

ST MARY THE VIRGIN CHURCH, WILLESBOROUGH, 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 also taken place from the mid-late 20th century, including large housing estates to the south and west of the town. As a consequence, the village of Willesborough, on the south east of the town centre, has gradually become engulfed by the expansion of the town and lost its independent village status.

The Church of St Mary the Virgin stands at the junction of Bentley Road and the southern end of Church Road at the periphery of suburban development and is surrounded by a pleasant churchyard. The building itself is Grade II* listed, an indication of its historical and architectural significance.

This large church, built in Kentish ragstone, comprises a chancel, nave, north and south aisles, south porch and a tower at the west end. The building has Saxon origins from when it belonged to the monastery of St Augustine at Canterbury, although the nave of that period subsequently became the south aisle in the 13th century when the nave and tower were built. The chancel dates from the early 14th century and most of the south aisle is 15th century. The distinctive shingled spire was a later addition and also the north aisle, built in 1868 by Pearson, together with a new organ, heating and pews and much restoration of the building fabric itself. Notable interior features include a fine 14th century east window and two carved head corbels on the arch in the chancel, as well as a blocked window of Saxon date at the west end of the south aisle.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Whilst the church is at the heart of the Willesborough parish, it had become an under-used asset and the PCC as well as the local authority were keen to widen its use for the church parish in partnership with the local community.

Ashford Borough Council was able to make funding available as a result of the rapid recent growth of new housing nearby and this initiated the project to transform the church building itself to serve both spiritual and community needs instead of providing a separate community hall.

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



View of church spire and south porch



View of church in its setting

THE PROJECT BRIEF

The brief was for the building to undergo a major re-ordering including removal of the pews throughout the nave, north and south aisles. New heating and lighting installations were required, together with a kitchen, toilet facilities and much needed storage space. A further aim was to improve access to the Memorial chapel at the east end of the south aisle.

THE PROPOSALS

The internal works are almost entirely contemporary and sympathetic alterations, and the installation of a new limestone floor finish throughout the nave and both aisles creates a light and open interior. The decorative Victorian encaustic tiling was retained as a central aisle within the nave to link it as a processional route to the raised dais at the east end and the chancel beyond. Salvaged tiles were also used on the dais area.

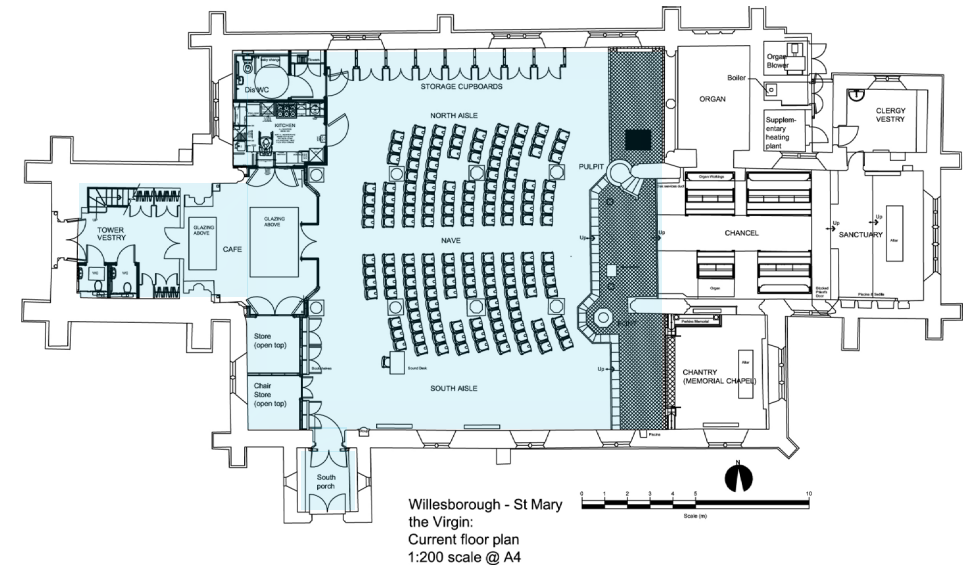
In the tower area, a very steep stair was replaced, and cupboards for choir robes, together with two new WCs were added whilst the traditional processional entrance from the west door was maintained.

A new welcome area has been formed at the west end of the church, linked to the nave by a folding oak and glass screen. This area has a glazed ceiling, providing glimpses of the fine medieval roof structure beyond. It contains a fully equipped kitchen, flower room, accessible WC and a chair store, all concealed from the nave behind purpose made oak screens.

In the south porch, the most used entrance into the church, the heavy oak studded door is now normally kept open as there are new glazed inner doors with a symbolic star design.

At the east end of the south aisle, the ironwork screen to the Memorial Chapel was modified to improve access and the Victorian encaustic floor tiling was repaired.

High level unattractive and inefficient radiant electric heaters were replaced with underfloor heating using the proprietary Jupiter system of dry layered construction to minimise archaeological disturbance. This extends throughout the nave and both aisles. The new gas fired boiler is housed in a small weatherboarded extension. The lighting system was also replaced with a new LED installation which is fully programmable.



Plan of church showing reordered areas shaded in blue



View of nave before reordering

OBTAINING PERMISSIONS AND TIME LINE

The architects commenced design work following their appointment in late summer 2012. Due to the complexity of the reordering project, there were issues such as the design of the screen at the west end which was reduced in height and had internal rooflights inserted in response to comments by Historic England and SPAB. In retrospect this has been a very successful feature. Planning permission was also required for the small boiler room extension. The Faculty was not obtained until January 2015 and work on site started shortly after this with completed of the entire project achieved in September 2015.

During the construction works, excavations were surprisingly limited as most of the sub floor had already been disturbed and cleared by previous Victorian reordering. However, in the north aisle which was also added at this period, a large number of burials were found concealed by a very shallow covering. These were carefully recorded by the archaeologists and then filled in situ with compacted sand. Other existing archaeology meant careful re-routing of below ground pipe-work and copious amounts of additional ductwork installed at the same time to cater for future audio-visual equipment.

PROJECT COSTS, FUNDRAISING AND GRANT AID

The contract value for the building works was £571,300.00
The total budget for the project was £780,000 and this included the audio-visual works and the freestanding stackable seating as well as all professional fees. Funds for the project were raised through general fundraising by the church, together with grants from the local Council and the Diocese.

PROJECT TEAM & SPECIALIST SUPPLIERS

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|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Architects: | Lee Evans Partnership LLP |
| Structural Engineer: | John Kettle |
| Quantity Surveyor: | Clifford Rickards Associates |
| M&E Design: | Hamson JPA |
| Heating Design: | Jupiter Heating Systems Ltd |
| Archaeology: | Canterbury Archaeological Trust |
| Main Contractor: | Astral Ltd., Sheerness |
| Joinery: | Howard Joinery, Dover |
| New seating: | Alpha Furniture |



View of nave looking east after reordering (before seating was installed)



View of nave looking towards welcome area at the west end showing new oak framed glazed screens

PROJECT REVIEW

Has the completed scheme achieved the objectives of the brief?

Most of the objectives have been achieved and the Church has been transformed into a place where spiritual guidance and secular need can combine within a light, airy, warm and accessible place at the very hub of this extended village.

Have new uses for the church been generated?

Yes, lots including Diocesan Training, school use, wedding receptions, funeral wakes, children's parties (with bouncy castle), committee Meetings, winter night shelter, café, Guides, orchestra, community lunches, ballroom dancing classes, social functions and various young people's groups.

Has the congregation changed/increased/decreased?

The congregation has now increased

Were there any unexpected conflicts between church and community?

Perhaps parking issues due to the extended use of the church for larger functions

Is the project sustainable in the long term?

Yes

Does the PCC have any future plans?

None at present

Best Piece of Advice?

Keep some reserve funds to help with ongoing maintenance.

Parish website details and contact

website: www.willesborough.org.uk

E-mail: office@willesborough.org.uk

Tel: 01233 624064

Photographs and church plan courtesy of Lee Evans Partnership except photos of church clubs from parish website



View of welcome area from tower showing Victorian tiled flooring and glazed ceiling with view of roof timbers in the nave



Above: View of north aisle with storage and informal meeting area



Right: Mums and toddlers club in the nave