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A to Z of Church Maintenance

Seating in churches

History

The earliest churches in England had no fixed congregational seating. In a limited number of churches, there were stone benches running around the north, south and west walls, or even around the pillars. The weakest people would therefore have gone to the wall, and the remainder either stood or sat on mats or stools.

Seating was increasingly introduced from the late thirteenth century, a process accelerated by the Reformation and the consequent shift in emphasis from altar to pulpit, until churches became fully pewed. Allocation of seating in churches was originally according to criteria such as gender and social status. From the end of the sixteenth century rights to a particular pew could be acquired either through the grant of a faculty, by payment of rent, or by prescription (continuous long use). Bodies such as Corporations were allotted seats in churches. The numbering of pews – and even their locking – was a necessity for the purpose of appropriation or systematic allotment. The provision of galleries in churches was an effect of the appropriation of pews.

In terms of design, pews were originally simple in form, being benches with backs and ends. The allotment of pews led to more sophisticated design, for instance higher sides for greater privacy and comfort in the Jacobean period. Private pews were well furnished, with cushions and mats or straw, but additional comfort was also provided for the parishioners. During nineteenth-century restoration of churches, many churches were re-seated. Considerable efforts were also made by bodies such as the Incorporated Church Building Society to ensure a certain amount of free seating in churches, as well as to make certain that the design of pews steered an acceptable course between the conflicting needs of comfort, space to perform devotions, and the accommodation of as large a congregation as possible. In the late twentieth century and up to the present time, there has been a desire for increased flexibility and comfort, as well as to allow different seating patterns for modern styles of worship.

Law

Under Canon F7, it is the duty of the churchwardens to allocate seats in the nave of a church, subject to the rights of any person to a seat or to allocate seats by faculty, prescription or statutory authority. Although private rights to pews are not now common, they still exist, and must be discovered in any proposal to re-seat a church. Local knowledge, as well as research in parish archives, will be essential.

Canon F13 requires that churches should be decently kept, with the contents maintained in an orderly and decent fashion as best becomes the House of God. This is particularly relevant in the case of seating: whereas fixed pews are naturally orderly, piles of stacking chairs such as might be found in the corner of a school or village hall are inappropriate. Even good-quality chairs have the potential to produce disorder and clutter.

Any application for faculty permission will require the petitioners to pass the test that there is a strong presumption against change that will adversely affect the character of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest. In order to rebut that presumption, there must be evidence of sufficient weight to show a necessity for change.

Changes to seating

Many churches have been refurnished through the centuries, and parishes will rightly wish to consider whether their existing furnishings are suitable for their needs. But changes to seating will make a significant alteration to a church and will need careful thinking through to make sure that the best solution is reached. The first step should always be to analyse carefully, and objectively, through a Statement of Significance and a Statement of Need, how significant the present seating is, why the present seating is considered inadequate and what needs the parish wish to meet through their seating, bringing the DAC and the parish inspecting architect into the discussions at an early stage. This first step may seem time-consuming, but in fact it is the most important step to get right: and experience of the CCC and many DACs is that time spent at this stage pays dividends later. Removal of all the pews may sometimes seem like an attractive option to enable flexibility of use and comfort, but in practice most buildings work best in a particular way and moving chairs around for different services may seem less attractive when someone has to take responsibility for organising it. Some people may also find pews more comfortable than modern upholstered chairs.

So the issues to be considered include:

- Why are the parish considering a change at all? What would reseating enable a parish to do that it cannot do at present?
- How significant are the existing pews within the building and how far do they contribute to its character? (See also below.) Are they pews which deserve every effort to keep them, or are they genuinely of little significance?
- If a change is proposed for liturgical reasons, how would it work within the building?
- If the assessment of significance shows that there is scope for change to the pews, is there also scope, as an alternative to removal, for altering or shortening them without detriment to their historic importance? Is there scope for removing the pew platforms without archaeological damage, and making the pews more movable on a new hard floor surface?
- Do some sections of the congregation (eg parents with very young children) prefer the existing seating? What benefits does the present seating have?
- Would a change diminish the number of seats available?
- Can new seating fulfil health and safety requirements?
- As chairs will not last as long as pews, how will the parish arrange for their replacement in due course? How will this affect the finances of the future congregation?

Assessment of pews

Linked to the Statement of Needs should be the Statement of Significance, which summarises the historical development of the church and identifies important features. As part of this it is important to assess the history of the pews (date, link to restoration programme etc.), and in particular their contribution to the

overall character of a church. Many churches contain nineteenth-century pews that are not of great artistic merit in themselves, but nevertheless contribute greatly to the overall character of the church (particularly if part of a Victorian restoration), and the case for their retention is that much stronger. Where the pews are of great historic interest, for instance with carved ends and poppy heads, the case for retention may be overwhelming.

Guidelines

The following criteria have been approved by the CCC for dealing with requests for advice:

- a) a Statement of Significance and Needs including a historical assessment of the pews is essential from the outset in all cases, together with an archaeological evaluation and mitigation strategy where necessary;
- b) there is an overwhelming presumption against the removal or alteration of all pre-Reformation pews, without the strongest justification;
- c) there is a similar overwhelming presumption against the removal or alteration of pre-Victorian pews, in particular box pews;
- d) strong justification is needed for the removal or alteration of pews that are contemporary with a major nineteenth or twentieth-century reordering, or which, whatever their age, are otherwise of good quality and contribute to the character of a church;
- e) subject to f) and g) below, more flexibility be given in other cases;
- f) in all cases proper justification must be made;
- g) good quality replacements and proper treatment of floors are essential.

Development of proposals

Proposals for the removal of pews need to be considered along with the floor on which they stand. Where pews stand on timber platforms, consideration will need to be given to the future of the floor, i.e. its level, surface finish etc.

Archaeological implications of removing the pew platforms will need to be consulted too. Where work is needed to the floor, an archaeological evaluation and mitigation strategy should be commissioned. In order that the character of a church is not adversely affected, the replacement of a floor will require a suitably high-quality finish, i.e. a good quality hard floor surface in stone or wood, rather than carpet. Acoustics are also important in the design process: a change from a wooden floor to carpet would radically alter the acoustics of a church, having an effect on the music and congregational singing.

The long-term costs of proposals should be carefully considered. PCCs receive little from the sale of pews compared with the price of new chairs. Pews have a very long lifespan and require little repair. Chairs have a considerably shorter lifespan; as their joints become weak and any upholstery becomes worn. Therefore parishes considering replacement of pews with chairs should be aware that future generations are being committed to a cycle of replacement.

Where a case is made for new furnishings, the choice of new furniture will be crucial to the success of the scheme. The advice of the DAC and architect/surveyor will be essential. Parishes are encouraged to look at the possibilities of furniture (either chairs or new short pews or stacking benches) made by independent craftspeople, and whose work would impart considerable character to a reordered church, rather than catalogue chairs. They should also be encouraged to visit other churches where different solutions have been tried, to gain some feel of how these have worked in practice.

Chancels

Chancels often contain pews set collegiate-wise, often nineteenth-century and of good quality. Where there is no choir, the pews may be rarely used. Retention of chancel furniture is however often desirable, in view of its position in the architecture of the church. The pews can be used for smaller and mid-week services, and many churches find this positively conducive to the atmosphere for such worship.

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