

Neutral Citation Number: [2023] ECC Bri 3

In the Consistory Court of Bristol

In re Fishponds, St John

JUDGMENT

1. This is a petition for the disposal of all the pews in this unlisted Church dedicated in 1911 and their replacement with two sets of upholstered chairs in two different colours (one set of 57 orange chairs, one set of 24 blue chairs).
2. The chairs have been donated from a local Methodist Church that has closed. The petition contains photographs of some of the chairs in situ (the chairs have been introduced under List A Rule 5A (9): “The introduction of free-standing chairs in a church which is not a listed building”).
3. The statement of needs states:

Our vision statement is “Serving the Community, Worshipping God” and all the activities of St John’s are intended to refer back to and work towards furthering our vision.

In working towards our vision statement, we want to serve the local community and as our main resource to offer is our building to improve the facilities we can offer. Most recently some of the pews have been removed and the stone font removed and replaced with a moveable wooden font. This has allowed for a more flexible use of space for worship, social and community use and removal of the remaining pews will allow us to make greater use of the space.

The pews run behind a number of the pillars, giving a restricted view of the chancel, the use of chairs will enable us to resolve this problem. They also hinder us from exploring café style worship, as well using the space more flexibly for worship, (sitting in a circle rather than in ridged rows or setting up prayer tables in different parts of the building for example). They also hinder the use of the building for drama use by the schools, and for social events, particularly meals such as an agape on Maundy Thursday and a harvest supper. or as a venue for refreshments after services, weddings and funerals.

A more flexible space will also make the building more attractive to community groups.

We have a longer-term vision is to re-order the interior to provide disabled toilet facilities and improve the refreshment area.

We have been gifted a number of chairs and we want to use these as a replacement for the remaining pews to increase the flexibility of the space.

Across the lawn from the Church is the Church Hall which was built during the 1930’s. The hall is much used by the local community, Scouts and Guides

use it most evenings, however it also used by AA, Weight Watchers, a baby signing class, dog training and for occasional children's parties. As the church hall is in almost constant use, we would like to make the church space more flexible for greater community use so it is not standing empty for most of the week. As detailed previously the church is already used by a mental health support group, by a Wives group and a clarinet group.

4. In their statement of significance, the petitioners state that:

Removing the pews will impact the whole of the interior of the building, however St John's has nothing of special architectural or historical interest.

In my opinion they do their building a disservice. Although it is not listed the photographs show an attractive undecorated interior. The pews are plain but give a pleasing and neat symmetry to the interior.

5. The Victorian Society, whose opinion I sought although it is an unlisted Church said:

St John's is a dignified and rather impressive edifice, designed by a firm of well-respected late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architects. While it may not meet the necessarily high criteria for buildings of this date to be inscribed on the national heritage list, it is nonetheless undoubtedly a distinguished building.

The loss of benches is unobjectionable in principle, on condition that high quality new furnishings replace them. Unfortunately, what is proposed is not high quality and would erode the character and appearance of the interior, and would also jar with the existing chairs, which are themselves unsuitable. The result would be extremely unfortunate. We urge the parish to consider the statutory advice issued by the Church Buildings Council in its seating guidance, which advocates (as does the Victorian Society) the use of timber, unupholstered seating in historic church interiors.

While they would be unacceptable on a permanent basis, we would be prepared to concede to the introduction of upholstered seating on the basis that any forthcoming faculty is strictly conditioned to impose the replacement of the chairs with appropriately high quality new seating within a set period, say two or three years.

6. In their response the petitioners state:

It goes on to suggest that upholstered seating is not appropriate for the following reasons:

- They have a significant impact in terms of colour, texture and character which is not consonant with the quality of a highly listed church;

- Experience demonstrates that upholstered seating needs more regular refurbishment (wear and tear, staining) than seating without upholstery. This is especially true of multi-use churches where it will be normal to eat and drink regularly on the chairs;
- They are heavy and therefore more difficult to arrange and stack;
- The addition of soft furnishings can alter existing acoustics; and
- Wood tones and textures fit well within church buildings and have been used for centuries in this context, whilst some colours have associations with other types of buildings such as offices

The petitioners responded with appropriate robustness to this advice. One response reads:

The CBC says: Experience demonstrates that upholstered seating needs more regular refurbishment (wear and tear, staining) than seating without upholstery. This is especially true of multi-use churches where it will be normal to eat and drink regularly on the chairs

The PCCs argues: It may be true that wooden chairs would wear better and last longer. However the PCC and the congregation look to maintain the church building to a very high standard. We endeavour to ensure the church is uncluttered and the textiles (carpet, linen, etc) are very carefully cared for. The upholstered seating would be similarly cared for.

It is, accordingly, unfortunate that one of the pictures that the petitioners chose to upload to the system shows a blue chair with quite an unsightly stain on it.

7. The petitioners also say:

The PCC would not consider St John's to be of particularly historic interest and is concerned to ensure that the church is able to provide an environment fit for worship and other uses in the current century, it is not a museum.

And:

It should also be noted that within the same benefice one of the other churches already has upholstered chairs, St Aidan's and St George has had heavy and bulky deeply cushioned seating for over 15 years.

8. The Victorian Society's response stated:

The proposal formally is to dispense with the present benches and to replace them with castoff chairs from a nearby methodist church. It is not relevant whether the parish would be purchasing them, or parting with money for them; the fact is that new seating would replace the original.

St John's may not be a listed building, but it is undeniably historic and is of considerable character. The Victorian Society is itself concerned to see that the building provides an environment fit for worship and other uses, and it is partly for this reason that we have indicated our willingness to concede to the near wholesale loss of the historic benches. It is therefore not fair to characterise our response as being intransigent, or to suggest that we wish to see buildings – in this case St John's – treated like museums. It is not whether buildings should change, but how they should be so. Here we have expressed significant willingness to compromise, and would be content to see the wholesale clearance of the historic benches from the building. We are therefore demonstrably not opposed to change per se. However, we are opposed to change that would cause undue harm to the building's special interest, character and charm. The benefits of this scheme, so far as there are any, could be equally realised by the introduction of aesthetically appropriate un-upholstered timber chairs.

The fact that other churches have introduced aesthetically inappropriate chairs is not reason in itself to say that the same can or should be done here. On the contrary, they provide evidence of why it should not be done.

9. It is indeed unfortunate that the petitioners have allowed their enthusiasm for this project to affect the usually courteous exchange of views expected in consistory courts.
10. The DAC recommended that 10% of the current chairs should be adapted to have arms. If this is not possible, additional chairs with arms (amounting to 10% of the total number of chairs) should be purchased . This is so those who need support when sitting or standing have chairs with arms available to them.
11. I am prepared to grant the petition. I appreciate the financial issues that face the petitioners and so I am prepared to allow the 'castoff chairs' (to quote the Victorian Society) to be introduced. I would not normally necessarily be prepared to allow chairs of this style to be introduced and so the petition will be granted with the following conditions:
 - a. 6 of the orange and 3 of the blue chairs are to be adapted to have arms, alternatively,
 - b. The petitioners must purchase 9 wooden chairs with arms
 - c. In the event of any of the newly introduced upholstered chairs wearing out they must be replaced with wooden chairs,

22nd September 2023

Justin Gau
Chancellor