The Parish of
St George the Martyr
Shirley

PROJECT UPDATE
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✠ *Following Christ* ✠ *Serving Community* ✠ *Welcoming All* ✠

Making the Case for Chairs

"After much consideration the PCC has agreed to begin to take steps to unlock the flexibility of the church space by replacing the pews with high quality chairs, similar to those already in use in the church. This is an integral part of the plans to develop the Church and Hall. The PCC's reasoning is explained in this update and we hope you will read it with an open mind."

The Vicar & Churchwardens

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Our ageing hall

When the project to replace the church hall was first discussed with Archdeacon Chris Skilton (now retired) he strongly advised that, as a first step, we look at the use we make of the existing buildings. He knew there would be a temptation to build a like-for-like replacement which he advised would be an opportunity missed to make sure we were making best use of our land and building assets. This is what set the PCC down the road of rethinking the best use of the existing church building as the first phase of the project.

Inclusion & flexibility

The key words that appeared during our discussions were ***inclusion*** and ***flexibility***.

St. George's has long considered itself a welcoming church, and rightly so, but that has never led to complacency. Over a number of years, St. George's has taken bold steps towards realising the third part of its vision - Welcoming All. To that end we have adopted the aims of Inclusive Church - *"We believe in inclusive church – a church which celebrates and affirms every person and does not discriminate"* – and that has implications for all aspects of our church life.

We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on grounds of disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality.

In terms of our buildings, we took some first steps towards this back in 2016 when we made a minor re-ordering to make some space for families with buggies and wheelchair users giving them at least the option not to have to sit at the back. However, we still need more flexibility to meet our aim that anyone should be able to sit in a place of their choice.

We have also updated our sound system and hearing loop to improve access for people with a hearing impairment and produce all our printed material in large format for people with visual impairments.

Nobody can predict with any certainty what the future life of the church will be, but in order to ensure the building meets the needs of future generations, we need to make it as flexible as possible.

Current usage

We realised that the main body of the church was only used regularly for about 8 hours a week (Sunday mornings for the 10.00am Eucharist and open for visitors on Monday and Saturday mornings 9.00am to noon.) We decided to remove the rear pews and since doing so, we have been able to host a number of new activities such as the monthly **Messy Church**; weekly **Little Dragons** toddler group; a weekly community art group called **Patchwork Palette**; and a **Blue Christmas Service** followed by refreshments for people who find Christmas a difficult time, perhaps due to a loss.

None of these activities would have been possible without the flexibility the new space gave us. Through these activities, many people have come into the building for the first time while others have spoken of fond memories from childhood Parade Services (which underlines their importance.) But each of them is still limited in terms of the numbers we can accommodate, the scope of the activities offered, and their importance to the life of the church by the present configuration.

Developing activities

Messy church attracts about 30 children and adults and involves lots of different craft activities, each on its own table, and we regularly have to squeeze past tables placed in the central aisle to have enough room. We want families to feel the church wants them and is prepared to change to make them welcome.

Messy church also involves refreshments – sandwiches, snacks and drinks for the children and adults - which means that a temporary servery is set up each time at the back of the church with extra care being taken over the use of kettles.

Little Dragons attracts a similar number and likewise comprises a number of activity areas but at either end of the church rather than together which limits the scope for whole group activities such as the singing slot and story time. Group sizes can become self-limiting if the space feels crowded. Little Dragons too involves refreshments – tea, coffee, cakes, biscuits and fruit served from tables near the vestry to minimise any risks to crawling babies and adventurous toddlers.

Patchwork Palette community art group uses the front space but would need more space if it were to grow beyond current numbers.

On occasion the 25 or so members of the **Monday Pop-In** have been known to meet in the Church when, for whatever reason, the church hall was temporarily out of action. They too enjoy refreshments and the kitchen is open throughout the session.

The pandemic pause

We acknowledge that the pandemic has caused the suspension of all of these activities but there is evidence that there is a real demand for them to re-start and that's what we're planning to do once things are Covid-safe.

Other local churches

The Church of St John the Divine, Selsdon, which was built in 1935-6 has always been furnished with wooden chairs as did many of the churches built at that time.

St Mildred's Church, Addiscombe, which was built in 1931-2 currently has more modern comfortable chairs which give them scope to hold events like diocesan training that require different seating arrangements.

Both churches retain the feeling of a traditional church, something the PCC is keen to maintain at **St. George's.**

What happens next?

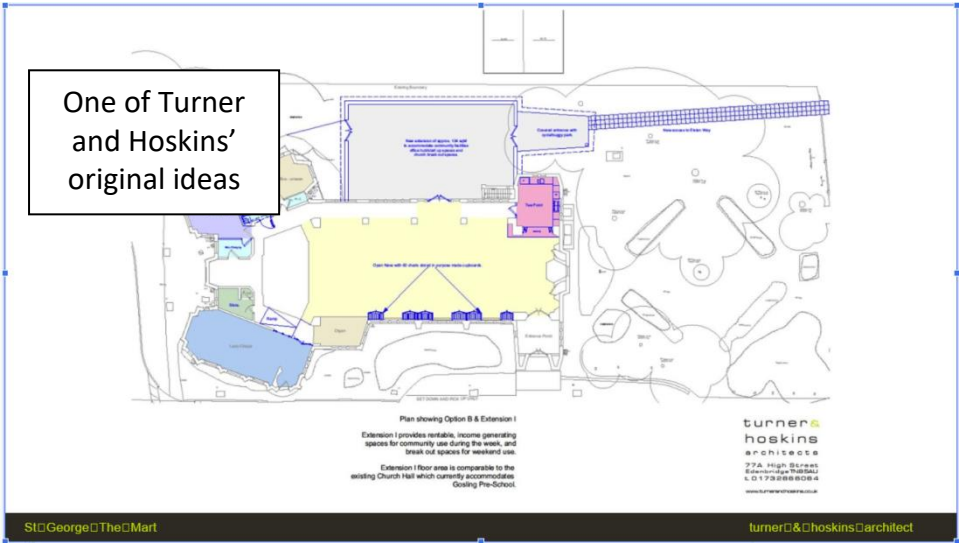
The pews at St. George's were reclaimed from a redundant 70-year-old church, St. Michael's in Folkestone that was demolished in 1953. They are made of pine; probably dating from 1884 when the church was built and were originally stained with a dark stain. They were also longer and had to be cut to fit their new home. Sadly, our inspecting architect does not think they have any particular architectural merit or value other than sentimental.

The PCC will now begin the process of applying for the necessary faculty to undertake the proposed work and any comments should be sent via the Vicar as Chairman for consideration by the PCC.

The bigger picture

After hearing submissions from 3 architects approved by the Diocese, the PCC has unanimously agreed to engage Turner and Hoskins to begin developing plans to build an annexe to the church to the north to meet the following brief:

"The preferred option agreed already, was that we should look to build a 'North Wall' annexe to house the following; a fully compliant 'Changing Places' accessible toilet. A kitchenette/servery (for hot/cold drinks, cakes/biscuits/sandwiches etc – with warming via microwave only), that ideally will face in to the church as well as in to the annexe. Two further unisex toilets. A new parish office, together with a separate smaller room for office equipment (eg. photocopier) and storage. A large meeting room that could house for example, 'Junior Church', 'Pop-in', or bible study groups. That this annexe would be accessed direct from inside the church but in addition, accessed from the exterior, at the end of a new path from the roadway, running alongside the most northern aspect of the new planned 'Garden of Remembrance'. That the stairwell to the basement/boiler room (that is often subject to flooding) be incorporated inside the annexe."



How will this be paid for?

Church - A few years ago the PCC was in receipt of a generous legacy from the estate of Fr. John Worsfold of just over £40k and it was decided that it should be used for a tangible project that centred around worship.

Together with the proceeds of £400k from the sale of Church Cottage last year we have a ring-fenced sum of £440k which forms the budget for the full cost of the annexe and re-ordering but we hope to supplement this with grant funding especially towards the provision of the 'Changing Places' toilet.

New Hall – This will be funded by the sale of some Church and Diocesan land as part of a joint development. The Diocese are keen partners in this project as they can see the value to both parties of working together.

Concluding comments

Changes on this scale can sometimes be met with concern, fear and outright opposition, but please be assured that the PCC has thought long and hard about this and has not undertaken it lightly, believing that this sequence of developments will deliver a church complex that will meet the needs of the worshipping congregation and the wider community well into the future. It will underpin our vision to be a church that is **"welcoming all."** We hope that you will give it your backing too.