

Statement of Need

Church of St Edmund or St James, Blunham

This document is in support of the application for permission to remove the pews against the wall in the north aisle and the first two pews across the church, and also the remaining pews in the south aisle. Once the pews are removed, the floors would be made level with the tiled floor, and finished in oak to match the floors on the south side of the church. The pew platform in the north aisle would remain, with a railing to protect from falls.

General information

According to the 2021 census, the parish of Blunham at that time had a population of 1,391. Currently we have 52 on the church's electoral roll. Since the 2011 census there have been three developments of private homes and affordable housing, with a fourth under construction. There are approximately 601 households in Blunham. We are working to encourage new villagers to become part of the worshipping community.

Following the appointment and licensing of Revd Graham Buckle in October 2018, a new pattern of services has been established, giving us two services of Holy Communion, one of Morning Prayer, and a Café Church service each month. Approximately every other month we hold a Messy Church for families and this is well-supported.

The Messy Church on Good Friday included 55 children and 45 adults, when the church was packed.

Café Church has become a popular service and pews are having to be used as there is not enough room for everyone to sit around tables in the south aisle.

The church is kept open during daylight hours for visitors. The Visitor Book shows a steady stream of people who appreciate the welcome in the church.

Our congregation numbers have risen from pre-pandemic levels, encouraged by the extensive programme of fundraising and social events that we continue to carry out; and the village have been generous in their support for the restoration of the clock.

The recently installed kitchenette and disabled toilet allowed us to begin our long-planned weekly Breakfast Café when we serve bacon butties to parents on

their way home from school, as well as to retired members of the village. This brings in new people to the church, and the parents help advertise Messy Church and support our quiz nights for the bell restoration project.

Every other month we provide refreshments to a local walking group, many of whom have been recommended exercise by their doctor. They celebrate the walk with tea, coffee and cake. Some who can no longer manage the walk come for the social aspect.

We are reaching people who would not otherwise come into the building.

We have maintained our links with the John Donne Church of England Primary School, but due to problems on their side have not been able to continue our assemblies in the church. We are now presenting an assembly to the children in the school and hosting end of term and festival services for them. These may see 200 people in the church.

The church has very good acoustics and a baby grand piano. The building is used by the Bedford Sinfonia for their '*Out and About*' concerts, which are well attended.

The Need

It has been our aim to increase the use of the church for the village and also to increase our normal congregation numbers. This is slowly being achieved.

We have held fundraising events over the last year which have been very well-supported. The Christmas Fayre raised over £3,000; the Beer, Bells and Bangers afternoon fell on an extremely wet day which may have encouraged people to attend the event inside – the church was packed – and £3,000 raised which included like-for-like funding from a bank. It was similarly packed for the Big Blunham Book Sale, which raised £4,500. All this money (and more) has been allocated to the repair of the parapets and clerestories.

We now think it is time to continue with our re-ordering, which started in 2016. At that time, it was eventually agreed with the DAC and English Heritage to remove the pews against the walls in the north and south aisles and the first two pews across the whole width of the church; to turn the Lady Chapel back into the vestry; install a window to celebrate John Donne over an oak screen; provide a kitchenette and disabled toilet in place of the old vestry.

We now find we do not have enough space to seat people at tables for Café Church or catered events. We also need space to display books and stalls and for people to view them. We have table tops to make stalls over the pews (and lend

them to other churches) but there is not sufficient space for people to walk around.

We have had a meeting with Matt Cannon from Rough Stuff. He runs a charity which supports prisoners in the Mount Prison in Hertfordshire to give them skills in reworking oak. He is currently removing the pews from St Edmundsbury. The prisoners make chopping boards. He also has a workshop which employs ex-offenders, who make pews of a suitable size to sell, and use the rest of the oak to make various other things such as coasters and coat racks. His charity will remove the pews and then share the profit made from selling. Although this would only bring us about £1,000, the PCC is very keen to go down this route.

The website is www.roughstuff.co.uk where information is available about the charity and the wares it sells.

Impact and Significance

The removal of the remaining pews in the south aisle and across the church would give us the floor space to expand the seating for Café Church. It would also give us space to seat everyone together for the Benefice Maundy Thursday Agape meal, lunches after some services, and at Messy Church.

The pew platform on the north side would give us a larger children's area and space for activities during Messy Church and for stalls at events. The extra space at the front of the church would give space for a larger orchestra and choir during concerts and performances. We would swing the baby grand piano round so that it opens towards the congregation instead of a pillar – it is used for Café Church, during services which have songs or hymns more suited to a piano, and some concerts.

Historic England said that removal of these pews would maintain the symmetry of the church, with the nave still being predominantly furnished with pews.

Note: This Statement of Need was circulated by email to the PCC on 7 May 2024 and was accepted by all as fit for purpose.