

Victorian Society Consultation Response

RE: 170450-0524F The removal of the pews against the wall in the north aisle and the first two pews across the church. Blunham, St Edmund or St James

8/10/2024

Thank you for consulting the Victorian Society on this application, we make the following comments.

This is a Grade I listed building of the highest architectural significance. The church has medieval origins, in the C16 the tower was altered, and later the building was restored in the 1860s. The interior retains a fine medieval character, preserving C15 bench ends at the west end of the nave and other later fittings and furnishings throughout the building. The Statement of Significance provides little detailed information about the 1860s restoration, but the restoration had a positive impact on the significance of the building. The benches installed during these works mimic the medieval benches and provide order and focus to the interior, communicating the C19 understanding of the building.

The Statement of Significance and the Pew Report are helpful documents but do not make an assessment of the benches proposed for removal, or the impact on the significance of the building this would have. The proposal would mean the removal of a substantial number of benches leaving a small mass of C19 benches in the centre of the nave. This would harm the significance of the building, reducing the legibility of the C19 works to the building.

The Statement of Need articulates several successful events taking place within the church, but further details of numbers attending, spaces required, and frequency of events should be provided if the harm to the building is to be justified.

If the benches are removed the lowering of the pew platform in the south aisle is acceptable. However, we recommend this also takes place in the north aisle. A raised platform with railings may be of limited use, especially if it is not equally accessible.

Any replacement seating should be in line with statutory Church of England guidance (https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/ccb_seating_guidance_2018.pdf) This advocates timber, unupholstered seating. This guidance *'should not be departed from unless the departure is justified by reasons that are spelled out clearly, logically and convincingly.'* No such justification is provided and we recommend timber, unupholstered options are explored. We also recommend that options for chair storage are explored. This is a building of the highest architectural significance and proposing to stack chairs behind choir stalls within the chancel does not befit a building of this quality. Well-designed storage cupboards in a discreet location at the same level of the nave would respect the building and be more practical.

I hope these comments are of assistance and can be addressed before the application moves further.

Kind regards,
Connor McNeill