

SPRING LECTURE 2026

THE WORK OF GEORGE FREDERICK BODLEY IN KENT by MICHAEL HALL

This was in several ways a most remarkable lecture by Michael Hall, author of a magisterial biography of Bodley, arguably the greatest figure in the later Gothic revival in England. First, while Michael discussed briefly other works by Bodley in Kent, and set them in the context of Bodley's development as a church architect, most of the talk was about a single building which no longer exists – St Michael's Folkestone. Second, the talk was the product of a piece of original research which Michael had done for the occasion. It is to be hoped that Michael Hall will publish this material, which relates to an important episode in Kent's 19th century ecclesiastical history, so that it can be available to a wider audience.

Bodley, born in 1827 and a pupil of George Gilbert Scott, set up his own practice in 1860 and was in partnership with Thomas Garner 1869-97: the work done by each is often difficult to distinguish. Initially Bodley favoured a style based on French architecture of the 13th century (such as St Michael's at Brighton) but later embraced the English Decorated style, though used with great originality and refinement, as at Clumber Chapel in Nottinghamshire, Hoar Cross church in Staffordshire and the magnificent St Augustine's, Pendlebury near Manchester. In Kent, his only complete, surviving church is St James, Bicknor, restored in 1859-61 but practically rebuilt in the process. It has a striking interior faced with chalk.



Exterior and interior of St James, Bicknor

Bodley also designed the screen at Penshurst and refitted the interior of West Peckham.

St Michael, Folkestone was opened in 1873. Initially, nave and chancel were built with the tower, north aisle and two-storied vestries following when funds allowed. Furnishing the church took even longer. The building was of brick with stone dressings and, though built on a cramped site, was monumental. It was, as Michael Hall explained, a new form of town church, of great height and beautifully grouped in its urban setting: see the photograph below (the copyright of which is owned by Folkestone Library).



St Michael, Folkestone: the exterior seen from the south-west

The church's chief interest is, however, that its construction was promoted by the Reverend Matthew Woodward, vicar of Folkestone's medieval parish church, who was an ardent ritualist. He and his former curate, C J Ridsdale, who had become incumbent of St Peter's, were objects of suspicion on the part of Folkestone's Protestant community and were closely scrutinised by Archbishop Tait. The building and furnishing of St Michael's were peppered with disputes between Woodward and the Archbishop, chronicled in Michael Hall's lecture.

St Michael's had been neglected during the Second World War and was almost casually demolished in 1953. Very little thought seems to have been given to this and it was a tremendous loss to Kent's architectural patrimony.

This was a surprising and rather splendid lecture which the audience of about 40 people were lucky to have witnessed.