

ST MARY'S CHURCH, STANSTED

Diocese of Rochester

INTRODUCTION

St Mary's Church is Grade II* listed and is set within the Conservation Area of the small village of Stansted which lies in a rural location within the North Downs about 9 miles north east of Sevenoaks and 14 miles north west of Maidstone. It is one of a small cluster of settlements in this area including Fairseat to the south-east and Ridley to the north, both about a mile away. Vigo village is a modern rural development of about 2000 people and situated to the east of Stansted.

The church building reputedly has Anglo-Saxon origins as a chapel to Wrotham church and, although the present exterior was heavily restored in 1883, within the interior there is evidence that the chancel arch, tower arch and the north aisle arcade all date from a rebuilding of c1400 in the perpendicular period.

The church comprises a two-bay nave and north aisle, a north porch and a west tower with a low broach spire and it is constructed in coursed rubble stone with clay peg tiled roofs. The wooden chancel rood screen possibly pre-dates the present church and the vestry was added during the late 19th century reconstruction.

The bells were refurbished, re-tuned and augmented to a ring of six bells in 1992. The churchyard has a distinguished Arts and Crafts monument to Sir Sydney Waterlow.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The church is in a benefice comprising three parishes, the others being Fairseat and Vigo. A variety of services are held in response to the needs of each community and St Mary's acts as the mother church.

All three parishes have limited community facilities, and although there is a village hall at Vigo, the primary school at Stansted was recently closed down.



Above: View of church from the west with the extension to the right of the tower



Above: View of chancel with rood screen



Above: View of rural setting to the north of the churchyard

THE PROJECT BRIEF

The PCC wanted to develop their existing church and community life that centred on St Mary's, including the new initiative of a ministry for mothers and toddlers as well as for the elderly and their carers.

They recognised that to achieve this they would need facilities such as a meeting room and social space, basic hospitality facilities, toilets, improved disabled access and additional storage. The PCC envisaged that these would be housed in a new extension separate from the main church building.

THE PROPOSALS

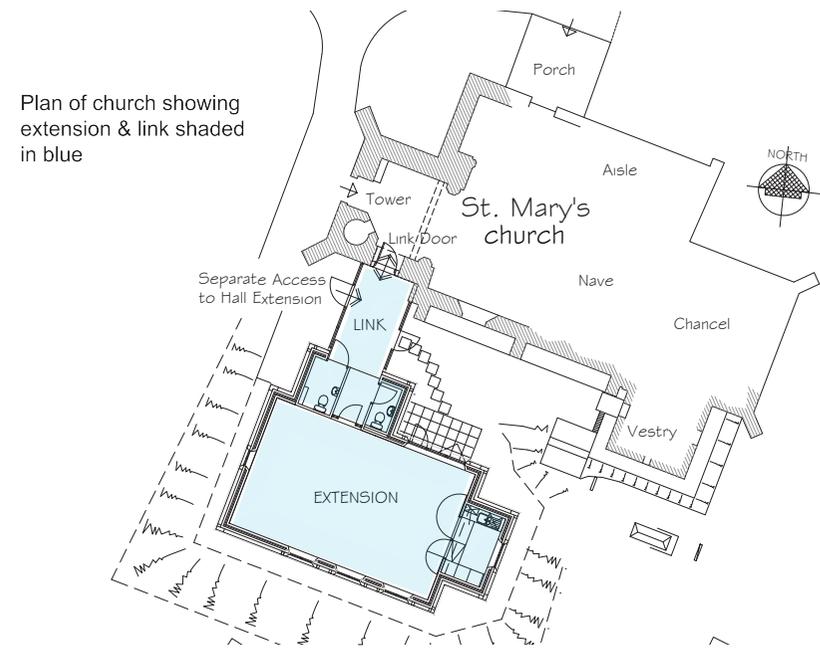
It was quickly established by the DAC, Historic England and other advisory bodies that internal reordering of the church building was out of the question. Attention then turned to consider an external extension attached to the west face of the tower, then to the south face of the main church. Initial designs for a lean-to structure were considered by the PCC and rejected on grounds of appearance and problems with blocking natural light through the south facing nave windows.

The next proposal was for a freestanding barn-like structure on the south side of the church incorporating a meeting room, toilets and vestry/office, linked to the main church at both the tower and Chancel, creating a cloisters with a safe outside area for children.

A smaller extension, on the south side of the church and set into the steeply sloping churchyard, was finally agreed, which preserved the north view of the building intact. This final revised proposal comprised a meeting room, kitchenette with servery, as well as WC facilities together with a simple glazed link to a new doorway in the south wall of the church tower.

The building has a conventional blockwork structure with high levels of insulation, and is clad externally by a knapped flint facing and stonework, and with a clay tiled roof to match the existing church. The link to the tower was designed to be as unobtrusive as possible and is fully glazed with a flat roof.

To enhance the use of the extension, the PCC agreed to the addition of broadband and an audio-visual display system with a CCTV link to the main church. The AV system is particularly useful for presentations, for overspill from large congregations, and by parents with children who can play whilst parents follow the service in the main church.



View of Cloisters extension from the south east

OBTAINING PERMISSIONS AND TIME LINE

The extension to St Mary's Stansted was first proposed by the Rector in 2006. A briefing meeting was held with architects Thomas Ford and Partners, the DAC, English Heritage (now Historic England) and the Victorian Society.

In 2008 the PCC approved the Cloisters design proposal but this was rejected by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council, the DAC, Historic England, Church Buildings Council and others, being much too large a footprint. The architects then designed a more compact structure much as we see today, in conjunction with and supported by the DAC, local authority and statutory consultees. This design was approved by the DAC and granted Planning Permission in 2010.

The PCC then considered the options for the detailed design and construction phase, and in 2013 appointed a small locally based architects practice, who reviewed the design, refined the detail and submitted changes to T&MBC and the DAC for approval with a subsequent resubmission for Faculty in 2014.

Construction works started in 2014 with the excavation of around 350 cubic metres of material under the watching brief of Archaeology South East. One hundred and nineteen burials were exhumed but neither remains of the previous Saxon church nor any significant finds were discovered. In October 2015 the new extension was officially opened and consecrated by the Bishop of Rochester.

PROJECT COSTS, FUNDRAISING AND GRANT AID

Following the granting of planning permission in 2010, fundraising continued with greater enthusiasm throughout the following three years until sufficient funds were secured. Grants and individual donations contributed about a third of the funds, with specific fundraising events such as annual bike rides, quiz nights and social events raising another third and the remaining third obtained by project specific giving by parishioners. In 2015 in order to complete the extension, the PCC also obtained the agreement for a loan from the Diocesan Board of Finance which was fully repaid in 2018.

The building contract cost was £433,000 and the total project cost was £566,000 including professional fees for architects, archaeologist, engineer and local authority charges.

PROJECT TEAM & SPECIALIST SUPPLIERS

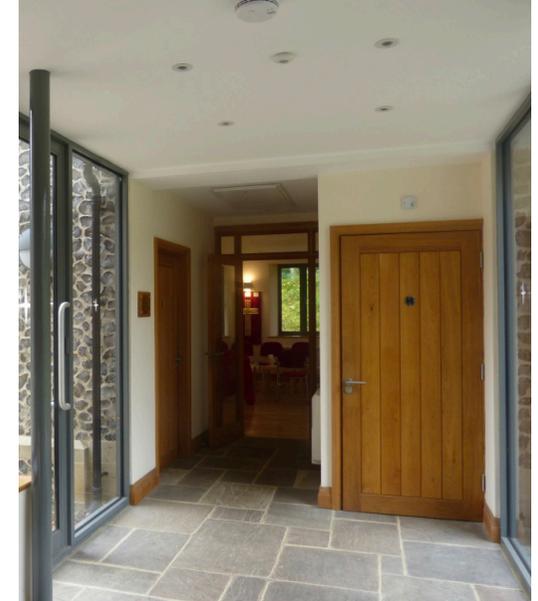
Architect: (Sketch Design & Planning Permission) : Thomas Ford & Partners
Architect: (Detailed Design & Construction Phase) : D C Hudson & Partner LLP
Structural Engineer: BdR (Civil and Structural Engineering) Ltd
Archaeologist: Archaeology South East
Building Contractor: Allen Construction (Kent) Ltd
Audio Visual System: Creative Audio-Visual Solutions Ltd



View of extension from the east showing the fully glazed link to the tower (photo by PCC)



View inside link corridor looking towards the new tower door



View inside link corridor looking towards the WCs and Cloisters Room

PROJECT REVIEW

Has the completed scheme achieved the objectives of the brief?

Yes, although the closure of the village C of E primary school means less use of the facility by children than expected. However, the building is used weekly for a very popular coffee club, run by members of the church, for the elderly and isolated members of the parish and surrounding villages.

Have new uses for the church been generated?

Yes; the extension hall with WiFi and audio visual system is used for meetings, conferences, the coffee club, film nights, and a fortnightly Sunday service known as "Church in the Cloisters". We hire the hall for pre wedding gatherings, baptism and post-funeral receptions, as well as diocese meetings / training sessions and pilates classes. We do not let the hall for activities which would detract from the local village hall usage.

Has the congregation changed/increased/decreased?

The congregation has increased due to CITC attracting new worshippers who also now attend main services.

Were there any unexpected conflicts between church and community?

No more than expected. Many of the objectors now approve of the finished extension and attend functions and some services regularly.

Is the project sustainable in the long term?

Yes providing we can let out at the current rate to cover the additional cost of heating and services.

Does the PCC have any future plans?

We continue to make improvements to the church and churchyard and we have re-laid the paths, added bollard lights and improved accessibility at the west gate. An area of the church grounds is being developed as a wildlife friendly garden to encourage flora and fauna: a long-term project, already showing signs of success.

We have a programme of quinquennial repair works to the roofs and rainwater goods, and restoration work on the external walls and stonework. We have plans with the DAC for additional storage and notice boards under the tower.

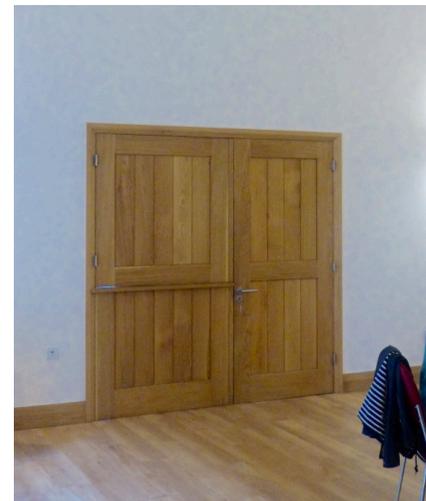
Future plans include lighting and heating to improve the ambience in the church.

Best Piece of Advice?

Involve the DAC and church buildings specialists at the earliest possible time, and keep them involved throughout, to avoid setbacks.



View of Cloisters Meeting Room



Doors to kitchenette & servery closed



Doors to kitchenette & servery in open position

Parish contact details

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Church Plan courtesy of Derek Hudson

Architects

Photographs courtesy of PCC & Elaine Wren