

Draft reply from St Edmund or St James church to the Victorian Society

The reordering of the church is part of a phased series of developments to ensure the continuing sustainability of the church through worship and community use. This supports the PCC's care and repair of the grade I listed church and the challenge of undertaking a series of major repairs to safeguard the fabric and allow Historic England to remove the church from the Heritage at Risk Register.

The first two phases of reordering and internal work in 2016 saw the removal of pews from the south aisle and provision of a level floor, with provision of necessary facilities – accessible toilet and servery/kitchenette, as described in the Statement of Needs. This has allowed the development of a community café, activities and events, and Café Church. The success of this development means that the south aisle space is no longer adequate and this has established the need to create further space in the south aisle, by shortening the pews that extend into the area from the nave and removing the front two pews across the church.

The following photo shows the set up before a Café Church service begins. There are more people sitting in the nave pews to the left of the fire extinguishers (the pot is to catch one of the leaks) and others sitting in the Jacobean pews to the left of the lady with the walker and microphone (she leads the prayers during the service from her seat). This informal service allows those with less mobility to take part. She is sitting in a comfortable chair with arms.

Also visible near to the screen, is the lid of the baby grand piano. Because of the lack of space, the piano is facing the wrong way – with the keyboard to our right instead of the left. The sound therefore plays into the pillar, rather than into the church. We use the piano, when appropriate, for school collective worship, carol services, weddings and music concerts.

With the front two pews removed, the piano can be turned round and moved back, with the sound then going into the church. The pianist will then be able to see the congregation and the screen. There will be enough space to set up more tables and keep the Café Church congregation together. Numbers for this service are consistently between 30 and 40.

Also visible is the screen designed by Derek Hunt which depicts the legacy of John Donne and one of his well-known prayers. John Donne was Rector of this church between 1621 and 1631. This is the major addition to the church after the Victorians.



The removal of the remaining three pews adjacent to the north aisle wall will provide increased space for children's activities. We recognise that retaining the pew platform is not ideal and we plan a future phase of work that will improve safety and accessibility by replacing the floor in this area. However, there is an urgent need to carry out drainage works and external masonry repairs and these are the current funding priority, to which the PCC is committed. The drainage, funded by the PCC through fund-raising, will start in the week beginning 21st October 2024.

This photo illustrates both the pews to be removed and the harm to the structure of the building from the damp, both from the blocked drains outside and the leaking roof. The just-visible white table seated six people for the quiz (see below) in very cramped surroundings.



During our weekly Breakfast Café we have pre-school children who come with their parents and they use the area to the left of the photo to play. Our Messy Church sessions see between 60 and 100 people in the church. To have this area without pews will help us better provide space for activities and the hot meal which is an integral part. At the moment everyone apart from the organising team moves into the chancel and choir stalls for worship (the children sit on the floor on carpet squares) while the activity tables are cleared and turned into places to eat. The activities and the meal have to be arranged all over the church, but we would like to have an area in the south aisle where the meal could take place with everyone together.

The removal of two further rows of pews at the front of the nave will provide space to meet liturgical needs and better access for wheelchair users. At the moment, wheelchair users and those using a walking frame are unable to reach the high altar to receive communion and have to receive at their seats. Numbers for Holy Communion services are between 20 and 30 for the 9.30am service, and 30 and 40 for the 11am service.

This photo shows the crossing. The plan of the church gives an erroneous impression of the space here. The space is set up for a quiz to raise money to restore the bells. There were 60 people taking part and we had to turn others away as there was no room for more tables. Here there were two teams, one of six and one of four.

There is usually a nave altar here; and with the lectern in place, the steps to the pulpit and the priest's stall (which is made of oak and very difficult to move) there is little space for people to navigate their way to the high altar to receive communion.



The principle of removing pews from the aisles to create space and improve accessibility was established in 2016. This was a very heavily-pewed church following the 1862 re-seating. The current proposals will restore greater symmetry and retain the main block of nave seating, including the significant ancient pews at the west end.

We hold several major fund-raising events during the year as well as many smaller ones. In February is the Big Book Sale when we sell thousands of books and people come from far and wide – this year a book dealer came from Cheltenham. There are table tops across all the pews, except for the south aisle which is reserved for refreshments. We have four large screens which go across the choir stalls. We raised £4,000 for the fabric of the church from this event in 2024.

This photo gives an idea of the crowding in the church during the event. The north aisle is very narrow and by removing the pews we would be able to provide more space for people to see the books. This coming year, we are discussing opening half an hour earlier just for people who have limited mobility.

The Christmas Fayre sees a similar set-up, with craft stalls instead of books. Stall holders have to crawl under the table tops to get behind their stall to serve people. In 2023 we raised £2,000. Increased room in the north aisle and in the crossing will allow easier access and more stalls.

Both events see hundreds of people in the church. We have to use the chancel door to allow easy access to the chancel from the outside, as it is so crowded inside.



Although the national C of E policy is that seating should not be upholstered, the DAC takes the view that seating should be considered carefully on the basis of what is needed and appropriate in each individual context.

Most of the nave pews will remain in place, they are of the highest quality and will last centuries. Although they are wide and comfortable, members of the congregation requested pew cushions and these were funded by sponsorship, the fabric matching the chairs in the south aisle.

The chairs in the south aisle are Alpha Church chairs upholstered in Cranberry fabric. [Faculty 0461; 9 March 2018]. Ten of these chairs have arms for those with reduced mobility.

The loss of seating in the nave amounts to 20 which is also the number of these chairs, which can be brought into use for larger services.

In our usual services, we have a couple who sit at the front of the church in the nave and another couple who sit in the pews in the south aisle. Both couples have one member of the PCC and who has backed the removal of these pews. No one sits in the north aisle except for very large services such as the school Harvest Festival and Christmas end of term service, when the total in church is about 200. We have discussed our plans with the school and will be able to use stackable chairs and the choir stalls to accommodate everyone.

Extra chairs will be bought, in consultation with the DAC, and we have now identified a space to the south of the font at the back of the church for the storage of these.

The hope of the two church wardens when they took office in 2013, along with all incoming incumbents, was to encourage people into the building who would not normally set foot in a church, to carry out a re-ordering and repair scheme and to increase attendance at services.

The many fund-raising events over the years have seen an interest in the church from non-worshippers. A recent fund-raising meeting for the Christmas Fayre had 16 attendees, six of whom are not worshippers apart from at major festivals.

Average attendance at normal Sunday services has increased in that time from about 22 to about 32, which is almost 50%.

Major work has been undertaken on the fabric of the building, in the hope that it will stay standing for many more centuries. A balance between mission and maintenance has to be made, as if there are no people in the church there will not be the resources to maintain the building.

Our emphasis on the external fabric is only possible with the backing of the people who come into the church, and we have to make the church comfortable and welcoming to them – otherwise the church building will become an ancient historical monument, rather than a living, flourishing part of the community.