
THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY
The champion for Victorian and Edwardian architecture

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Peterborough DAC Secretary

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Dear Paul

**Grade I, C13, restored 1869 and 1892, screen 1915 and rood 1919, altar rails
post-1918
Removal of furnishings and reflooring throughout**

Thank you for your letter of 10 March enclosing details of proposals to reorder the Grade I-listed church of St Botolph, Longthorpe, and for arranging the forthcoming site visit to Longthorpe St Botolph for the afternoon of Tuesday 3 June. I look forward to attending this visit, which I hope will allow a constructive discussion about the most sensitive ways of meeting the parish's needs. As the basis for such a discussion, however, it is important that we should state frankly and clearly our views on the quality of the application and the merits of the scheme in its current form. I presented this case to the Society's Southern Buildings Committee at its April meeting and now write to convey the Committee's response.

Members of the Committee were shocked by the approach to the reordering of the Grade I-listed church that has been adopted by the PCC and its architect. This radically insensitive scheme would amount, in effect, to gutting the church of its historic interior. It would go far beyond the degree of alteration that the building could bear without suffering substantial harm to its character as a building of special architectural and historic interest.

The Victorian Society was first consulted on the reordering of St Botolph's church in 2011, and offered its advice in a letter of 7 July that year from our then Churches Conservation Adviser, Edmund Harris, to the Secretary of the church's Reordering Task Group, Mr G. Sayers. I attach this for your reference. The same scope of works as currently proposed was envisaged – a scheme that, as Mr Harris pointed out, would have 'a drastic effect on the interior of the church':

All the congregational and choir seating, the pulpit, the chancel screen and the altar rails are to be removed and the floor will be replaced to install underfloor heating and create a level surface throughout. The font is to be moved from its current position by the north door to the centre of the nave and

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the reredos is to be altered to bring its central section level with the sill of the east window.

Whilst not offering detailed comments on the individual proposals (because the scheme was, at that time, only presented in sketch form), Mr Harris nonetheless offered a 'general expression of concern over their impact.' He pointed out that 'the current appearance of the church is predominantly a product of the 19th and 20th centuries, with only the outer walls and arcades surviving from preceding phases of development,' and emphasised that 'we would like to see more evidence that the parish has considered their [i.e. the existing fittings] importance and balanced their conservation properly against the needs that it seeks to address.' He therefore recommended that the parish produce a much more detailed Statement of Significance to allow a full understanding of the building's fabric and fittings, in order 'to identify areas of importance and ensure that they are treated sympathetically.'

It is disappointing to see that three years of further reflection and development have resulted in a Statement of Significance little more detailed, and a scheme of no greater nuance or sensitivity, than that seen by Mr Harris in 2011. Part II of the Statement of Significance is, in actuality, an apologia for the Statement of Needs: rather than offering a thoughtful appraisal of the historic and aesthetic interest of the existing furnishings and the contribution they make to the church as individual items and as an ensemble, it simply dismisses them all as of 'low' or 'low-moderate' significance, without explaining how these judgements were arrived at, as a prelude to reiterating the arguments for removing them. Taking the items in turn:

- The pews – 'low significance.' These are described as being 'probably from a pattern book': how has the PCC arrived at this conclusion? The appearance of the pews is not described, though the bench ends appear to feature decorative roundels. The aesthetic contribution made by the pews *en masse* in bringing structure to the volume of the church does not appear to have been considered. The Statement of Needs does not mention whether the PCC have considered removing fewer of the pews, or adapting the pews to make them more easily moveable – has an options appraisal been conducted?
- The choir stalls – presumably also considered to be of 'low significance.' These are said to be oak – are they also amongst the furnishings made 'by local craftsmen'? Poppy-headed, and apparently part of a coherent early twentieth-century ensemble that also includes the bishop's, vicar's and deacon's chairs, also in oak – these items, incidentally, are not discussed. Their role in defining the chancel is not touched upon. Has retaining the chancel intact behind the screen, for use as a small chapel and an attractive historic area of the church, been considered as an option?
- The high altar – 'low significance.' 'Of stone with wood side extensions,' but not otherwise described. It is not clear when this was introduced to the building. Has retaining the high altar in situ whilst using a movable altar in front of the screen been considered as an option?
- Communion rail – 'low-moderate significance.' The statement that 'there are many secular examples of this kind of rail' is difficult to comprehend. Installed as a 1914-18 war memorial: is this not considered to lend it additional significance? It is said that 'the brass engraved memorial plates would be removed and refitted in an appropriate location,' which seems to miss the point that the rail is the memorial, and the plates simply draw attention to that fact – there is no other appropriate location for them.
- Lady Chapel altar – 'low significance,' but not otherwise described.
- Rood screen, rood and pulpit – 'low-moderate significance'. Appendix 4 to the Statement of Needs, 'The case for removal of the rood screen and pulpit,'

states that the screen was installed in 1915. It is acknowledged that the screen is 'not unattractive on the west side,' but claimed that it 'has had all the mouldings removed from the east side' – it is not clear when or by whom. The rood screen would be retained, but the side figures removed: the importance of the relationship between the rood and the side figures, and between these sculptures and the screen, is not discussed. The pulpit is not described: is it in fact a part of the screen, or did it pre-date it?

- Reredos – 'low-moderate significance.' Oak, perhaps installed at the same time as the other chancel furnishings, but not otherwise described. The application seeks to lower the reredos but the impact that this would have on its appearance and structural integrity is not discussed.
- Font – 'low-moderate significance.' The font currently by the south door would apparently be repaired and retained in a new location. The Statement of Significance states that there is 'another small stone Victorian font' in the Sanctuary but it is not clear what would happen to this.
- No description is given of the historic floors in the sanctuary, chancel and aisles, all of which would apparently be replaced. The significance of the oak eagle lectern, 'a gift of the congregation in 1907', is not assessed, nor is it clear what would happen to it.

The alterations to the chancel seem premised on the notion that the existing furnishings 'detract from the altar' – accepting for the moment that this is a legitimate objection, we would nonetheless ask whether less destructive options for ameliorating this have been considered. However, we find it difficult to believe that such an open screen forms much of a barrier either visually or acoustically, as the Statement of Needs claims. Similarly, it is objected that the provision of both a pulpit and a lectern fails to provide a single clear focal point for the proclamation of the Word: we would point out that the great majority of Anglican churches possess both a pulpit and a lectern, and respectfully suggest that a clear focus is achieved through the act of speaking aloud from either location.

We feel that retention of the chancel intact must almost certainly be a fundamental criterion of any acceptable reordering scheme. We note that the chancel screen, rood, and altar rails post-date the period of the Society's remit (1837-1914): ultimately, therefore, we defer to the Twentieth Century Society on the impact of your proposals on these fixtures. In our view, however, these are important and high quality items which should be retained in situ. Together with the other chancel furnishings they produce an ensemble of beauty and historical importance.

Similarly, we do not feel that a case for removing all of the nave pews has yet been made, and would recommend that a critical mass of pews, adapted to be more easily moveable, be retained.

Fundamentally, we remain of the opinion that the significance of the building's fittings has not been adequately assessed, and that as a result the scheme entirely fails to strike a reasonable balance between the needs of the parish and the historical and aesthetic interest of the existing building. Notwithstanding the fact that the church's medieval fabric would be unaltered by the present proposals, the building's historical and aesthetic interest would be very seriously impaired by the present proposals, which would denude the interior of much of its richness and variety and strip it of its character as a building that has developed, by accretion, over centuries. This is an unacceptable approach to take towards a Grade I-listed historic church.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Ashley

cc Canon W. S. Croft, Priest in Charge

Henrietta Billings, C20

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