

In the Worcester Consistory Court

Archdeaconry of Dudley: Parish of Halas: Church of St John the Baptist, Halesowen

Faculty petition (2018-027063) relating to reordering of the south doorway

Judgment

Introduction

1. The church of St John the Baptist is a large church in the centre of Halesowen, predominantly medieval in origin – with significant Norman zigzag decoration, dating back to the mid-twelfth century – but altered and extended at various dates since then. The red sandstone tower and spire are clearly visible for miles around. The church was listed in 1950; it is now Grade I, although it is not clear from the statutory list whether this is the result of an upgrade at some point.
2. The church was the subject of an extensive restoration by John Oldrid Scott in 1883, which included the construction of a south porch and an outer south aisle immediately to the east of the porch. The porch is secured at its outer end by a pair of iron gates, installed in around 1901, which are locked when the church is closed. The outer south aisle is sometimes referred to as the Lady Chapel.
3. Inside the south doorway is an Edwardian timber lobby, erected in 1906, commemorating Felix Smith, who was parish clerk of Halesowen for thirty years and some time choir master at the church. Mr Smith is also commemorated by a substantial memorial on the north wall, opposite the south doorway.
4. The inner (north) elevation of the lobby consists of a pair of timber doors, between part-glazed side panels, and the east and west elevations each of a single timber door between part-glazed side panels, all beneath a glazed upper portion. There is a step down from the porch into the main church, and inside the lobby is a substandard temporary ramp, to facilitate access by those in wheelchairs and pushchairs.
5. The lobby is described by the parish in the statement of needs as “a good, sound piece of Edwardian woodwork”; Historic England characterise it as “an attractive and good quality piece of early 20th century carpentry”. The list description of St John’s Church is very brief, and mentions neither the porch nor the lobby. The description in *Churches of the Black Country* (Bridges, 2008) is much more comprehensive, but that too mentions neither porch nor lobby.

The proposal

6. The proposed works are as follows:
 - to remove the existing iron gates to the porch, and install glazed sliding doors recessed just behind [inside] the Gothic outer archway;
 - to install new lighting within the porch, and to glaze the western window to match the existing eastern window;
 - to remove the 1906 timber lobby and relocate it to the back of the Lady Chapel in the south aisle, where it will be converted (and slightly extended) to form storage;
 - to remove a single pew and its plinth from the south aisle, to enable the relocation of the lobby; and
 - to replace the existing temporary ramp, located inside the lobby, with a new DDA-compliant ramp with handrails.
7. These works are considered by the parish to be necessary to provide a more welcoming entrance to the church, to include permanent step-free access. The introduction of new outer glass doors will enable the heat inside the church to be retained, which will enable the main wooden doors to be kept open at all times, and the removal of the large wooden inner lobby will enable a view into the church to be opened up for the first time. The parish has apparently felt for many years that the lobby has been a barrier to newcomers and visitors.
8. The lobby will be relocated to the back of the lady chapel, and converted to form much-needed storage facilities.
9. The iron gates will be retained in storage, and the hinges on which they hang will remain in place, as a heritage feature.
10. The works are expected to cost £52,000, to be paid for from the balance of PCC funds retained for the purpose. Some or all of this apparently originates from a recent donation.
11. They are part of a larger programme of alterations, including the removal of some pews, reconfiguring toilet and kitchen facilities, re-opening the old north door, clearing the west end of clutter, introducing glazed west doors, and adjusting the floor so as to provide a single, level surface.

The views of those who have been consulted

12. The proposed works have been recommended by the DAC, subject to provisos requiring the parish to obtain approval for the details of the new external doors (including any manifestation or safety signs) and of the conversion of the lobby to form storage.
13. Historic England expressed its views in a letter dated 13 December 2018. It had some concern as to the removal of the iron gates, but on balance, “given that the installation of the glazed doors will create an improved environment within the porch, ... in this instance a case could be made for the proposed

changes". It raises no objection to the new porch lighting, or to the re-glazing of the western window.

14. However, it has concerns as to the relocation of the lobby. It notes that considerable adaptation work will be required to enable the lobby to function as storage space, with the installation of shelves or cupboards, and the screening of the stored items from views through the glazed panels – as well as a new rear panel and ceiling. Conversion will obscure the purpose of the lobby as a memorial structure, hiding much of its fine internal carving from view, and will impact on its contribution to the significance of the church.
15. Historic England suggests that it would be sensible to explore the possibility of adapting the lobby to provide a more welcoming entrance, by incorporating clear glass into the existing glazed panels, and new glazed panels into the doors. And a bespoke solution – such as well-designed cupboards or drawer units along the west and south walls – might help to address the need for further storage space.
16. The planning authority, the Victorian Society and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) have all been consulted, and have not responded. The CBC defers to the DAC.
17. No comments have been made in response to the public notice.

Procedure

18. In view of the concerns raised by Historic England, I have inspected the church carefully myself, accompanied by the Deputy Registrar. The parish representatives, who enabled me to gain access, explained one or two detailed points, but made no oral representations.
19. In the light of that visit, I am satisfied that it is expedient to determine this case on the basis of written representations.

Conclusions: works to the porch

20. I can see the point of the proposed works to the porch – those detailed in the first two bullet points at paragraph 6 above. And I note that Historic England, although slightly hesitant, in the end raised no objection. I am therefore content to authorise those works, subject to suitable conditions requiring that:
 - before any works are carried out, the detailed specification of the new external doors (including the manifestations or safety signs) must be approved in writing by the DAC or, in default of such approval, by the court; and the works must be carried out in accordance with the details thus approved; and
 - all relevant cabling must be in FP200 cable or equivalent.
21. I note that the iron gates are to be retained in storage. This is wise, for as long as the new glazed doors are to some extent experimental. However, once the parish has decided that they are to remain in place indefinitely, it would be sensible to consider whether it is necessary to keep the old iron gates for ever.

22. The introduction of the new glazed doors across the outer face of the porch will be a building operation that will materially affect the external appearance of the building, and will therefore require planning permission, which has apparently not yet been sought.

Conclusion: relocation of the lobby

23. I note the evaluation of the lobby as “a good, sound piece of Edwardian woodwork”, and “an attractive and good quality piece of early 20th century carpentry”. And any element of the history of a church will contribute something to its overall significance. However, it is not part of an overall scheme of decoration or furnishing, and does not even fit particularly well with the earlier fabric – the top of the opening in the stonework is visible above the roof of the lobby. And I have noted already that Mr Smith, the former parish clerk, is the subject of another memorial in the church in addition to the lobby.
24. I therefore recognise that the lobby is of some interest, but do not consider it to be of any great architectural, aesthetic or historic value, or to contribute greatly to the overall significance of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest.
25. Further, once the new glazed outer doors have been installed, the inner lobby will not serve any functional purpose by retaining heat in the building. Most importantly, I agree with the parish that the presence of the lobby inside the south doorway results in an unwelcoming first impression, which would only be mitigated to a limited extent by the carrying out of the alterations suggested by Historic England.
26. I also entirely accept the need to introduce into the church a high-quality ramp, to enable step-free access for those in wheelchairs and pushchairs. Once the lobby has been removed from its present position, it will be possible to achieve this. I note that the DAC has recommended for approval the revised design of ramp shown on drawing 3900-4D-2, dated 22 March 2019. Historic England was concerned as to the design of the ramp, but that view predated the most recent revision, so it would need to be given an opportunity to express a view on the new design.
27. However, I share the concern expressed by Historic England as to the wisdom of relocating the lobby as proposed. To do so will require a substantial amount of additional carpentry, as well as the loss of a pew. It will result in a storage facility that will only be limited use – certainly compared to a purpose-designed set of cupboards and drawers. I think that the re-located lobby will look odd, and out of place, and may very well before long be the subject of a further petition seeking a faculty for its removal.
28. I am therefore not willing to authorise the relocation of the lobby as proposed – and I have no proposal before me seeking the removal of the lobby without its relocation elsewhere within the church. It follows that I am also not willing to authorise the removal of the pew and its plinth, to enable the relocation of the lobby (the fourth of the items listed at paragraph 6 above). It would be

premature for me to consider the ramp (the final item in that list) until the future of the lobby has been determined.

Overall conclusion

29. I therefore direct that a faculty should issue to authorise the first two items listed at para 6 (those relating to the porch), subject to conditions, but not the remaining three items (those relating directly or indirectly to the lobby).

CHARLES MYNORS

Chancellor

3 January 2020

(revised)