

The Parish Church of St Nicholas, Dereham

# Toilets and Cowper Room – Statement of Need

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For: The PCC of St Nicholas, Dereham

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## Summary

St Nicholas' Church, Dereham is a large and historic grade I listed town parish church dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It serves a community of over 20,000 as well as surrounding villages and is used extensively for concerts and events as well as regular church services. Despite this, it has no toilet facilities in the building or nearby closer than 100m from the nave entrance doors. It only has a basic temporary kitchenette with no proper drainage, hidden behind a curtain, and the only acoustically separate space, able serve as a private meeting space or green room, is the clergy vestry which also doubles as the boiler room!

Due to its unusual double transept layout and the position of the organ to the north of the tower crossing, the North Transept and Cowper Chapel are underused and practically unusable for liturgical purposes despite having a convenient, accessible, central position within the church building.

Following careful consideration of all the options, the church wishes to put these spaces to better use by creating new toilets and kitchen facilities, in the form of pods built within the existing historic envelope of the North Transept, and enclosing the Cowper Chapel (NE transept) with timber and glass screens to create a separately heatable and acoustically separate meeting room.

The current church community strongly believe that these essential facilities are critical to maintaining the relevance and sustainability of this important church building and that, above all else, this is the legacy that they would like to leave to future parishioners.

## Context and options appraisal

### Parish context

St. Nicholas Church is a large Parish church, recently designated as a Major Church and part of the Dereham and District Team Ministry. It serves the market town of Dereham which has a population of 20,000 (2021 Census). As of 2022 there were 115 on the Electoral roll.

In addition to being a substantial parish in its own right, the town of Dereham, as the historic market town, is a natural centre of gravity for around 30 larger and smaller surrounding villages. In the same way, St Nicholas' church also has the opportunity to act as a hub church or 'minster' for the surrounding area too, being a natural focus for concerts, services and events that serve the wider community in this part of Norfolk. It already fulfills this function to an extent, being a common venue for local musical society performances and Christmas services for schools and groups based in the area. However, weighing against its use for such events is the lack of adequate essential facilities, such as toilets, refreshment facilities and heating, which if not addressed could lead to this magnificent building being side-lined in favour of better equipped churches in the surrounding area.

The church is open daily 9am-5pm in the summer and 9am-4pm in winter. Visitors come from all over the country and overseas. The church houses the final resting place of the poet William Cowper, with a memorial and fine stained glass window in his memory as well as later memorial windows in the chancel. There are two 15<sup>th</sup> century painted ceilings, a rare seven sacrament font and wall and floor memorials to many Dereham men and women. Outside the west door is Withburga's Well, mentioned on [hiddenea.com/Norfolk.htm](http://hiddenea.com/Norfolk.htm) and said to be site of a convent founded by the Saxon princess in AD 654, and a place of pilgrimage for centuries. The large churchyard has three public footpaths running through it, providing access from the town centre to residential areas. The separate bell tower boasts a full peal of 8 bells and a full band of willing ringers. New recruits are taught by experienced hands.

There has been a religious presence here since 654 AD. However, the earliest surviving fabric of the church is C12th. The church was rebuilt in the C13th and in the early C14th it was extended. There were major restorations in the C19th which involved remodelling the chancel, rebuilding the clerestory, removing galleries, and refurbishing the nave. The vestry was added in 1921. A major reordering of the nave was carried out in the 1980s which included new flooring, heating and seating. St. Nicholas has evolved with changing times and changing demands.

Services are held in church on Sundays with a regular congregation of 60-70, and a weekday communion is held on Wednesday morning. During the Covid pandemic, the clergy were quickly able to adjust to provide Zoom services and weekly worship using YouTube and Facebook, to ensure that as many people as possible in the benefice, could join in with worship at home or in Care Homes. During the year there are a range of additional services for festivals such as Withburga Day, Christmas Eve Christingle services, attracting nearly a thousand participants of all ages (pre pandemic), Midnight Mass and Mother's Day. Messy Church attracts a regular group of around 30 children aged 4 to 10 years of age. St. Nicholas hosts Civic services, the RBL Annual Remembrance Day service and services for the armed forces based in the area. It is used by the local community for large funerals, christenings and weddings, concerts, organ recitals and fundraising events of all kinds.

Church finances are carefully managed by the Treasurer and the PCC. St Nicholas' prides itself on always paying its Parish Share in full. Fundraising activities, donations and fees contribute to a small surplus to cover repairs, maintenance, and contingencies. The Quinquennial Inspection Report completed in November 2022 reported no major issues with the fabric of the building and the church is in a good state of repair.

A Parish meeting in January 2018 highlighted the need for improved toilet and kitchen facilities, renewal of the heating system and reordering of the nave. A 5-year Strategic Plan was agreed that laid out a timescale for addressing these issues. A small fund set aside for the initial costs of the building project has enabled a feasibility Study to be discussed with Nicholas Warns Architects and plans to be drawn up by Nicholas Jackson of Nicholas Vanburgh Ltd. Grants, donations and a major fundraising campaign will be needed to complete the works.

## Needs and objectives of this project

St Nicholas is a busy church but lacks modern facilities and fully effective heating, making it less attractive to use, especially in the winter months. There are no toilets in or attached to the building. The existing kitchenette arrangement was only ever intended as a temporary measure and is not appropriate to the significance of the building. There is no smaller space within the church that is properly heated or acoustically separate except the vestry, which is also the boiler room. The nearest toilets are those in Church House, a 100m walk from the body of the church, when they are open. Church House is run by the Headborough Charity and is not owned by the church itself. Due to security issues of leaving the Church House toilets open and unattended, the more normal arrangement for anyone needing facilities is to leave the church and walk uphill to the nearest public house (a Wetherspoon's 150m away) or into the centre of town. This is increasingly unacceptable to the visiting public and the church's aging congregation.

In summary, the primary objectives of this project are:

1. Accessible toilets within the building to allow all users of the building access to the facilities expected of such a substantial building. In the interests of hygiene, the toilets should have a separate cleaner's cupboard with sink, if possible.
2. A new kitchenette to replace the inadequate, but well-used, temporary kitchen provision and allow this low-quality temporary installation to be removed.
3. An accessible meeting/function room that is well lit, separately heated and with some acoustic separation from the main body of the church. The room should have two doors, (to provide a second escape route), vision panels in the doors and possibly CCTV for personal security.
4. Improved storage arrangements for tables, stacking chairs, staging, flower arranging equipment and general janitorial equipment.

Secondary objectives are:

- A. Improved presentation of the church's most celebrated history and heritage – e.g. its general architectural history and development, the Tudor ceilings, the life and work of William Cowper (poet), its stained glass windows, war memorial screen, lantern tower and organ.
- B. Improved lighting to areas affected by any proposals.
- C. Provision for future low-carbon heating renewal/improvements and general 'future-proofing' for other mechanical and electrical services.

## Evidence for need

It is self-evident that a church serving a community of 20,000, being a venue for large community events and being the most important heritage visitor attraction in the town, requires basic accessible conveniences and facilities. Visitors frequently ask, “where are the toilets?” At weddings, funerals and christenings, guests travelling from away, arrive looking for toilet/baby changing facilities and refreshments. Whilst there are toilets in Church House, it is not always convenient to access them as the building is kept locked when not in use.

The church often hosts concerts attended by 200 or more, e.g., the Masai warrior group in 2019, West End Has Faith in 2022, Royal British Legion services, Dereham Band concerts, Christingle services, Mid Norfolk Singers concerts, craft events and summer fetes, such as that held on Withburga Day. The temporary kitchen cannot easily cope with refreshments for such events and there is a pressing need for toilet facilities. The lack of toilets was an embarrassment at a recent fundraising concert for Ukraine organised by the Salvation Army (October 2022) as a member in the band who needed the facilities twice in each half of the concert had to leave the church each time.

There is only one set of public toilets in the town (over 300m away). Recent events such as Dereham Day attended by thousands, and held in the town’s Memorial Hall, received positive reactions from residents to our plans which were on display for all to see. St. Nicholas’ Church is open daily and new toilets could provide additional publicly accessible facilities for the town. The group “About Dereham” is establishing a toilet scheme for the town like the Kendal Courtesy Toilet Scheme and St Nicholas would like to be part of this. <https://www.kendalfutures.co.uk/portfolio/explore-nature>

The need for the kitchenette is evident from the frequent use of the existing temporary kitchenette facilities. In conjunction with new toilets, a better appointed kitchenette would provide scope for further mission opportunities, such as café church or serving community lunches as well as better provision for refreshments at services, meetings, concerts and other events.

A separate meeting room would allow more environmentally efficient use of the church, saving having to heat the full space to comfort level for a small meeting or event, reducing the church’s carbon footprint and allowing the use of greener electric heating. The room would provide a suitable space for choir rehearsals, children’s activities during services (Sunday school), café church, parish/staff meetings and pastoral meetings that require privacy (e.g. those involving bereavement or counselling).

Enclosing the Cowper Chapel creates the opportunity for a well-lit and heated space in winter in which one can view the Cowper memorial and read about the man, his work, and his brief life in Dereham. In addition, the memorial will be at the heart of a pastoral, but flexible space to be for all the activities mentioned above. This is all part of the church’s mission to be an inclusive organisation in the heart of the community.

## Wider building development needs/context

St Nicholas' Church is a complex building, particularly the area around the central tower. Due to the central tower being set one bay to the west of the chancel arch, there is not just one chancel arch but effectively three, as well as a chancel screen dividing the nave from the chancel. A congregant in the nave is over 100 feet from the high altar, making it difficult to use the full space for any participatory forms of worship. The tower crossing and transept areas are difficult to use liturgically with either the nave or chancel but make up around 30% of the total floor area at heart of the building. This has a major impact of the character of the building as a whole.

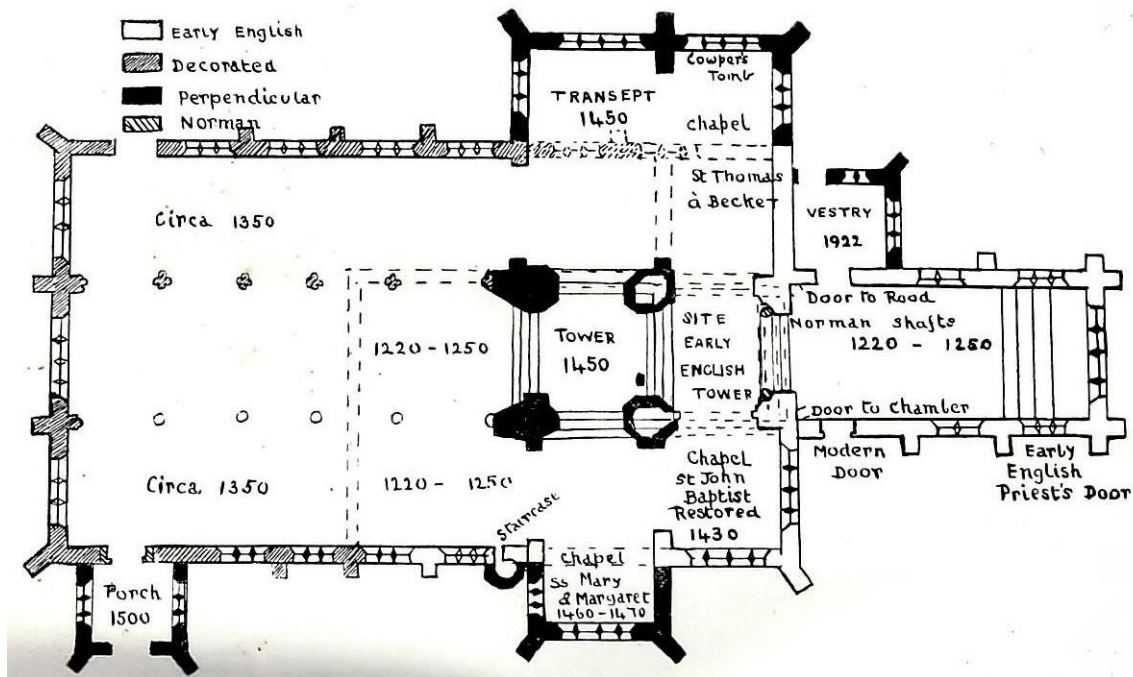


Figure 1 Plan of St Nicholas' Church showing development (East Dereham: George Coleby 1922)

This physical arrangement has led to an unsettled liturgical layout for the church – over time, all the main church furnishings, including the font, pulpit, lectern, clergy seating, choir stalls, organ and nave altar have occupied a variety of different locations.

Rather than a single liturgical space, the church is perhaps better considered as a group of spaces (or halls), like a cathedral, with nave and quire that are used separately but can on occasions be used together. The main spaces are the nave (with nave aisles) and the chancel, which are each served by their own entrance doors. In addition, there are smaller spaces, also accessible from the tower/crossing area – these are the South transept chapel (labelled chapel of St Mary & St Margaret), the Cowper Chapel (labelled St Thomas a Becket), and, the Chapel of St George (labelled Chapel of St John the Baptist). With the exception of the Chapel of St George, which is compromised by the circulation route between nave and chancel, these spaces are all of regular plan and, since even the largest of these (the nave) only seats around 300, they are best preserved in their current regular, unsubdivided form. Figure 2, below, shows how all the meeting spaces, stores and facilities naturally radiate off a central circulation area. What is more, the crossing area provides the majority of the architectural and civic interest of the church including the painted Tudor ceilings, lantern tower, war memorial screen, Oxborough screen and organ and therefore making this public circulation and mingling space works well.

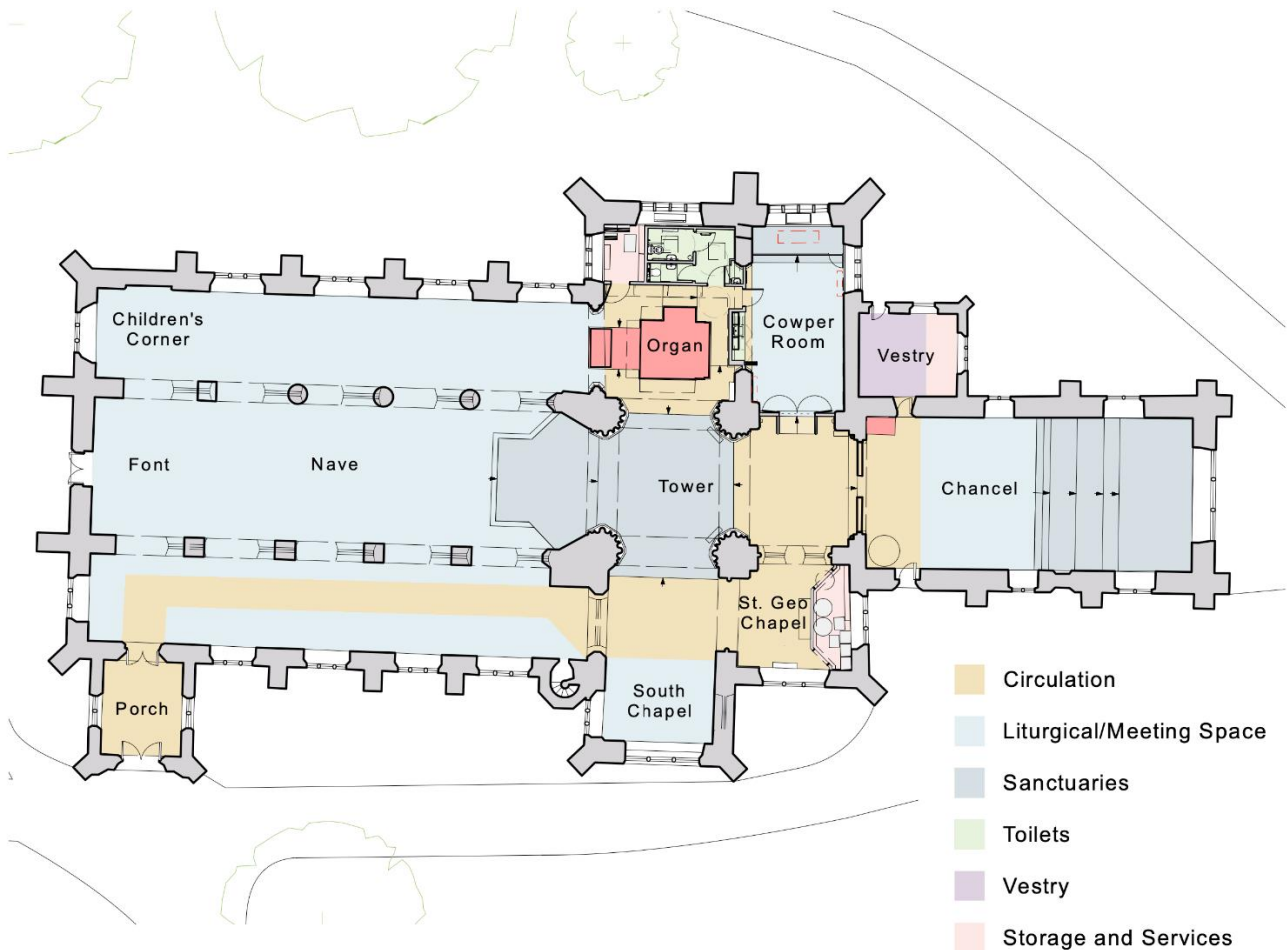


Figure 2 Plan of St Nicholas' Church showing suggested use of spaces

Whether the nave sanctuary occupies none of the space under the tower, the full space under the tower or the building is used at its full length, the above plan (figure 2) demonstrates that the proposed Cowper Room, toilet and kitchenette will work with all likely liturgical layouts.

### Constraints and options appraisal

Various options were considered for the location of new facilities as shown on the plan below (figure 3). The toilets needed to be reasonably accessible from all areas of the church with step-free access from the nave a priority. A convenient drainage route to a public sewer was also important. Proximity to the water supply is desirable but not essential. Both new extensions and conversion/use of internal space were considered.

All extension options would have a visual impact on the historic exterior of the church which has public footpaths to all sides and therefore no discreet 'back'. All extension options are also likely to be expensive due to the need for new thermal and weathered envelope with a high quality of design, materials and workmanship, substantial impact on potential archaeology and provision of rainwater disposal. Most options are likely to be too constrained to accommodate both toilets and a kitchenette without becoming inordinately large and a location for the kitchenette within the main building would still need to be found. All options are likely to disturb a significant number of historic graves.

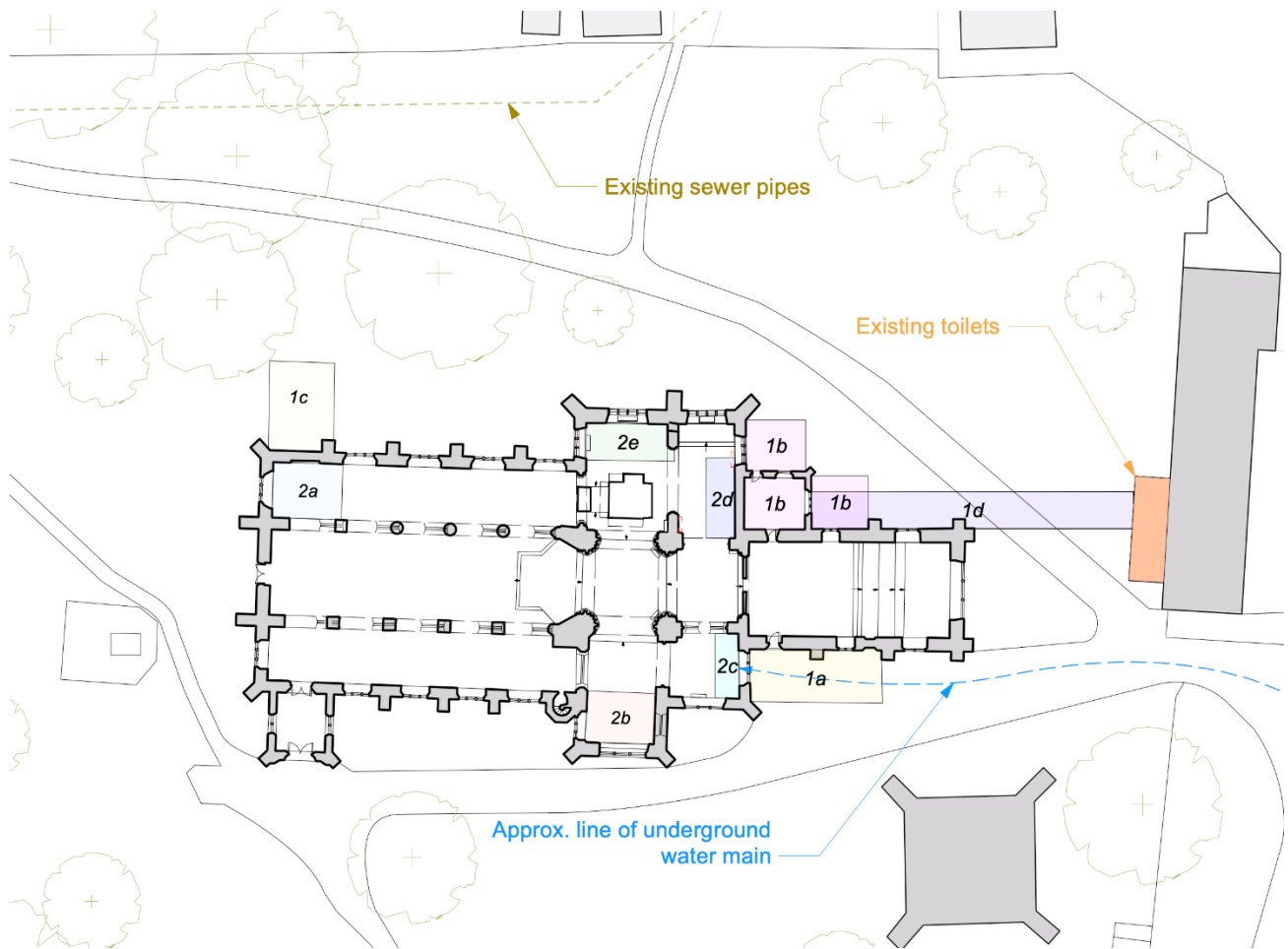


Figure 3 Plan of St Nicholas' Church showing facilities location options

## The toilets

### 1. New build extensions considered for toilets:

- a. to the south of the chancel – There is an existing external door – currently one of two main public entrance doors so would require a lobby to preserve entrance. This location is very prominent in the primary view of the church as approached from town so unlikely to be acceptable in heritage terms. There is no level access from the nave.
- b. to the north of the chancel – Replacing or adjoining the 1922 vestry – Probably the most discreet location on the exterior. There is an existing door from the chancel into the vestry. There is a possibility of creating a door from the Cowper Chapel too although there would be an issue with levels requiring long ramps inside the church or extension and a new doorway through historic fabric. The 1922 vestry extension is currently both clergy vestry and the boiler room so these function would have to be preserved or relocated making it a substantial extension. Window heights would also severely constrain the extension form.
- c. at the northwest corner – The site of a former boiler room. There is a blocked historic doorway in this location which could be reopened, as well as a concrete pad which is believed to cover a large void, (previously part of the boiler room or coal store). The existing underground structure is as likely to create structural complications as provide a ready-made foundation. Being accessed from the westernmost bay, an extension here would be quite prominent in the view of the west end and have a significant external visual impact although would to some extent reflect the porch. The presence of sizeable trees are likely to constrain the footprint of the extension. Any toilets at this corner are very remote from the chancel.
- d. creating a link to the existing toilets in Church House – A remote possibility, but creating a link to Church House was considered, by means of a 'cloister'. This is unlikely to be feasible as the route

crosses by a public footpath. It would also involve both significant visual impact and alterations to historic fabric to create a new door from the nave level. The toilets would remain remote and there remain issues with the separate ownership of this building.

Internal options are more promising since nearly 30% of the internal space of the church is difficult to use liturgically and it saves on the cost of new external envelope. However, being very much in the main body of the church, all internal options would need suitable acoustic partitions and an acoustic lobby to the toilet cubicles themselves. The toilets would be best designed as 'pods' that have a minimal fabric impact on the existing building and are very substantially reversible.

## 2. Internal locations considered:

- a. The western end of the North aisle – Currently in use and effective as the children's corner. It is readily accessible from the nave but remote from the chancel. The space is not large and it would be necessary to alter the nave pews (and therefore the pew heating) in order to maintain circulation. The nave and aisles are not excessively large (for a town church) but form a regular rectangle and it would be a pity to detract from this, especially when there are other areas that are underused.
- b. South transept – Currently a side chapel partitioned off by the Oxborough screen. The advantage is that is directly accessible off the existing natural circulation route between nave and chancel. However, it is already an attractive, well lit chapel and it would be a shame to lose it to toilets. Furthermore, an alternative location would need to be found for the Oxborough screen and the windows would be a significant constraint on the toilet pods. The nearest public drain connections are on the opposite side of the church.
- c. St George's Chapel – The current location of the temporary kitchenette. The incoming water supply is here but there is no proper drainage, the nearest public sewer being on the opposite side of the church. It is a prominent location within the church, visible from the moment you enter by the south porch and on the main circulation route between nave and chancel. The need to preserve the circulation route constrains the form of any toilets in this location. It is below one of the painted Tudor ceilings which are a significant heritage feature of the church and would impair its appreciation. The relatively low windows also pose a significant constraint.
- d. The Cowper Chapel – Although currently underused, this space has single arches to the west and south and the Cowper memorial and grave to the north and so does not subdivide easily. It is ceiled with one of the painted Tudor ceilings and incorporates some of the church's more significant stained glass. At present it is a poorly defined space, exposed to the back of the organ but cut-off by the organ from the rest of the church. It would greatly benefit from some attention and better physical definition but is not an ideal location for lavatories.
- e. The North transept – The southern part of the transept is occupied by the organ leaving the northern part, currently used for storage, cut off from the rest of the church. It is relatively central, being accessible from the Cowper Chapel to the east and the nave aisle to the west and directly from the tower crossing around the organ. It is underused and discreet and unlikely to be used liturgically unless the organ is relocated at some point in the future. It is the closest point to the public sewer that runs along the north boundary of the churchyard. The main constraint in this location is the presence of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century wall memorials, although the installation of toilets is unlikely to be more harmful to them than the existing storage use and so the impact on these is likely to be neutral rather than negative.

Taking all considerations into account, as a location for new toilets, it is clear that the northern end of the North Transept is by far the best location, giving the best chance of cost-effective construction, minimal heritage impact and making better use of an underused and difficult space.



## The kitchenette

A similar, but more limited exercise was carried out with respect to the kitchenette. The kitchenette needs to be in a location to suit plumbing and drainage arrangements (ideally close to the new toilets) and in an area that is close to open circulation areas for serving. Of the spaces identified above, 2a, 2c and 2d also had some potential as kitchenette locations.

The western end of the north aisle (2a) is remote from the ideal toilet location and would require separate plumbing. As previously stated, the children's corner works well in this location and if a kitchenette were placed here, the children's area would need to be relocated. A kitchenette here could be disruptive to the congregation attending services as it is very much in the same liturgical space, and due to the presence of the font and font steps, pews and pew heating, circulation space is constrained and not easily altered without knock-on effects. This is therefore not ideal.

2c, the current location in St George's chapel works moderately well, being on the central circulation route and therefore well-positioned to serve both nave and chancel. It is visually prominent as the focal point of the south aisle and so would need to be well screened. It is close to the mains water intake but is not currently served by foul drainage. It is also some distance from the proposed toilet location so would require separate plumbing arrangements.

2d, the Cowper chapel, provides a similarly convenient central position but is closer to the best toilet location. It is screened from the body of the church by the organ and so activity around the kitchen is unlikely to disrupt worship. Even less so if the Cowper chapel is screened off acoustically as a separate room. This therefore seems to be the best place for a kitchenette and would allow the Cowper chapel, re-purposed as the Cowper Room, to be equipped to provide a self-contained meeting room with provision for refreshments. The main disadvantage being a slight conflict of activities if the Cowper Room were to be used as a green room or rehearsal space for an event that also requires refreshments. A proposal that would help overcome this is to have a coffee machine on a free-standing trolley so that only intermittent access would be required to the kitchenette and it is intended to adopt this plan, using a trolley designed to match the new Cowper Room panelling.

Overall, it seems clear that, in conjunction with toilets located in the favoured position in the North Transept, a kitchenette would be best located in the Cowper Chapel area.

## Element requirements

### Toilets

A minimum of one accessible toilet is required with baby changing facilities. Ideally, one or two further toilets are desirable to allow for moments of high demand, which will often be the case due to the nature of church events, however the number of toilets needs to be balanced with other demands on the space, such as storage. The toilets should be fully equipped unisex cubicles to provide the maximum flexibility. The toilets should be easily accessible from the various spaces within the church, but in a discreet location if located within the church itself. A cleaner's sink/cupboard is needed. Natural daylight to the toilet cubicles is desirable but not essential. The toilets will need to be provided with quiet mechanical extraction if located within the body of the church. The accessible toilet is to have step-free access from the nave. The toilets should ideally have an enclosed lobby to provide acoustic isolation from the body of the church. The design is to take into account the impact of water supply and drainage routes.

### Kitchenette

The kitchenette is to provide washing up, crockery and cutlery storage, coffee making facilities, a fridge, instant boiling water and some food preparation/finishing space. It is not intended to provide for cooking - no hob or oven is required and no mechanical extraction is required unless it is a very enclosed space. The design

is to include suitable water supply and drainage routes. A trolley mounted coffee machine to allow increased flexibility with refreshments is a useful addition.

## Meeting Room

The meeting room is to be heated independently of the main body of the church. It is to provide adequate acoustic isolation for private meetings but is not required to be soundproof. It is to be fully accessible without steps. It may contain the kitchenette. It should have two entrance doors for personal safety. It is to be visible through visibility panels in the doors to establish whether the room is occupied and for personal safety of users, without seriously impairing the privacy for meetings.

## Storage

Storage is required to replace most of the existing storage provision in the North Transept including for staging system, stacking chairs, folding tables, shorter ladders, flower arranging equipment, vacuum cleaner and cleaning equipment and general maintenance tools. The staging is usually used in the nave sanctuary area and stacking chairs are mostly used in the nave. Stacking chairs and folding tables are likely to be used in the new meeting room. A sink for flower arranging purposes would be a desirable bonus.

## Heating

The new toilets and meeting room are to be heated independently of the main body of the church with an efficient and responsive heating system. The design is to take into account the likely need for future repair and upgrading of the main church heating system.

## Lighting, sound, power and data

The proposals are to include new LED lighting to the converted areas. Suitable power provision should be provided to all new/re-ordered areas. Allowance should be made for data wiring for CCTV and possible internet connection for events.

## Access

The toilets, meeting room and kitchenette are to be wheelchair/pushchair accessible from the nave and main body of the church. There is no requirement that there is step-free access from the chancel due to the existing chancel steps.

## Heritage/conservation

The proposals should only involve proportionate and necessary alterations to historic fabric and should be designed so as not to have any harmful indirect impacts on historic fabric. The presentation of the existing heritage features should be enhanced where possible within the general scope of the work, e.g. improved lighting. The meeting room should provide for interpretation displays on William Cowper and his works.

## Conclusions

There is a clear need for an important, historic town church the size of St Nicholas' – being the parish church to a community of 20,000 as well as something of a Church of England hub for Dereham's satellite villages – to have essential toilet, kitchenette and meeting facilities on site that don't require users to leave the church building.

There are two preferred location options for the toilet and kitchen facilities: an external porch-like addition at the north-west corner; or an internal pod arrangement within the North Transept and adjacent Cowper Chapel. The North Transept option is the better option in this case, since it doesn't require a new and expensive external envelope, worthy of being seen against the grade I listed building, and it does make use of an area of the church that, due to the position of the organ, is under-used in its current form. The North Transept location is also convenient for service connections and the toilet proposals combine well with the screening of the Cowper Chapel space to create a new meeting room with kitchenette. Despite being within the main church space, the proposals have a very low impact on historic fabric and will enhance the character of this currently unloved part of the church.

The church community strongly believes that equipping the church with these important basic facilities will not only help to address the current needs of both church and town, but is the best way to preserve the relevance, significance and viability of this magnificent historic building for years to come.

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