

Statement of Needs

The current choir stalls have been in situ since 1974. They were designed by Arthur Lockett and Tom Karen and are made from veneered plywood. Karen, who lived in Ashwell, was well known for his car designs, including the Reliant Scimitar, the Reliant Robin and his award-winning Ford Anglia interior. He was asked by the Rector at the time (Jack Catterick) to design choir stalls that could be used as a temporary stop gap, until 'proper choir stalls' could be purchased (as related by the late Judy Catterick, long serving choir director).

The choir has a regular attendance of up to 20 singers most Sunday mornings for Communion Service. The choir also sings once a month for evensong and a number of special services.

Proposal to remove current choir stalls and chairs

Current status

The stalls are increasingly in a poor condition; a few are starting to crumble around the base. The beech choir chairs are standard, approximately fifty years old and upholstered in blue vinyl. Several of them have sagging seats. The stalls are extremely heavy (approx. 70kg each), requiring two people and a trolley to move each one. They are positioned on platforms, that are even heavier and more cumbersome to move. When the choir stalls are moved or returned to their original place it is very time consuming. It also requires the presence of an individual with knowledge of exactly how the puzzle of platforms and stalls fit together. Most recently, it took six people, in good physical condition, 45 minutes to return the choir stalls and platforms to their correct positions. If people have not experienced moving the stalls/platforms before, they are at risk of mild injuries, (eg dropping the platform on fingers, pulling back muscles) and this puts them off helping again.

Access and arrangement of choir stalls and chairs

Both back rows of the current stalls are inaccessible to people with mobility issues. They are also very cramped in some places, a particular issue for those who currently stand very close to and in front of the organ. Whilst this arrangement has been tolerated for many years, it is restrictive for the organist and unpleasantly loud for the back row of the choir.

The arrangement of the stalls has been considered in this proposal, for example turning the stalls to face the congregation, which has benefits in terms of addressing the music more directly to the congregation. The existing stalls could not be arranged in this way, partly because the existing choir frontals are extremely large and would block the congregation's sight line to the altar. They are also very solid and heavy visually and were they to be turned around to face the congregation, the effect would be like putting in a solid wall.

Prior to the current stalls (although the timing is unknown) a photograph of the church in the 1920s shows choir stalls, that are more like the stalls we would like to purchase. So, by installing the new stalls we may be reverting to something closer to the original.

Removal and Recycling

In terms of recycling, the chairs will continue to be used in the church. Treske can collect from site any of our existing wooden furniture items (stalls and platforms) and they would ensure that that all items are sorted through and any elements which can be recycled will be sent off for processing. They would separate out any metal components and then turn the wood components into energy which is used to heat their facility in North Yorkshire. As a

company they are very focused in trying to reduce any waste created by their manufacturing process and in doing this, aim to reduce their overall impact on the environment

Consultation with PCC, choir and congregation

In considering the re-ordering, extensive consultation with the PCC, congregation and choir has been undertaken. This began with an informal survey at the PCC, who, from an aesthetic perspective, voted the choir space their least favourite area of the church. The congregation were able to express their views in a questionnaire. In addition, two meetings were held with the choir, where there was extensive discussion. This was extremely useful and informed the next steps of the proposal - initially our preferred design included curved stalls and benches, but this was changed to straight stalls to increase flexibility and reduce cost. All parties were strongly in favour of the proposal for new choir stalls and benches.

Identifying the best supplier

Extensive desk top research was undertaken to identify church furniture suppliers who could provide the stalls which would meet our requirements. We also engaged with other local churches, one of whom had relatively recently installed new choir stalls. They used a local supplier, who unfortunately is no longer in business. Of the two suppliers we worked with, Treske were able to provide the best product in terms of both quality and price. Treske visited Ashwell and advised on how the stalls and benches could fit with existing furniture (polished and stained to match).

Proposal for new choir stalls and benches

The new furniture has been designed to be in keeping with the architectural style of the space, but also flexible enough to be reconfigured easily and with minimal effort to give several different seating/standing arrangements for the church choir. The new stalls are much lighter both physically and visually and would therefore be much more flexible to use in both the collegiate and congregational seating formats. The proposed re-ordering would allow the choir area to be more flexible, adaptable, and inclusive as a space for the whole church and the community. It would enhance the space between the congregants and the altar and allow a greater connection with the choir. It would also provide a greater aesthetic experience for the congregation, the choir and those who are involved in logistics. The new furniture could be more easily configured to reflect the requirements of different services, and they will also provide storage for hymn and chant books.

The benches are more in keeping with the choir stalls and will also last significantly longer than the vinyl seats and backs on the chairs. We discussed comfort with the supplier, who has researched this for the solid oak benches. The feedback they have received from those churches that have chosen this option, is that choirs can sit quite comfortably on the slightly raked seats of the benches and that the back rests offer some good support for longer periods of use.

Access and new arrangements

The additional space that the new stalls would enable means that singers would have more space around them both individually and collectively. The back row, in front of the organ, would no longer be affected by the amplification of the organ. And the choir would no longer restrict the organist's visibility and experience. The new stalls are fully accessible for anyone with mobility issues.

Once a month there is a more informal worship service, where piano, guitar, harp and other musical instruments might be used. More flexible stalls will allow us to arrange the choir and musicians in different ways, to best match the nature of the service or event.

Community and village events

Whilst still robust, the new stalls and benches are much lighter and can be moved more easily. This is so important as the church hosts a wide variety of community events, some of which raise essential funds for the church, including concerts, the Music Festival, the Book Fair, and the Horticultural Show. We have received strong support from those organising these events, that lighter and more flexible choir stalls would not only be extremely welcome but would also encourage wider engagement with the local community to utilise the space and amenities of the church. We have been told many times, and know from our own experience, that moving the current stalls and platforms is an extremely arduous job.

Summary

These changes would bring immediate transformation to the area of the church in front of the chancel – it would be lighter, more spacious, adaptable and members of the choir would be better grouped, for improved sound and connection with the congregation. The adaptability of the new more lightweight stalls would enable the village to continue to use the church for a wider range of community events.