

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF ST EDMUNDSBURY AND
IPSWICH

In re Sibton, St Peter

JUDGMENT

1. This is an amended petition by a Grade I listed church, to:
 - a. Instal 4 stained glass panels in the three south chancel window openings currently glazed in a clear geometric pattern in poor condition
 - b. To convert all but four pews to form pewlets (shortened pews), the pews and all pewlets to remain in a moveable format.
2. The first part of the petition is uncontentious. The second has been criticised, in part, by the Victorian Society who have elected not to become a party opponent.
3. I note that the petitioners refer to shortened pews as ‘pewlets’. I will not¹,
4. The amended petition now seeks to shorten all but four of the seventeen pews described rather ominously, as being stored ‘on end behind the organ’. That method of storage has already caused damage to some of the pews.
5. The petitioners have helpfully analysed their own petition using the *Duffield* criteria (although it is doubtful that they would be considered entirely independent in doing so). In dealing with the issues they state (and I quote them in full):

Questions 1 and 3 are more easily answered together.

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

And Q 3. If the answer is “yes”, how serious would the harm be?

The church is listed Grade I for its medieval remains, in the listing text the following C19 alterations are mentioned: C19 alteration to the C17 pulpit, and inclusion of panels from the C15 rood screen in the late C19 dwarf chancel screen. The rebuilding of the chancel carried out in 1872 is noted together with C19 alterations to the exterior in C13 style. However there is nothing mentioned concerning significance to the building of C19 nave pews as part

¹ Indeed, if any petitioner choses to use the word ‘pewlet’ to refer to a shortened pew in any future application, they will have an uphill task persuading me to grant their petition.

of the Victorian re-ordering. The PCC suggests that the listing text should be regarded as defining those artefacts that are significant to the architecture and history of the building as a whole. Opinion has been expressed that the addition of the chancel, built to E. C. Hakewill's design in 13th century style, was carried out in a particularly sensitive manner, and that the significance of the medieval character of the rest of the building is increased by that work. In 2004, concerning the nave pews, the DAC recommended and the Victorian Society did not object to proposals that the pews could be removed from their pew platforms and made moveable. It was agreed that pavement tile flooring, more suitable to flexible use of the nave space, could replace the pew platforms. That 2004 re-ordering has resulted in the body of the nave being free of pews. This was a benefit that enhanced the significance of the medieval interior still further, removing a sense of over-heavy Victorian additions and reinstating the uncluttered state of the medieval space. The PCC is of the view that it is therefore an overstatement to maintain that the C19 pews in their current situation are intrinsic to the historical and architectural importance of the building and are of high significance. The proposals put forward by the PCC will not impact on that benefit, especially since walls were the usual place for seating in earlier times. If pews were modified to pewlets, with other pews remaining intact but moveable, the harm done would be minimal. A proposal by the Victorian Society that reintroduces full length pews filling the east end of the nave to approximately one third of its length appears to be totally at odds with reinstatement of the medieval nave space, and is seen as harming the special architectural significance of the building.

Q 5. Bearing in mind that there is a strong presumption against proposals which adversely affect the special character of a listed building, will any resulting public benefit (including matters such as liturgical freedom, pastoral well-being, 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?

The needs of maximizing available flexible space, together with provision for the possibility of varying seating arrangements, were put forward in earlier statements by the PCC particularly in the justification and appendices of a revised statement of needs that was provided to the Victorian Society following their first response to the original proposals. As the result of its revised proposal regarding the pews, the PCC wishes to develop its earlier justification in light of Q 5. of the Duffield questions:

a) Seating in relation to greater liturgical freedom: While shortening of the pew benches may be a consideration in assessing potential damage to their historical significance, it is the unique set of pew ends designed by E. C. Hakewill that is of the highest significance. The PCC argues that shortening a proportion of the pews to the proposed two-seater format provides the opportunity to remove all the pews from permanent storage and have the pewlets with their individually carved oak pew ends in full use and on view in the body of the church. Together with the retention of four full length pews it means that all the carved pew ends are on view. The public benefit of this alteration is that by becoming much more flexible in use, historical significance of the seating is preserved and alteration allows for greater liturgical freedom.

Though the current congregation for in-parish church services is small and the chancel is the preferred location for these occasions, a cross-benefice aim is to provide mission and spiritual advice to younger generations who are not presently habitual worshippers. For the benefice as a whole the nave at Sibton, completely free of pews, is a unique asset (the other seven churches

retain their pew sets more-or-less-complete). It means for example that Sibton has the ideal flexible space available for 'Family @ Church'. The free space of the nave combined with the historical association of the pew ends, carved in the Victorian era to represent the fruits of Creation, becomes a considerable public benefit, with the added advantage that two-seater pewlets in conjunction with other flexible use furnishings can be easily re-arranged in any required way, or the four pews moved to any location, together facing in the most appropriate direction.

b) Seating in relation to pastoral well-being and spiritual guidance: These changes will provide similar public benefit at other events to aid pastoral well-being and spiritual guidance. Long pews against the walls are not a convenient option for gatherings such as quiet days, or bible study and spiritual guidance where group discussion is advantageous. Maximizing space between groups is also a considerable advantage acoustically during group discussions. Two-seater pewlets have the advantage of being more easily moveable than long pews. Flexible in use, they can either be used singly or in combination with each other or with stackable or folding chairs: They provide possibilities for different orientation to compliment different seating arrangements. There is even sufficient room on a pewlet to use a laptop. They are the straightforward seating solution in a number of situations described in the revised statement of needs and demonstrate that historic furnishings can be adapted to changing attitudes to worship. There is public benefit in that historical seating made less cumbersome can remain in use in sessions for spiritual education; sessions where congregations and study groups are an essential part of the action rather than observers to be maintained in serried ranks as was the case in a bygone era. The PCC suggests that retaining long pews as a means of displaying arrangements for seating during a particular period in the history of the church building is harmful to the Church's mission and does not contribute to the Sibton Church's role as a place of worship.

c) The benefit of maximising usable space and flexible seating for other viable uses of the building: It is essential to remember that the church building is the only building in Sibton available for public use. Public benefit is enhanced by leasing of the nave and chancel to the Friends of St Peter's Sibton whose objects concerning support for the maintenance of the building by enhancing community use are listed at the end of this addendum. Maintaining a clear space in the nave from the south and north doors forwards to the chancel step is as essential for social and community use of the nave provided by the efforts of the Friends of St Peter's Church, as is the space to the west of the doors that is occupied by the kitchen chest and servery where tables for refreshments can be set out.

The suggestion that four or six of the full-length pews should be re-positioned, preferably re-fixed, at the east end of the nave, presumably facing eastwards, is harmful to the public benefit. This arrangement would need to incorporate space in front of the chancel step. The whole area, thus limited to the single function of seating a group for a single fixed type of use, would reduce the space available by approximately one third.

This would be a major hindrance to flexible use of the nave in other situations, including community events frequently held in the nave. Those full-length pews in front of the chancel step, facing in the wrong direction for events taking place in western parts of the nave, even if they were not fixed, would have to be moved constantly and stored for every other activity that takes place in the nave and north aisle. (Health and Safety reasons for not moving these long pews were explained compellingly as justification in the original

statement of needs.) The help received from the friends' organization emphasizes the importance of the PCC's policy towards outreach. We are not shy of asking for help with fundraising to maintain the church building, which is a stated object of the charity of the Friends of St Peter's, Sibton. Through running fundraising events such as the annual three-day Books-'n-Bric-a-brac sale, the majority of which require the whole space of the nave, a large number of offers of help comes in. When popular and highly appreciated community events are provided, a valuable exchange of gifts becomes outreach in itself. Fundraising events in the church can contribute significantly in raising awareness of a somewhat remote, but highly significant church building.

The PCC awaits the full results of an investigative survey of the nave roof, but from initial feedback there is the suggestion that a major fundraising campaign will be needed to ensure the roof's longevity, indeed even the sustainability of the church building as a whole. It should be noted that St. Peter's, Sibton has recently been added to Historic England's 'At Risk' register for the precarious state of its medieval single hammerbeam nave roof. Neither the PCC, nor the Friends are daunted by this prospect, provided there is space in which to hold events that can be maximized. In the end it is care of the whole building that must be catered for. To lessen the ability to do so is to reduce public benefit.

d) There is quite possibly a future need for additional space not occupied by long benches. Added to its significance as a Grade I listed building is the fact that the church building shares heritage, and possibly structural modification re-using some of its stonework, with the nearby ruin of C13 Sibton Abbey, which is currently being stabilized with funding from Historic England. Greater awareness of this link between the two buildings would further increase the current significance of the medieval heritage and structure of the church building. Any display or exhibition would add to the public benefit. It is hoped that at some future date this can be promoted through some space for permanent exhibition of this shared heritage and history in the church, possibly in part of the north aisle.

To summarize: The Victorian Society's view concerning the importance of retaining the church's pews is weakened if the situation means that the majority of those pews remain out of sight and without easy access. If they can be modified so that they are easier to handle they can be displayed and used in the body of the church, contributing to the church's heritage and illustrating a part of its history. It is a win-win situation if current space is not limited as a result. All advantages are denied by insisting that there should be fixed pews in a central position in the body of the church to preserve historical significance alone. The overall harm would be the prevention of other valuable use of a large part of the nave, damaging opportunities to develop liturgical freedom, mission and outreach. We believe that, in giving its advice on the matter, the DAC in supporting the views of the Victorian Society may have overlooked the PCC's responsibilities in these areas

6. Having read all the documentation sent to me, in particular the very thoughtful and clear representations from the Victorian Society, I have to carry out a balancing exercise. I take into account that St Peter's is the only building in Sibton available for public use, and that the greater flexibility created by shortening the majority of the pews and making all the pews mobile will make

it a much more useful space for missional opportunities and pastoral well-being and for making the church a more viable space for the public to use.

7. I am just persuaded, due in large part to the helpful analysis by the petitioners of the situation, therefore to grant this petition in amended form set out below:
 - a. Instal 4 stained glass panels in the three south chancel window openings currently glazed in a clear geometric pattern in poor condition
 - b. To convert all but four pews to form shortened pews, the pews and all the shortened pews to remain in a moveable format.

7th November 2022

Justin Gau,
Chancellor