

NOTES ON COMMENTS MADE ON THE FACULTY APPLICATION TO RE-ORDER ST NICOLAS, GREAT BOOKHAM: OFS No: 2021-058069

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This note sets out a detailed response on behalf of St Nicolas, Great Bookham to the points raised by DAC and others on the faculty application made to re-order the church in January 2021 – OFS No: 2021-058069

2. Heating proposal

- 2.1. The primary purpose of the proposal to replace the current, antiquated heating system is to enable the building to be heated to a reasonable temperature throughout the year. However, the church is also concerned to improve the sustainability of its buildings. The church has already installed LED lighting. It has also obtained the bronze eco church award and is working towards the silver award.
- 2.2. In line with this, when the feasibility study was commissioned on options to improve or replace the existing heating system our heating consultant, Chris Reading Associates (CRA), was specifically asked to ensure that the green options were fully considered. A copy of their report is attached. See pages 16-22 in particular.
- 2.3. CRA's advice was that it was not practicable to improve the current blown warm air heating system which is grossly inefficient: it uses a gas burner and an ancient heat exchanger to produce hot air which rises quickly to the roof of the nave but does little for the congregation at ground level. The proposed system would deliver heat where it is needed and will use a boiler that has an efficiency of up to 99.6% gross GCV. This would enable significant energy savings to be made whilst at the same time creating a much better internal environment. This would be a major contribution to improving the sustainability of church's buildings.
- 2.4. The church would like to go further in reducing our carbon footprint but CRA's advice is that it is not possible to become carbon neutral in a building like St Nicolas with current technologies. With no insulation and large windows the heat losses from our church are extremely large and there is little that can be done about that given the Grade 1 listing. This means that to achieve reasonable temperatures in cold weather a large heat input will be required. Underfloor heating is not affordable and the available wall space limits the size of radiators that could be installed. As a result we need to have system that will run at much higher water temperatures than could be achieved economically using heat pumps. Hence the conclusion that the best option at present is to install a highly efficient gas boiler.
- 2.5. The church proposes to be forward looking by ensuring that the boiler we install is 'hydrogen ready' i.e. that it can work with a proportion of hydrogen gas mixed in with the natural gas and can be converted at low cost to 100% hydrogen should that become an option. CRA believe that it is very likely that the gas supply network will handle at least a proportion of hydrogen gas in a few years' time: various test to explore how this might be done are already underway. This should enable us to reduce our carbon footprint further.

- 2.6. Should 100% hydrogen not become an option, in the slightly longer term there may in time be the option to replace the boiler with a carbon neutral heat source once the necessary technology has been developed.

3. Why the church needs to remove the pews

- 3.1. It is proposed to remove all of the remaining pews with the exception of the rector and curate's stalls and the choir pews.
- 3.2. The church is largely as it was re-ordered by the Victorians in 1885 when it was laid out to suit the needs of the time: almost exclusively formal worship led from the east end with music provided by an organ and choir. There was no provision for children (who were expected to sit quietly in the pew with their parents) or for those with limited mobility and wheelchair users. It was not envisaged that worship might be led by instrumental groups or bands or that services might involve drama. No allowance was made for the use of the building for purposes other than worship.
- 3.3. The result is a building that is very inflexible which does not lend itself to uses other than the formal worship that the Victorians designed it for. Although St Nicolas holds well attended formal services and intends to continue doing so, it needs to be able to offer a wider variety of services and to use the building for other purposes. This is seen as crucial to meeting the needs of younger people which in turn is vital to the future of the church as a high proportion of the existing congregation is over 70. Providing a space which will be a much more attractive venue for community events is also important to the financial security of the building
- 3.4. In short, the re-ordering, including in particular the removal of the pews, is intended to rectify the shortcomings of the current layout whilst preserving the ancient character of the building.

A space more suited to modern services

- 3.5. Greater flexibility is sought to provide:
- More space at the front through an enlarged chancel step/platform to allow a wider variety of service content including:
 - Instrumental groups/bands to lead the worship. At present these have to be located off to one side due to the lack of space.
 - Drama and dance. The current 'stage area' is very limited being constrained by the choir pews (which will remain) and the small space between them and the chancel step.
 - Bringing forward the communion table to the chancel arch/front of the nave on an occasional basis for contemporary services so that the celebration of communion is less remote. (The celebrant at the high altar cannot even be seen by those in the side aisles.)
 - Scope for different seating arrangements including services in the round and the possibility of discussion groups.

- Seating for children at the front of the nave during all age/family services and Tots Alive (a mid-week parent and toddler service). With flexible seating it would be possible to remove the front row or two of adult chairs and replace them with children's chairs.
 - Improved sight lines for those in the north and south aisles. At present those seated in the pews in the north and south aisle sit looking at either the organ pipes or the Lady Chapel and for some seats the view of the chancel step and those leading the service is obscured by the pillars. With flexible seating it will be possible to set out the chairs in curved rows so that all seats look to the chancel step and chairs are only put where there is a clear view.
- 3.6. Our Worship Group is already planning to include more frequent use of drama, instrumental music and singing group in some services (alongside our more traditional services). And our revised orders of service for our main Sunday services now include a 'Time for Children' slot. The intention is to gather the children in front of the chancel step, perhaps for a children's talk or to hear from them, but particularly to pray for them before they leave for their children's activities.
- 3.7. Two medium term aspirations include:
- To occasionally arrange the seating in a curved or even circular pattern so that the whole of the congregation can see one another for the purpose of expressing the unity of the fellowship.
 - To introduce a young families' service on a Sunday afternoon around 4pm at which the children will be fed. This would require small tables and chairs to be laid out in the main body of the church so that the gathered fellowship can share a meal together as well as a time of worship.

More flexibility for church events

- 3.8. The church building itself is the only large space available to St Nicolas. Although the church is fortunate to have both the Church Room and the Pastoral Centre, both of these are relatively small: they can only accommodate 50-60 people, less than half the size of the main Sunday congregation in normal times. (The church has an electoral roll of 247 as of March 2021) This limits the events the church can hold and currently leads to a number of not very satisfactory compromises.
- Children's events. Pre-pandemic there was a weekly 'Tots Alive' service on Wednesdays during term time and 'family fun' days were held once or twice a term with a range of activities for children and their parents provided in the Church Room and in church itself, but heavily constrained by the fixed pews. These have been well attended and provided an important form of outreach into the local community. Removing the pews would allow much more flexibility and enable parents who don't normally come to church to see it as somewhere that seeks to meet their needs rather than predominantly a place designed for what they see as old fashioned and irrelevant services.
 - Church family events – celebrations and farewells etc. These events normally involve food and have to use either the Church Room or the Pastoral Centre with those attending carrying their meal either into the church or into the

Pastoral Centre garden. People bringing food into the church and perching on the pews is far from ideal and using the Pastoral Centre garden is fine if the weather is good, but not otherwise. Flexible seating would allow tables and chairs to be set up in the church for a much larger group than can be accommodated at present, enabling both existing events to be much better and providing scope for new, informal events to be developed to deepen the fellowship within the congregation.

- Display space. With more flexible seating it would be possible to use some of the space for a display area whilst still accommodating the normal Sunday morning congregation. The church is normally open throughout the week and, with the right displays and publicity this could provide a useful way of engaging with the community. Displays could include the history of the church building; the mission organisations we support; and topics of current interest.

A more accessible and inclusive building

3.9. The church does not meet modern standards for accessibility and inclusiveness. The chancel step (which needs to be negotiated to reach the altar rail) and the step beside the organ (which provides access to the Church Room and toilets) are both major barriers for those using wheelchairs or with limited mobility. The installation of ramps will address these but there are other issues that can only be addressed by installing more flexible seating.

- Installing the ramp to the chancel step will necessitate the removal of the front pew.
- Accommodating those using wheelchairs. The aisles are relatively narrow and as such cannot accommodate wheelchairs without posing a hazard in the event of some emergency that necessitated the evacuation of the church. This means that wheelchairs can only safely be accommodated at the very front; by the font or in the north aisle (from which the pews have already been removed). Wheelchair users cannot sit in their chairs in the main body of the seating in the nave – something which has in the past caused very strong feeling. Moving to freestanding chairs would enable wheelchair users to be accommodated virtually anywhere by removing a couple of chairs.
- Areas for young children. At present play areas for families with young children can only be provided in the north aisle from which the view of what is happening at the front of the church is poor. Whilst having a play area in the north aisle is better than nothing, putting that provision in a back corner is hardly a warm and inclusive welcome. More flexible seating would allow space for children to be provided in the main nave area so that families are in the heart of the congregation, not pushed to one side.
- Tables and chairs for coffee. In normal times coffee is served in the north aisle after the main Sunday service. That is fine for those who are able bodied and can stand and chat whilst holding a coffee cup. Those who are frail perch on the end of pews, balancing their coffee precariously on the narrow shelf on the back of the pew in front. A much better arrangement would be to have a

number of tables and chairs near where coffee is served. That is not possible at present due to the lack of space in the north aisle.

Providing a better space for community uses

- 3.10. The church is the largest auditorium in the village. (The Barn Hall can only accommodate 175 when laid out with theatre style seating and is heavily booked. The church could accommodate an audience of up to 275, depending on the seating layout. It is currently used by a range of community groups including the local choral society (Bookham Choral); a small orchestra (The Dorking Chamber Orchestra); Mole Valley Quilters; and the local schools at Christmas. Those uses are, however, constrained by the fixed pews, and we believe that they would make more use of the building if it were more flexible. For example, Bookham Choral use the church for one of their carol concerts when the choir is accompanied on the organ, but for their other concerts (which are accompanied by an orchestra) they have to use venues outside the village because there simply is not space at the front of the church for a choir and an orchestra. Moreover, the pews are uncomfortable for sitting still on for any length of time.
- 3.11. With an improved and more flexible building we envisage that there will be demand for:
- More concerts, including lunchtime recitals
 - Exhibitions, for example by local photography and art groups.
 - Use for lectures and public meetings including U3A, local government consultations and election hustings.

Why not only remove some of the pews?

- 3.12. The removal of the pews from the north aisle was in real sense an experiment to test the benefits of removing pews. (They were initially removed and stored for year before the decision was taken to sell them.) Removing those pews did provided a very useful degree of flexibility but it has become clear that the main impediment to the more flexible use of the building is the main block of pews in the nave. It is those pews that limit the amount of space at the front of the church and it is in that area that it would be good to be able to accommodate wheelchairs and make space for children. Moreover different seating arrangements for services wouldn't be possible whilst those pews remain in place.
- 3.13. The option of removing the main block of pews in the nave and leaving the rest would both produce a very odd layout and would not be consistent with the installation of sufficient radiators to heat the church effectively. The wall space available for radiators is tightly constrained and, in order to provide sufficient heat output, the pews in the south and aisle and the north side of the rear of the nave would need to be moved away from the walls. If that were done would be preferable to remove all the pews.

4. The architectural significance of the pews

- 4.1. The 19th century restorations and rebuilding's had a significant impact on the medieval church of St Nicolas giving us the building we see today. However, how significant this fabric is in terms of the importance of the current building and the overall story of 19th century architecture is something to be discussed. We need as ever to be careful when judging 19th century work. You cannot assume just because work is by a recognised architect that it is of high quality or a significant part of their body of work. Also work by lesser known architects can very often be of greater significance in design terms.
- 4.2. The two architects associated with the restorations at St Nicholas are Carpenter, and Butterfield. Starting with the work undertaken by Carpenter, he is attributed with the construction of the north aisle between 1845 and 1847. However we know the north aisle was in existence before then as Cracklow in the 1820's gives us a small scale plan. Lambeth Palace has two plans of Carpenter's work. The first shows the proposed rebuilding of the north aisle in red, however the second plan, dated 1845 and signed by the churchwardens and the vicar is more significant. This actually shows what was constructed, and is very different from the first plan. The north aisle was filled with benches facing both east and into the body of the church. Carpenter has also removed pews in the body of the nave and south aisle and re organised these areas with what appear to be benches. Interestingly, significant elements of the Georgian interior remain with the pulpit and at least two phases of box pews within the eastern half of the nave. The font is located in the south aisle and the medieval internal south porch is still in existence. Of the Carpenter work only the external walls of the north aisle survive today, and these incorporate medieval re-used masonry. When compared with his overall body of work, what survives at Great Bookham is not significant.
- 4.3. Butterfield's work is far more extensive at Great Bookham and is said to have been undertaken in 1858 and 1885. Neither date ranks a mention in online biographies, and we are grateful for the information from the Victorian society. Indeed the 19th century work at St Nicolas only gets a fleeting mention in the official listing of the church. Butterfield is one of the outstanding Gothic revival architects of the 19th century, famous for the colour and detailing of his buildings. Keble College, and All Saint's church, Margaret Street, London are amongst the greatest 19th century buildings ever created. However, he is not so well known for his restorations. It is thanks to the Carpenter plans we can see what Butterfield undertook. He removed the medieval internal south porch, removed all the Georgian work, removed the Carpenter benches, and essentially re-laid the floors, and introduced the fittings we see today. He kept the 12th century or early 13th century font bowl but placed it on a Caen stone base and steps. Since the completion of this restoration, the benches have been removed from the north aisle, and in other areas of the nave, the base of the tower has been re ordered, however the chancel remains essentially intact. The question is therefore, "Where does this re ordering rank in the overall scheme of Butterfield's work, and does its significance outweigh the compelling need the parish have to create a sustainable future for the whole building?" The online biographies do not list the work at Great Bookham, however we can compare what we have at St Nicolas to other re-ordering schemes. Compared with say his work at

Maple Durham 1863, Aldbourne 1867, Whiteparish 1870, and St John's Ault Hucknall 1880s it is certainly not of the same quality. The current benches are pine, and clearly standard in design, unlike say the benches at Milstead 1872, which we know were designed by him. The scheme is also incomplete, and cannot be seen as a significant part of his overall output.

Remnants of earlier pews

- 4.4. There are panels that are believed to be remnants of Georgian pews which Butterfield (we assume) has reused in the back of the bench immediately in front of the font and in the front of the pew behind the font, fronting on to the cross-aisle – see photo below. The panels in the back of the pew in front of the font are partially obscured by the font. These panels (nine in total) probably date from the 17th or 18th century and are arguably of greater interest than the Victorian pews. However, they do not represent a coherent scheme and appear just to have been reused. The intention is to reuse these fragments in a coherent way, ensuring they are presented better. A number of options are under consideration.



5. The font

- 5.1. The font was moved to its current position from elsewhere in the church when the pulpit, choir stalls and pews were added during the restoration carried out in 1885 by Butterfield. He kept the a 12th or early 13th century Bethersden marble font bowl but placed it on a Caen stone base and steps.
- 5.2. The current position of the font is awkward and will be even more so when the pews are removed as it takes significant space up within the body of the nave. Options for placing the font central at the west end and towards the east end of the

church have been considered but not thought practical. The proposed location closer to the western door, in a position of prominence but not in the way of other activities, was thought sensible. The font will still be visible throughout the nave for baptisms

- 5.3. There is a clear disagreement as to the qualities of that base. The design is overpowering compared with the 12/13th century bowl and of a completely different material. It really does not fit the current bowl, and is visually clumsy. It will look even worse when the lower steps are removed to bring the font to a sensible height. (The current step is a trip hazard to passers-by and carries the risk that the officiating minister might inadvertently step off backwards, with unfortunate consequences.)
- 5.4. The PCC propose to re-present the bowl in a dignified and prominent position with a new, visually lightweight base that would ensure that the ancient bowl is visually dominant. This will release space around the font, remove a trip hazard and the possibility of the minister falling off the step. In this context the loss of the current Caen stone base cannot be seen as significant.

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