

Neutral Citation Number: [2025] ECC She 4

DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD

In the Consistory Court

Her Honour Judge Sarah Singleton KC

Chancellor

In the Matter of ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST, RANMOOR

Works: Removal of font cover and its metal support frame

JUDGMENT

1. The Petitioners in this matter seek permission for works described as follows:

We propose the removal of the metal font stand from the baptistry. The stand is awkward to baptise around and obscures some attractive Shrigley & Hunt stained glass windows of women in the baptistry. We believe removal of the stand will create a more practical, attractive and inclusive environment at the back of the church.

2. The works were considered and recommended by the DAC at their meeting. They made this comment:-

The Committee supported the removal of the frame, but questioned the intention of storing the font cover, suggesting that it may be more appropriate to explore either re-hanging it from a (possibly fixed) chain or disposing of it altogether. Members felt the baptistry would be viewable in its intended French Gothic style without the cover hung in the way. So, it was felt that these options should be considered and agreed at the parish level, and the Committee would be minded to support either decision.

3. The Church

The Church has a welcoming congregation with a strong tradition of excellent music in its worship and events. The interior is large, impressive and sought after for weddings and events including an episode of Any Questions in November 2024.

The Church is II* listed. It was re-constructed in 1888 following a devastating fire which destroyed much of the first 1877 structure. Only the tower and steeple survived. The tower and steeple are the tallest in the city and cause the Church, which is in an elevated location, to be a prominent local landmark.

The Church, including its interior was constructed in the Gothic revival style. It was designed by Edward Mitchel Gibbs. It includes decorative sculpture work by the celebrated Sheffield craftsman Frank Tory of Frank Tory and Sons.

The church, including its interior, is a dramatically impressive example of Gothic revival architecture. A notable feature of the interior is a number of Victorian and Edwardian stained glass windows. The windows in the baptistry are the only ones in the church which depict women.

In 1991 permission was given for re-ordering work under the design of the prominent church architect Ronald Sims. That work included bleaching of the original choir stalls, pulpit and sanctuary furniture. It also included the introduction of black iron work embodying Sims' practice of "combining modernism with his respect for the arts and crafts movement" (Statement of significance)

The 1991 re-ordering included a four-legged wrought iron stand over the font from which a 1975 conical font cover was suspended. The font cover had been given to the church by a parish family. The original donors have now passed away.

4. Listing and Notable features

The Church is listed at II*. The official listing makes no mention of the Sims 1991 re-ordering although the baptistery is mentioned twice:

As to the exterior:

Canted baptistery with three Lacis flanked on each side by a two light window

As to the interior:

Baptistery has moulded arch and rib vault with shafts between the windows

It will be noted that the Historic England listing does not reference the Sims features at all and therefore the wrought iron stand is simply not mentioned.

The Pevsner guide to Sheffield says of the inside of the church

'The elegant proportions... Are matched by the outstanding quality and richness of its detailing and fittings, the only jarring note being some alterations made in the controversial re-ordering by Ronald Sims in 1991 (p.577).'

5. The Faculty Process

Public notice requirements have been fulfilled and no objections have been received except from the Twentieth Century Society.

The DAC secretary sought to consult with the historical amenity societies about these works. Historic Buildings and Places replied that this was a matter upon which they did not wish to comment. The Victorian Society indicated that they had no comment and deferred to the Twentieth Century Society. The Twentieth Century society did not initially respond to the DAC secretary and when the Petition was first presented to me there was

nothing from them. I was cautious about accepting this lack of reply as reflecting a lack of objection and directed that they again be contacted for their comments. They have now conveyed their objections to the proposals but later confirmed that they do not wish to become a party opponent. They do, however ask me to take their objections into account.

Their letter conveying their objections is dated 4th April 2025 from their case worker, Gus Wray, it reads:

Thank you for consulting the Twentieth Century Society on application 2024-101895 the removal of the font cover and its metal support frame, at the Grade II listed St John the Evangelist. Ronald Sims was notable as the assistant to George Pace, and later inheritor of Pace's practice. He was the recipient of a Lambeth Degree, and is a major name in twentieth-century church restoration. The re-ordering carried out by Sims in 1991 was significant and coherent. The black ironwork is, as is common with Sims, strongly dramatic (particularly against the bleached oak), resonating with the Gothic Revival church that it occupies. As mentioned in the Statement of Significance, "the reordering work by Ronald Sims... is itself a significant phase in St John's history. Although this action today may be met with some controversy, it does not affect the significance of these items." The metal font stand is a reimagining of the font stand designed by Sims for Southwark Cathedral (during Pace's tenure as cathedral architect, pre-dating Sims' time as cathedral architect), but adapted for a smaller font and baptistry. As one of only a few known Sims-designed font cover stands, it holds high significance – particularly as part of the coherent ensemble that is Sims' 1991 reordering of St John's. The Society objects to the removal of this stand. It is our opinion that the Statement of Need does not strongly justify*

the loss of this fabric. The stand itself takes up little space, with thin vertical members; based on the provided photograph the stained glass does not appear to be greatly obscured. We do not think that awkwardness is justification for the loss of this important fabric. If the church removes the font stand, it must be conserved in storage, rather than disposed of as currently proposed. The petitioner has stated that there is insufficient storage space for the frame once dismantled. If this is the case, then it ought to be retained in-situ, as part of the ensemble Sims re-ordering, if the only other option is disposal.

Visit to the Church

6. Having received the objection and reasons of the Twentieth Century Society I thought it best to go and see the church and the feature which the Petition seeks to remove. My visit took place on 31st May 2025. The church is situated in a pleasant and leafy suburb surrounded by Victorian and Edwardian houses, some very substantial. The approach confirms that the steeple and tower are justifiably a Sheffield landmark.
The church was open and I was warmly welcomed by a parishioner who was anticipating the arrival of a group undertaking a history trail. It is obvious that the church is treasured by its congregation. A concerted drive is ongoing to raise funds for extensive works of repair and maintenance necessary for the structure and safety of the tower and steeple.
7. I was able to observe the baptistry, the font stand and the cover from many perspectives both close up in the baptistry from the viewpoints of the celebrant and parents, godparents and family members who would be

expecting to stand around the font at a baptism but also from various points around the church.

I concluded that the four legged stand does reduce the space around the font markedly and I understood why it is said to be an obstruction for those most closely involved in the ritual of baptism who would normally stand close and around the font. I could see why the celebrant in particular might find the structure awkward at that point when they hold a baby or child over the font in order to access the baptismal water.

I noted that whilst there are a few points in the church from which the stained glass of the baptistry, the font and the baptistry itself can be seen without the stand blocking and obscuring the view, such points are much fewer in number than those viewpoints from which a perspective of the baptistry is obscured and obstructed by the structure. My task is not to evaluate the aesthetic impact of a feature or to resolve issues as to controversy but I must record my impression that its impact on the overall aesthetic of the church is discordant.

8. The applicable law

Canon F1 of the Church of England requires a church to have:-

A decent font, with a cover for keeping it clean

And: That it shall stand as near as convenient to the principal entrance (unless there is a custom to the contrary or the Chancellor directs otherwise) and in as spacious and well-ordered surrounding as possible.

(my underlining)

My reasons in this matter must be structured by my posing and answering “the Duffield Questions” derived from paragraph 87 of the Court of Arches decision in *St Alkmund Duffield* [2013] Fam 158 namely:

1. Would the proposals if implemented result in harm to the significance of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest?

I agree with the authors of the Statement of Significance for the Petitioners in this case that the stand in the baptistry is of low significance within the building.

It may be argued as the Twentieth Century Society do, that it forms part of the 1991 reordering which, whether viewed as controversial or not, is now a feature of high significance within the church. They point to the stand being a “re-imagining” of the stand created by the architect’s partner, George Pace, in Southwark Cathedral. I do not understand why and cannot agree that the possibility that the stand in St John’s Ranmoor is an imitation of a feature installed in a quite different space elevates its significance.

The main features of the 1991 re-ordering in St John’s Ranmoor are not the subject of any Petition for alteration and removal and the potential removal of the stand leaves the impression created by the whole 1991 re-ordering substantially intact. The lightened wood and the other wrought iron features remain prominent and are located separately from the baptistry. The location and appearance of the other 1991 changes in the church do not need to be seen as a unified with the font structure. I conclude that the proposed removal hardly impacts the holistic impression of the 20th Century reordering.

2. If the answer to question (1) is that minimal harm would result from the proposed removal of the font frame, the ordinary presumption in faculty proceedings in favour of things as they stand is nonetheless applicable. Its rebuttal depends on the particular nature of the proposals.

The presumption in favour of leaving matters as they stand if there is no harm, can be rebutted here by the reasons advanced in respect of the obstruction created by this feature of the primary purpose of the baptistry and the font namely the celebration of the rite of baptism.

3. If the answer to question (1) is yes, how serious would the harm be?

I have concluded that the harm to the historical and architectural significance of the church were this Petition to succeed is low. I have also concluded that the justification offered for the removal of the font stand

legitimises the change proposed. That is that the feature presents a marked interference to the primary purpose of the baptistry. That reason overrides a presumption against change given the minimal harm which would result. My quantification of this harm is explained in response to question (1).

4. How clear and convincing is the justification for carrying out the proposals?

I consider that the justification is clear and convincing. The baptistry is a small space with a specific and important purpose in accordance with Canon F1. The present structure obstructs that purpose. It may not have been realised at the time of the permission for the reordering in 1990/1991 that this would be its impact. I am satisfied that the Petitioners have evidenced that impact clearly and sufficiently.

5. Bearing in mind that there is a strong presumption against proposals which will adversely affect the special character of a listing building will any resulting public benefit (including matters such as liturgical freedom, pastoral mission, opportunities for mission, and putting the church to viable uses that are consistent with its role as a place of worship and mission) outweigh the harm?

In answering question (5) the more serious the harm, the greater will be the level of benefit needed before the proposals should be permitted. This will be particularly the case if the harm is to a building which is listed Grade 1 or 2* where serious harm should only exceptionally be allowed.

I do consider that the likely benefit outweighs any harm in this instance. It is worth noting under this paragraph that baptisms are widely attended by a child's family and supporters. The maintenance of a suitable place for that ritual which also welcomes, perhaps infrequent visitors, to a church is a public benefit which also justifies the change proposed.

Decision and reasons

I have concluded, for the reasons set out in the answers to the Duffield questions in the last paragraph, that this Petition should be allowed. The font stand may be removed from the church to better enable the baptistry to be

beter used for its primary purpose and to be a more welcoming and therefore inclusive place for those attending. The Canon requires the font to have a cover. I therefore consider that the existing cover should be retained and stored in order for it to be reinstalled as before (i.e. suspended from the roof/ceiling) in the relatively near future. In the event that the Pettoners have in mind an alternative cover arrangement they may request the Registry to put that alternative to me for an amendment to the faculty that will issue following this decision.

HHJ Sarah Singleton KC

Chancellor of the Diocese of Sheffield.

22nd June 2025