

DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD

In the Consistory Court

Her Honour Judge Sarah Singleton QC
Chancellor

In the Matter of Christ Church Fulwood

Judgment

1. By a Petition dated 28th August 2021, the incumbent and church wardens of Christ Church Fulwood seek permission to carry out extensive works of internal re-ordering in the church building. The works under consideration by this petition form part of an extensive programme of alteration and development proposed by the parish for the buildings. I have previously considered other proposals under the scheme and have delivered two previous judgments in respect of this church and the programme which should be read in conjunction with this judgment. I propose to limit this judgment to the minimum necessary to explain my decision and not to repeat the matters set out in my previous judgment about the church, its congregation and their theological position, its buildings and their history and architectural significance.
2. The present proposals have been the subject of further extensive consultation with the relevant amenity societies: the Victorian Society; the 20th Century Society; Historic England; and the Church Building Council. Their contributions are conveniently and aptly summarised in a document entitled DAC Final letter to the Church dated September 2020 and uploaded to the online system on 7th October 2020. None of the amenity societies seeks to become parties in this process; to the extent that they have particular objections or comments I am asked to take them into account in my decision making.
3. The DAC considered the works proposed by the Petitioners at their meeting of 7th October and their advice recommends the works be approved subject to a query to ensure that Building Regulations are complied with so far as possible in respect of the designs submitted and to request that details of foul water drainage be provided. I do not interpret the DAC's comments as requiring formal Provisos but note the acceptance of the Petitioners of their suggestions.
4. I note that these works constitute a more or less substantial overhaul of the reordering plans in response to the judgment handed down in 2018 when I refused to approve that element of the then plans which sought to dismantle key features of the Chancel which I considered should remain. Many elements of the reordering proposed now have already been permitted by previous decisions (including the removal of pews). The Petitioners have worked closely with the DAC and the amenity societies to bring forward proposals which comply with both the letter and the underlying principles of the 2018 decision.
5. In coming to my decision in respect of this petition I have had the advantage of reading the extensive documentation submitted by the petitioners to accompany it, including their Statement of Need and their Statement of Significance (the latter again prepared by Ms Mary Clemence of FVP Heritage Consultants).

6. The Victorian Society do not agree with the proposal to remove the 19th century pulpit and lectern and would prefer if some pews were retained. This has been their consistent position throughout the development of these plans. Historic England queried the curved shape of the raised dais and questioned whether an alternative (presumably more square or angled) might be chosen. Their letter of August 2020 constitutes the first time this suggestion was made. They further questioned whether the loss of light caused by the creation of storerooms at both the east and west end of the south aisle might be made up for by the introduction of some opening at the upper level of the new walls. Finally, they urged the retention of Pace designed doors and screens or for new doors to have the nuances of the relationships between the existing doors to be respected.

7. I am satisfied that an insistence upon the retention of the pulpit and lectern within the reordered church would run contrary to the overarching scheme of the new proposals and I do permit their removal as sought by the petition. In coming to that conclusion I have taken into account, as I did in the 2018 judgment, that the listed status of this church emanates primarily from its 20th Century features not its Victorian fittings and that the proposed scheme has concentrated on the retention and conservation of those features. I note that the lectern and pulpit are not used and are unlikely to be used in the foreseeable future. I note that the plan for these items is to retain them and it may be that the Petitioners will, in due course, be able to pass them to another church where they will fit better.

8. In considering the suggestions of Historic England I have taken into account my assessment of the overall design of the new scheme which is, as Ms Clemence sets out in the Statement of Significance at paragraph 7.3:-

“The heritage-focussed analysis of the current scheme of work has found that it represents sympathetic, organic change to a historic asset in the service of the life and witness of the church to the glory of God and is unlikely to harm the overall heritage value of the site or its constituent parts to any significant extent.”

The Petitioners have given good reasons for wishing to retain the curved dais design proposed. I note that the suggestion of a different shape was made at a very late stage by Historic England and have some difficulty understanding the objection to the curved shape proposed throughout. The Petitioners point to the extensive renewal of the lighting in the church and suggest that any loss of light by reason of the installation of the store cupboards is already compensated for. The Petitioners have adequately explained their proposals for the proposed doors in the reordered scheme – namely their desire to maximise light and openness and welcome. I accept that reasoning.

9. In all the circumstances I propose to grant the petition as sought.

HHJ Sarah Singleton QC
Chancellor of the Diocese of Sheffield
13th March 2021