

THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

The national charity campaigning for the Victorian and Edwardian historic environment

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LEE EVANS PARTNERSHIP	
Att..... <i>NAG</i>	Job No..... <i>6792</i>
14 APR 2009	
Action	
Copies to	
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Our reference: 2006C/02/004

6 April 2009

Dear Mr Lee Evans,

St Mary the Virgin, Ashford (Grade I, medieval, extended 1837 and 1860)

Thank you for notifying the Society of the latest detailed proposals for a major reordering of the church of St Mary the Virgin, Ashford. My former colleague, David Garrard visited the building when it was his case and our Southern Buildings Committee are familiar with both the history of the church and of this scheme. The information you kindly sent to us dated 23 February 2009 was discussed by our Committee and I now write to convey their response.

The Proposals

This consultation is largely focused on works that would be carried out in Phase 1 of a two phase reordering. The first phase is largely restricted to the nave and crossing, excluding the transepts, though the parish hope that a WC can be installed in the north vestry/blower room. Phase 1 involves: The removal of the pews to the nave and aisles; the construction of a stone floor and under floor heating; the construction of a new dais and the moving of the font and pulpit; the creation of rooms at the west end including new WCs and meeting rooms; general repairs to the fabric.

Phase 2 consists of creating new glazed north transept doors, WCs and meeting rooms in the galleries and a new porch at the west end. Our detailed analysis was restricted to the first phase.

The Building

St Mary the Virgin is an ancient parish church which has been altered continually since the 15th century. A remarkable level of fabric survives from every era and the church now represents a complicated and delicate building history with a fascinating interweaving of fabric of various ages and importance. This sensitivity is reflected in the church's designation as a grade-I listed building.

The church is all the more remarkable in Ashford as part of the historic enclave in the centre of the old town. Ashford lost so many fine buildings in the war and has been so drastically altered by a new road system that the church and its immediate surroundings are of enormous local historic importance.

The report by the Architectural History Practice on the history of St Mary the Virgin is extremely thorough and explains clearly the complex development of this ancient building. Informed by their research, the aspects of the church that fall within our period of interest and that would be affected by these proposals are: the westernmost bay of the nave with its west window; the west gallery with its benches; the gallery stairs which were partly built using the recycled material from the Jacobean stair; the vestry on the north side of the chancel built in 1873; the nave pews; the heating system with its iron grilled floor vents and the pulpit designed by John Loughborough Pearson.

The west entrance vestibule is of uncertain date. The report suggests that it may have been designed by Carøe, who also was responsible for the chancel screen which was added in 1919 and therefore within the 20th Century Society's period.

Response

The proposals intend sweeping changes to a major church, whose interior is a complex amalgam of historic features. We previously commented on the need for a comprehensive study of the historic development of the church which has now been completed. The Architectural History Practice state that the church is of '*considerable historic and architectural significance*'. The strongest justification is needed to alter the character of a grade I-listed building which the Society does not feel the current proposals provide.

The supporting documentation explains that the council has identified the church as a potential resource to help deliver their aspirations of developing the town's artistic and cultural life. It is stated that with the proposed expansion of the town, new cultural venues will be needed, but in the meantime the church is seen as a suitably located building to act as a stop-gap venue until the population size justifies the construction of a new performance venue.

The Society would like to impress upon the Council and the parish the delicate nature of the special interest of this building, which cannot withstand the damaging effect of such extensive change. What is needed is a much more subtle approach which does not intend such a complete transformation but that retains the internal and external character of the church. The importance of this building is in the ensemble of all the various elements; of which the removal of any part has an impact on its special interest and each change must be weighed-up against the benefits to the building as a whole. In this case the proposed scheme does not have the long-term future of the building as a priority and therefore any damaging implications cannot be acceptable. Bearing this in mind, the following points set out the Society's stance on the major alterations that are proposed:

-The nave pews are finely carved and clearly make a major contribution to the character of the church, which would be much changed by their removal. The wholesale removal proposed is entirely unacceptable to the Society and represents an unsustainable waste of very fine-quality seating.

-The principle of a new dais is acceptable but risks reducing the choir to 'dead space' and altering the visual and ecclesiastical hierarchy of the building. The resultant need to move the pulpit entails altering the gentle sweep of the steps round the column. This would in all likelihood make the alteration unacceptable to the Society as the pulpit is one of its finest fixtures by a major 19th century architect.

-There may well be scope for alterations to the space under the west gallery but the manner in which the interface with the nave is envisaged is not appropriate and needs to respond

and fit in with the existing character of the building. Limited interventions may also be possible on the west gallery.

-Of the external alterations, a small extension to the north vestry in the manner proposed is acceptable to the Society but is also subject to the views of the SPAB.

-The west porch is, as predicted by the architects, a highly contentious proposal that would affect a major elevation of the church; it would in all likelihood, be unacceptable to the Society.

The use of this church as a flexible performance space as envisaged in these proposals is not compatible with its current character. We recommend that a new more sensitive and subtle approach is adopted.

Please contact the Society if we can give any further help over these or amended proposals.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Heloise Brown', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Heloise Brown
Conservation Adviser

cc. Catherine Cullis, The SPAB
Stuart Taylor, The Georgian Group
Ian Dodd, Canterbury DAC
The Twentieth Century Society