’s own description: “The stone dressings to angles, buttresses, plinths and copings are executed in Box Ground Bath stone; the gable crosses in Portland stone; windows and tracery in red Farleigh Down stone; and the caps and bases to the respond pillars and the corbels inside the church in red Corsehill stone. The moulded bricks in the hood mouldings, arches and jambs, are all worked by hand on the site” (*Hertfordshire Mercury* above).

Whatever Pevsner’s or others’ opinions of the merits of the architecture of St Andrews, the present writer, along with many others, consider it a very well-proportioned building, well-

situated above the line of the road, and pleasing to the eye. Zephaniah King did a good job. I am not an Anglican, nor even a present inhabitant of the village, so have no axe to grind. I am not an architectural expert as Nikolas Pevsner was, but I know what I like, and I like St Andrews, Stanstead Abbots.