

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF EXETER

In the matter of Witheridge with Creacombe and Romansleigh: St John the Baptist

Application reference: 2018-028208

Context

A faculty for reordering the west end of the Church had been granted in 2022 and included permission to remove some pews and to introduce stackable chairs. In the architect's drawings an example of a wooden and metal chair had been shown but the Chancellor had included a condition in the faculty requiring the DAC to approve the design of chair that was to be used. The parish chose a Canterbury style chair from Alpha Furniture but the DAC were not prepared to approve this design due to the chair having a curved back. The DAC were of the opinion that this design was visually disruptive and wished to see square back chairs introduced into the church. The parish made an application to the Chancellor for a determination of this matter.

JUDGMENT

1. I have now had time to read through the various emails and submissions. I have also been much assisted by the photographs that the Petitioners have submitted.
2. Whilst I can understand the central point as to a wavy or 'busy' effect made by the DAC and that this is their normal advice, I do not consider that this factor should be seen as a trump card. A considered and proportionate view should be taken in each case.
3. These are to be stackable chairs which, the Petitioners anticipate, will only be deployed when needed. The parish is seemingly, and understandably (from the photographs), pleased with the architectural effect that has been created by the removal of pews at the rear of the Nave. On that basis, the degree to which the backs of the chairs, whether curved or straight, will impact on the overall presentation of the church interior should not be great. On the limited occasions when the chairs are out, they are likely to be occupied by those attending a service or event and, when so occupied, the line created by the seat backs will not be noticeable.

4. The photographs of dark stained 'Canterbury' chairs indicate that the curve may be less of a noticeable feature than in lighter staining, but it would be wrong to place too much weight on this.

5. The deciding factor, in an otherwise fairly balanced decision, is that the Parish have tried out a number of alternatives and that the curved back is preferred for comfort. A primary aim of providing chairs is presumably for them to be comfortable. The Parish are no doubt hoping that those who attend services and events will enjoy the experience and come again. The imposition of a design of chair which is thought to be less comfortable and has been rejected by those who are going to be using them, should only be required where there is a clear need to do so. The aesthetic benefit of rows of straight back chairs, whilst understood and normally supported by this court, is not sufficiently weighty to justify imposing such a design in this case against the considered wishes of the Parish.

6. For these reasons, I approve an amendment to the Faculty to permit the introduction of 'Canterbury' chairs provided that they are suitably stained to blend with the remaining church furnishings.

The Rt Hon and Worshipful Sir Andrew McFarlane
Chancellor of the Diocese of Exeter
17th October 2023