

ST MARY THE VIRGIN CHURCH, ASHFORD

Diocese of Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

Originally a small market town, Ashford expanded during the mid 19th century following its growing importance as a main railway junction. Much new building has taken place from the mid-late 20th century, including large housing estates to the south and west, a shopping centre, library, college and cinema complex.

The Church of St Mary the Virgin stands in the centre of the town within a peaceful churchyard. This is set in a close-knit square of attractive houses and cottages, many of which are listed, including the mid 17th century former Grammar School and 18th century College, just off the High Street. The square is at the core of the Ashford Conservation Area and the church itself is Grade I listed, an indication of its historical and architectural significance.

This large church, built in Kentish ragstone in a cruciform shape, is notable for its substantial central tower with unusually tall octagonal buttresses with plain pinnacles. Glimpses of the tower are visible from many parts of the town. The remains of a 14th century building is evident in the south transept, but the chancel, together with aisles and transepts mostly date from the mid 15th century. The major building phase took place in the late 15th century when the tower and nave were rebuilt under the direction of Sir John Fogge. Both nave aisles were later widened and the nave extended westwards in the early 19th century and at the same time the 17th century galleries were also enlarged.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Whilst the church is at the centre of the town, it was identified by Ashford Borough Council as being an underused heritage asset and there was a desire to widen its use for the local community in partnership with the church parish.

The Council was also looking for a suitable location for a new arts centre and the church building was clearly a very sustainable option for such community use and would be less costly than a new building.

The church itself is one of six parish churches within Ashford Town Parish which extends to the surrounding areas of Great Chart, Kennington, Kingsnorth, Sevington, Shadoxhurst and Willesborough.



Left: view of church from the town centre



Below: view of church from the churchyard

THE PROJECT BRIEF

The brief was for the building to undergo a major re-ordering in partnership with Ashford Borough Council so that it could provide a home for the visual and performing arts as well as expanding worship in the growing town of Ashford.

This re-ordering was also a once in a century opportunity to shrink the carbon footprint of a major historic building.

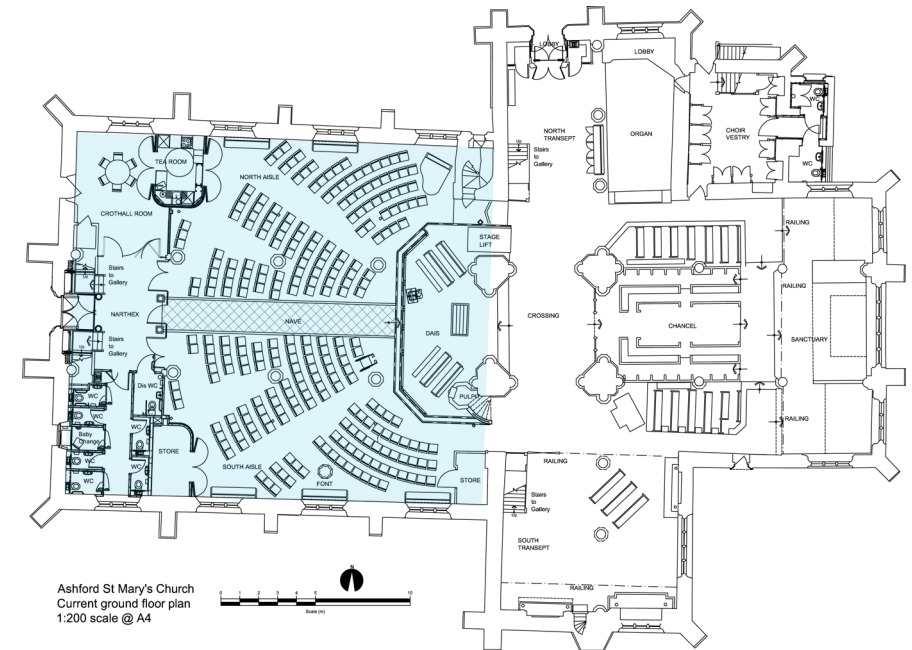
THE PROPOSALS

The internal works are almost entirely contemporary and sympathetic alterations, the replacement flooring in the nave being the principal change in the building. The chancel, chapels and tower area were retained as existing, without alteration. In the nave, the Victorian pews and platforms were removed, retaining samples of each type within the aisles and south transept. The new floor is German limestone and incorporates the original central aisle with diagonally laid stone flooring.

All the flooring has been laid on a dry, Jupiter System sub-base which the architects and heating specialist developed jointly to avoid the need for extensive excavations or wet trades. This provides efficient underfloor heating which is powered by a ground source heat pump. The floor is also strong enough for a cherry picker to access high level equipment in the nave. The ground source heat pump (GSHP) was identified as being a suitable heat source given the ground conditions. Due to archaeological considerations a new radial array bore hole system was installed, going down to a depth of 50 metres below the churchyard, minimising the number of points where drilling takes place. This is new drilling technology in Britain and uses the Eonic system that has been previously used in mainland Europe.

The font was re-located to the west end of the south aisle and a new wooden dais was formed for the nave altar. There are oak vertical-boarded "pods" at the west end to provide a kitchen, storage cupboards, WCs and a meeting room. These are entirely contemporary in appearance, as are the glazed screens which divide the west end into flexible spaces and also enclose the re-constructed Victorian staircases to the upper galleries.

A state-of-the-art audio-visual system has been installed with considerable future-proofing capacity, a motorised drop down screen and very sophisticated sound and lighting as well as a portable stage with lift. This last item was positioned to avoid impact on the extensive archaeology which inevitably arises in projects of this nature. This was demonstrated by the discovery of the foundations of the earlier Norman church that formerly stood on the site.



Plan of church showing reordered areas shaded in blue



View of nave from galleries:
Before reordering



After reordering

OBTAINING PERMISSIONS AND TIME LINE

Lee Evans Partnership LLP was invited to tender for architectural services in September 2008. The Faculty for the scheme was granted in April 2010 and work started on site September 2010, with the project opened to the public in late July 2011. A very, very tight programme was only made possible by the innovative floor construction, with minimal excavations.

Most of the works were internal except for a modest vestry WC extension which was built entirely to match the existing Victorian lean-to structure housing the organ blower. Samples of materials including a sample panel were agreed with the Area Conservation Officer and Historic England. Externally there were also the “engineering works” consisting of a ground source heat pump and rainwater harvesting installation. These were completely below ground and subject to a full archaeological investigation, carried out by Canterbury Archaeological Trust. All of the works to the fabric of the building were carried out in close liaison with Roger Joyce, the Inspecting Architect for the church.

The internal alterations were outside the jurisdiction of the Local Authority, requiring certification from Canterbury Diocesan Advisory Committee and a full Faculty. Consents were also required from the advisory bodies including the SPAB, Victorian Society and Church Buildings Council. The scheme development was a long and convoluted process and the consent, which had the full backing of Historic England, was eventually attained following a Consistory Court hearing. Throughout the development and implementation of the scheme a very close relationship was maintained with the DAC as well as other consultees.

PROJECT COSTS, FUNDRAISING AND GRANT AID

The contract value for the building works was £1,134,290 and this translates as a cost per square metre of £1,288.

The total budget for the project was just under £1.9 million and this included the audio-visual works, furniture and professional fees. Government growth area funding and Ashford Borough Council have contributed £1.4 million towards the project. Other grants amounted to approx £235,000 from local trusts and £236,000 from the EU, whilst the PCC raised £15,000 towards the project costs.

PROJECT TEAM & SPECIALIST SUPPLIERS

Architects:	Lee Evans Partnership LLP
Heating Design:	Jupiter Heating Systems Ltd
Archaeology:	Canterbury Archaeological Trust
Main Contractor:	Farnrise (Builders) Ltd (now ceased trading)
New seating:	Alpha seating



View of nave looking east towards the chancel before reordering



View of nave looking west towards the chancel after reordering

PROJECT REVIEW

Has the completed scheme achieved the objectives of the brief?

The main objective to create a flexible worship space and venue for community arts events has been fully achieved. The second objective to try and 'shrink the carbon footprint' has been achieved as far as possible within the constraints of a Grade I listed building and has included insulation of the nave floor, provision of heating by ground source heat pump, improving electrical efficiency and economising on water usage with the installation of a grey water system.

Have new uses for the church been generated?

The St Mary's Arts Trust has held concert performances in pop, folk and classical genre as well as children's concerts and film events. The building is also now used as a centre for conferences, art group exhibitions, as a concert hall for local choirs and singing groups and by local schools as well as other local organisations as a venue for awards ceremonies and presentations.

Has the congregation changed/increased/decreased?

There has been some increase although numbers have fluctuated since due to changes of incumbent, an interregnum and parish reorganisation.

Were there any unexpected conflicts between church and community?

In general the church congregation and local population supported the project but the continued opposition of one parishioner and the Victorian Society meant that the proposals had to be heard by the Consistory Court, at considerable expense.

Is the project sustainable in the long term?

The church is committed to the 'shared space' concept with St Mary's Arts trust for twenty years. Further grant funding will probably be needed to meet full costs in the second half of this period.

Does the PCC have any future plans?

None that involve further major construction work.

Best Piece of Advice?

Prepare a good statement of need and statement of significance so that the impact on the historical parts of the church can be clearly seen. Carry out a feasibility study to assess the practicality and costing of the works. Consult widely with the congregation and local community as well as parish council and local authority support and perhaps partnership as well.

Parish website details and contact

www.stmarysashford.org

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View of 'pod' at the west end of the north aisle



Above: School event in the nave

Left: WC showing exposed existing wall stone

Church photographs and plan courtesy of Lee Evans Partnership except for town centre photograph at top of page 1 courtesy of Elaine Wren