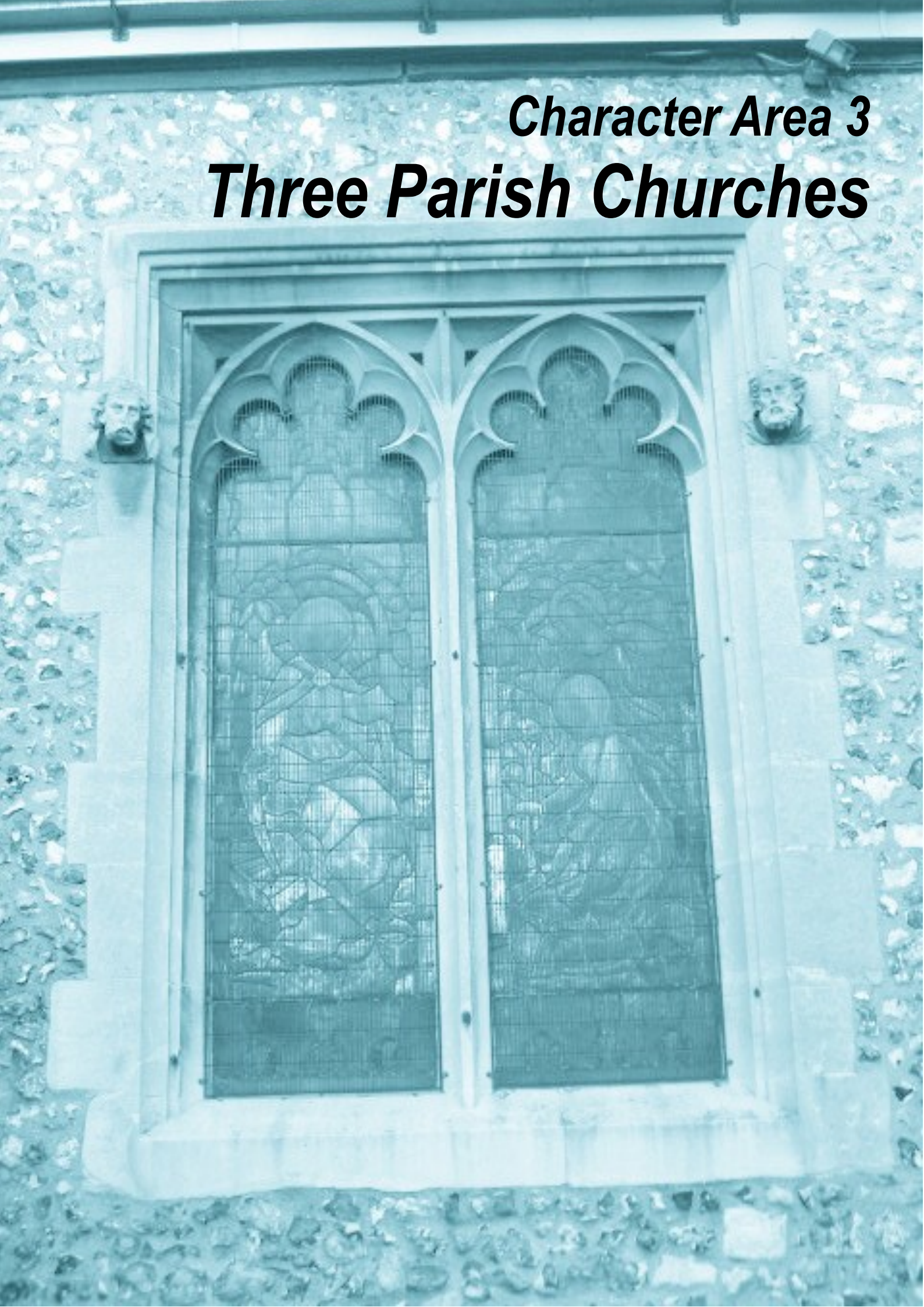


Character Area 3
Three Parish Churches



Area 3: Three Parish Churches

St Peter's Parish Church and Churchyard (northern end of St Peter's Street), St Stephen's Parish Church and Churchyard (on the corner of Watling Street and St Stephen's Hill), St Michael's Parish Church and Churchyard and Parish Centre (on St Michael's Street).

Scheduled Monuments

St Michael's is covered by AM7 Roman City

Locally Listed Buildings

None.

Listed Buildings

St Peter's Parish Church (Grade II*)

St Stephen's Parish Church (Grade II*)

St Michael's Parish Church (Grade I)



St Stephen's Church (grade II) is situated at the junction of St Stephen's Hill and Watling Street.*



St Peter's Church (grade II) is situated at the northern end of St Peter's Street.*



St Michael's Church (grade I) is situated at the south-western end of St Michael's village (character area 4c).

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

Character Summary

Although this Character Area is made up of three geographically distinct areas, it is united by function as well as history. The areas have evolved differently because of the varied geographic locations, meaning that

they now have distinct characters. The best features of these identities ought to be preserved and development that would detract from these positive attributes should be avoided.



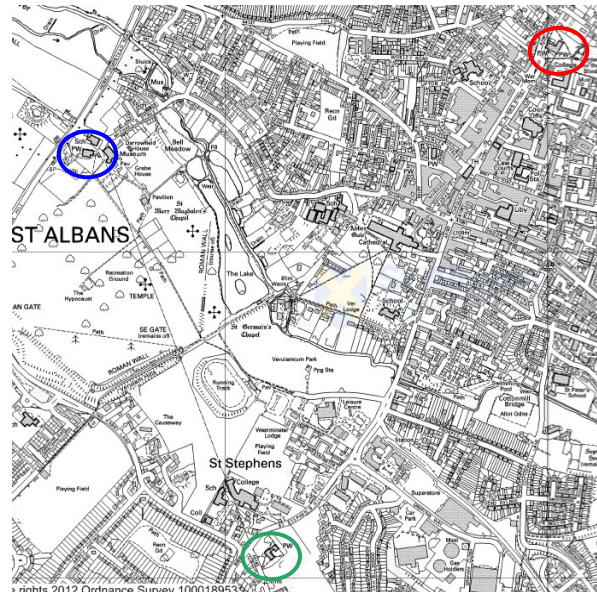
St Peter's church from St Peter's Street. The church provides a focus and end-point for the road looking north.



St Michael's church from St Michael's village. The church can be seen behind the school and screen of trees.



St Stephen's church from the churchyard with buildings on St Stephen's Hill seen in the background.



Recent OS map showing the location of each church in relation to each other and the rest of central St Albans. St Michael's is located by the blue oval, St Peter's is indicated by the red oval and St Stephen's is indicated by the green oval.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

History

In 948AD Abbot Ulsinus is said to have been the town's first planner when he established the three parishes of St Peter, St Michael and St Stephen at the three main entrances to the town. The churches were to serve the pilgrims visiting the shrine of St Alban. Later in the century he blocked the route of Watling Street so that travellers would have to use St Stephen's Hill, Holywell Hill and Fishpool Street if they were to continue their journey. This move channelled people past the monastery and associated guest houses and inns and encouraged a settlement that grew into the present day St Albans.

The only parish within the medieval boundary of St Albans, St Peter's, a Grade II* Listed Church, has always been a more integral part of the town centre than the others. Today it is fully integrated into the commercial town centre with its west entrance fronting the northern end of St Peter's Street, where it is elevated from the pavement edge. The south elevation, backed by the tower, forms a backdrop to the war memorial, which is located on St Peter's Green to the east of St Peter's Street. The Church's elevated position on a gently inclining hill means it overlooks the town and market place and its imposing brick tower, dressed with stone and flint and four pinnacles, is important and dominant in the St Alban's skyline from many viewpoints. Furthermore, the building creates an important counterpoint to the Town Hall at the other end of St Peter's Street (Character Area 4a) and vistas of the whole building are dominant from the town centre. Despite its mediaeval origins, it has suffered most from additions over the centuries, most damagingly to the exterior in the late C19 when it was virtually rebuilt by Lord Grimthorpe as a Victorian Gothic church, although some C15 features remain inside. Alterations have continued into the C20, with a brick extension to the north side, which is a principle elevation due to the location of the Harpenden Road, but as the extension is single storey and set back behind a garden it is only visible from within the churchyard. Despite the exterior of the church displaying little of its medieval origins, this does not detract from its grassy churchyard setting, which, situated slight-

ly above the town and screened by trees, offers an oasis of tranquillity away from the noisy city centre. This is a well used space and a popular through route, though the area, particularly the condition of the graveyard could benefit from some improvements and is currently the subject of a restoration plan. The landscape quality of this area benefits nearby Character Areas, for example the trees of the churchyard back onto the residential streets of Hall Place Gardens and Clifton Street (Character Area 7e), giving these houses a sense of space and the trees can also be glimpsed between the buildings on Hatfield Road (Character Area 4b), which positively contributes to the streetscene.



A postcard from between the wars showing the St Albans cattle market taking place in St Peter's Street, the tower of St Peter's church can be seen in the centre of the far background. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



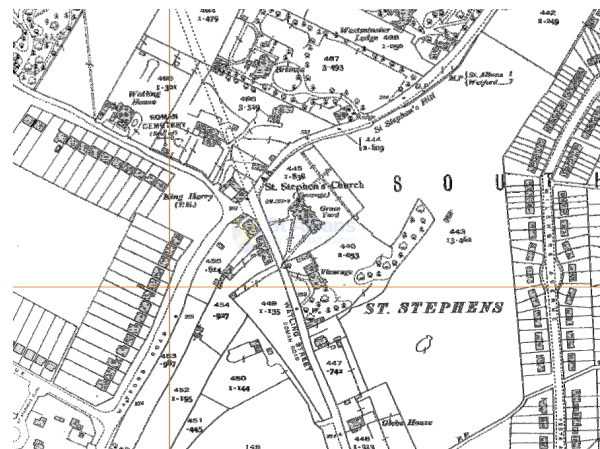
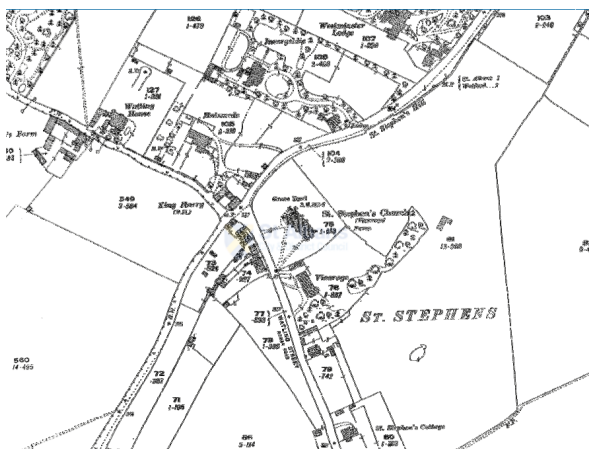
St Peter's Church in its tranquil, grassy setting.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

History contd.

In contrast, St Stephen's, listed Grade II*, is the least altered late Saxon Church of the three. It is situated some distance from the main town, on the other side of the River Ver valley at the top of St Stephen's Hill. Consequently, the church largely kept its rural setting until the 1940s, when residential developments outside the conservation area, such as Wilshire Avenue, were built. However, the setting today is still quite open and well landscaped because the large churchyard and the open space behind have prevented development next to the church. The vicarage to the south of the church was lost in a fire in the 1970s and that area also remains open, the vicarage having been replaced on the opposite side of Watling Street. Specimen trees, originally associated with the vicarage, are visible around the churchyard in the green space to the south and east of the church; there is a small pond also probably associated with the vicarage. There is, however, historic development along the busy Watling Street (as discussed in Charac-

ter Area 7b), a main entry route to the city in the past and presently a major entry point leading from the A414 to the town. St Stephen's displays more external evidence of its historic C10 origins, when compared to the Victorianised St Peter's. This is partly shown by the materials: flint dressed with stone is the predominant material of St Stephen's, compared to St Peter's which displays brick in the tower and the C20 extension. Furthermore, the scale of St Stephen's, when compared to St Peter's, is smaller and therefore more evocative of its origins. However, in common with St Peter's, St Stephen's was also remodelled in the Victorian period; in the 1860s George Gilbert Scott restored the stonework and added what is now the principal feature, the spire. Alterations continued into the C20, with the parish centre in 1990, a sensitively designed addition to the north of the church, that respects the scale and materials of the original building and is located away from the main elevation and attached by a link.



OS maps from the 1920s (left) and 1940s (right) demonstrating the rural character of the surrounding area until the 1940s.



The spire of St Stephen's is a Victorian addition but the church has retained the traditional materials of flint and stone.



St Stephen's has an open and well-landscaped setting despite the busy roads and development nearby.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

History contd.

St Michael's parish church is listed as Grade I. It is set at the end of St Michael's Street and is the only church within the setting of Verulamium, sited on the Roman basilica. Although the church originally became a focus of village life in the Victorian period, with several houses and a school dotted around it, later developments were focussed away from this area in the main town, and therefore the area has retained its pre-industrial character. The church, however, did not avoid Victorian restoration, as in 1898 Lord Grimthorpe rebuilt the tower and the west end. Despite these external and internal Victorian changes, the Saxon/mediaeval origins of the church are still evident, for example in the nave and chancel walls, which date from the tenth and eleventh centuries. The church is also archaeologically interesting with various reused features evident from the external elevations, for example Roman sized bricks and windows from various dates, including a mid C14 two light window and remains of a tomb recess. Flint is the predomi-

nant material of this church, which therefore links it more to St Stephen's than St Peter's where brick is more dominant. There have been no C20 additions to the Church, although there is a detached low building from the 1970s in the churchyard, used as a church/meeting hall. The church is somewhat detached from its surroundings because the heavy band of trees and hedges separate it from Verulamium Park, and the buildings of St Michael's and Bluehouse Hill distance it from the landscapes of Gorhambury. Although the trees shade the churchyard, they do benefit the area, serving to buffer the space from traffic noise from Bluehouse Hill and screening the church yard from the museum car park, both of which help to make the area more evocative of how the church and its environs would have appeared in the C18. Together with the school, the church and several large cedar trees in the churchyard form the focal point at the top of St Michael's Street (Area 4c).



The external elevations of the building display reused materials, such as Roman bricks and carved stone features.



The tower and west end of St Michael's Church, which were rebuilt by Lord Grimthorpe in 1898. The predominant materials of flint with stone dressings link this church with St Stephen's.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

History contd.

Although all three churches would have originally displayed architectural similarities, as they date from the same period, the differences in their development and extent of remodelling means that the buildings and their settings display differences. These changes have therefore led to a lack of obvious visual continuity between the three churches; this renders them more historically than aesthetically united. These changes have been determined by the respective locations of the churches in relation to the main town, which has also helped to define the extent and nature of development of the land around each one and the character of the wider area. However, out of the three churches, St Peter's is most removed from its mediaeval origins because it displays its 'restoration' more obviously, not only in its scale but also its materials. This is further compounded by the setting of St Peter's when compared to the other two churches because St Peter's is more integrated into the town, with commercial and residential development nearby, whereas the other two churches have large areas of open land nearby. St Stephen's has a large churchyard and open space beyond. Historically the church is sited on the edge of the Roman road leading to Verulamium, on the edge of a major Roman cemetery. St Michael's churchyard is bordered by the nearby park, with its rural quality much more evident due to the village atmosphere of St Michael's Street, whereas the busy Watling Street does detract from this ambience at St Stephen's Church.



St Peter's tower is brick in contrast to the flint of the other churches. Image courtesy of K Morris.



The large churchyard at St Stephen's church.



St Michael's church has a rural aspect reinforced by the village feel of St Michael's. Image courtesy of St Albans Museum.



Busy Watling Street; the churchyard wall can be seen on the left.



Commercial and residential development around St Peter's.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

Public Realm

Each parish church has unique characteristics worthy of protection; this is not only in the architectural features in each, but also in their settings. In the case of St Peter's, the large and well-used, peaceful churchyard is of particular importance, as are the important views of the church tower from many viewpoints. At St Stephen's the large area of landscaping that survives is important to the peaceful nature of the churchyard, which is a benefit to the area which is otherwise dominated by the busy road junction. The peaceful setting and village-like quality of St Michael's church should be retained as it blends in well with the setting of the adjacent Fishpool Street, covered in Character Area 4c, and also relates to the landscape of Character Area 1. As all three churchyards are in effect public spaces, they require continual maintenance and each would benefit from some improvements to ensure the longevity of the areas. In St Peter's this could include better paths and use of the space, as well as repair to the gravestones; in St Michael's selective thinning of trees would open up the space and St Stephen's would benefit from enabling public use of the area.



View of St Peter's (left, cathedral on right) from Verulamium Park.



St Michael's church has a rural, village feel.



Architectural features of the three churches. From left to right: the rose window in the west front of St Peter's Church; the doorway of St Michael's Church; the door of St Stephen's Church.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Positive

- ✓ Historic Assets - Scheduled Ancient Monuments, listed buildings.
- ✓ Strong sense of history, churches and open churchyard setting with historical gravestones and tombs.
- ✓ Green swathes, trees and hedgerows.
- ✓ Public access to the churchyards.
- ✓ Act as focal points visually and a focus socially.
- ✓ Aesthetically successful 1990s extension at St Stephen's.



The extension to St Stephen's church uses matching materials and so is sympathetic to the existing building.



St Michael's churchyard. All three churches are set in well-treed, green spaces, which are publicly accessible and add to the sense of history through the historical gravestones and tombs.

Neutral

- Parish Centre at St Michael's, 1970s.
- Extension at St Peter's, 1980s.



The extension to St Peter's Church makes a neutral contribution.



The detached parish centre at St Michael's makes a neutral contribution.

Area 3: Three Parish Churches

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Negative

- ✗ Traffic and traffic noise disturbs ambience at St Stephen's.
- ✗ Traffic, traffic noise and street clutter, disturbs the ambience at St Peter's and severs the church yard from the southern end of St Peter's Street.



St Stephen's church is bounded on two sides by two busy roads and so traffic noise is a problem.



The car parking at St Peter's church could be improved.

Scope for Change

- Need for continual maintenance and management of spaces, trees, planting and structures, but scope to improve appearance and the experience of the public using the spaces.
- Car parking in St Peter's churchyard could be improved.
- There could be greater interpretation of all three churches.



The public spaces surrounding the churches (St Peter's above left; St Michael's above right) need to be well maintained.

