

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, ASH, CANTERBURY

Diocese of Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

St Nicholas Church is in the village of Ash which is about 10 miles east of Canterbury and mid way between Wingham and Sandwich. The church stands in a commanding position halfway along the south side of The Street at the centre of the Ash Village Conservation Area and the building itself is Grade I listed.

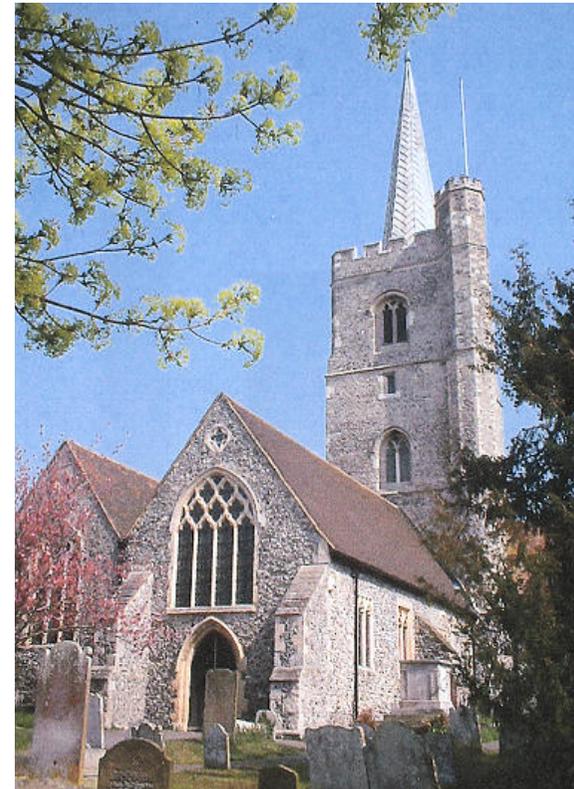
Most of this large cruciform church dates from 13th century early English period, with a tall 15th century tower at the crossing of the nave and chancel, north and south transepts with north-east chapel and north aisle. The south transept was rebuilt in the late 17th century and the large two storey north porch was added by the architect William Butterfield in the mid 19th century. The building is constructed in flint with stone window dressings and a clay tiled roof. The battlemented tower with its octagonal stair turret has a distinctive needle spire clad in decorative leadwork which was added in the late 19th century. The tower and spire are a local landmark, visible for miles around.

The interior contains historically significant features including the deeply moulded columns at the tower crossing with octagonal capitals and an extensive collection of medieval and early 17th century monuments. These include effigies and brasses of very high quality. The 14th century Molland chapel on the north side of the chancel has a perpendicular period oak screen.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Ash is a large village with several local shops, a primary school, library and two public houses. St Nicholas Church has a wide range of worship on Sundays and throughout the week and is the focus for Christian worship in the village.

In addition it endeavours to be a presence in the community not only for baptisms, weddings and funerals, but also through community activities such as the after school club for primary school children, music concerts and meetings. The building is open every day for quiet reflection.



View of church from the west



The Clitherow brass

View of nave and crossing with chancel beyond

View of tea station & WC at west end of north aisle



THE PROJECT BRIEF

The PCC had instigated a programme to carry out phased improvements to provide the church with facilities to cater for community as well as religious events. In 1998 a space at the west end of the north aisle was converted to create a small kitchenette and disabled WC accommodation, carefully concealed by oak screens. Oak storage cupboards had also been built in the north transept.

The PCC's other principal aim was to reorder the church interior to improve the very limited accessibility in the crossing and transepts for religious services as well as village events such as concerts and harvest lunches. These areas were filled with fixed pews on raised platforms with relatively narrow tiled aisles leading to the chancel and chapel.

This arrangement severely restricted circulation between the nave and chancel and between the transepts, thus limiting alternative use of the spaces. The tiled floors between the pew platforms were uneven, other areas had unsuitable concrete flooring and there were also two important historic brasses in the crossing floor which were in a vulnerable condition. Some of the memorial stones in the north aisle leading up the the chapel were partially obscured by the pew platforms. The juxtaposition of different floor finishes and levels as well as the bulky and dark pews created a visually cluttered and inflexible space.

THE PROPOSALS

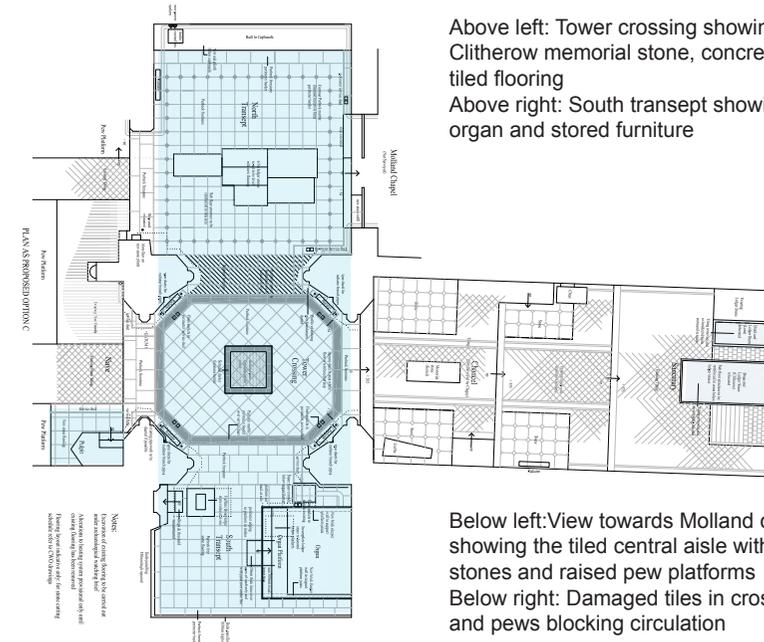
The only way that the spaces could be reordered was for the existing pews and pew platforms to be removed and the flooring replaced, although the platform for the organ in the south transept was retained. The design for the flooring emphasises the central crossing space, with a border of dark Purbeck marble in a chamfered rectangular shape surrounding diagonally laid Purbeck freestone flooring slabs. Both transepts have orthogonally laid flooring slabs with a ring of small diamonds in the darker stone surrounding the memorial stones in the north transept. These reflect the existing pattern of stone flooring in the chancel. The plan shows the new areas of flooring shaded in blue.

The relocation of the two vulnerable 15th century brasses was problematic and the DAC memorials advisor prepared a report on their significance and condition. After much consultation, it was agreed that the best solution would be to relocate them at the east end of the chancel where they would be less likely to be damaged and where there was a comparatively modern tiled floor. These are also shown shaded on the plan.

Improvements to the heating and provision of power sockets within the border of the floor in the crossing area were also included in the project.



Above left: Tower crossing showing the Clitherow memorial stone, concrete and tiled flooring
Above right: South transept showing pews, organ and stored furniture



Below left: View towards Molland chapel showing the tiled central aisle with memorial stones and raised pew platforms
Below right: Damaged tiles in crossing floor and pews blocking circulation



OBTAINING PERMISSIONS AND TIME LINE

The PCC had first discussed their ideas with their inspecting architect in May 2008 and the DAC Faculty was granted in April 2011. As the building is Grade I listed and as there were particular archaeological challenges, this process involved detailed and lengthy consultations with Canterbury DAC, Historic England, and Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT).

Before any construction work was carried out, CAT carried out the removal of the existing floor coverings and excavation down to the medieval floor base, and in some cases this was only just below the existing levels. The excavations were fully recorded before work started on the new floor construction. This comprised various thicknesses in thin layers of limecrete on top of a separating layer and with the new Purbeck stone flooring bedded in lime mortar on top. Some areas of the limecrete were reinforced with glass fibre.

Whilst the relaying of the memorials in the north transept was relatively straightforward, a large brick vault was discovered under the south transept containing a number of lead coffins which had to be recorded by the archaeologists. As it was so near the floor surface, the new floor construction thickness over it was reduced to a minimum. Also, when preparations were being made to the existing floor in the chancel to receive the relocated memorials, the floor structure started to collapse inwardly, revealing large voids and these had to be filled with a considerable quantity of lime grout to provide a stable base for the memorials. This additional work caused some delays and increased costs to the contract.

During 2016 the north porch floor was re-tiled and incorporated a border and central motif in the same stone that was used in the crossing area.

PROJECT COSTS, FUNDRAISING AND GRANT AID

The total building contract cost of the reordering project was approximately £105,000. The total project cost including professional and local authority fees amounted to around £130,000. The project was funded by the Friends of St Nicholas through parish fundraising events together with an endowed fabric fund.

PROJECT TEAM & SPECIALIST SUPPLIERS

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| Architects: | Clague Architects |
| Structural Engineer: | Adrian Cox Associates |
| Archaeology: | Canterbury Archaeological Trust |
| Main Contractor: | CWO (Chichester) Ltd (now ceased trading) |
| Stone Flooring: | Haysom (Purbeck Stone) Ltd |



View of crossing looking towards nave and north transept



View from crossing towards Molland chapel

PROJECT REVIEW

Has the completed scheme achieved the objectives of the brief?

The outcome is excellent and has opened up the space to many uses.

Have new uses for the church been generated?

New uses such as the annual village nativity play, school use for quiet days and the annual art festival run by the Friends of St Nicholas have been made possible as a result of the crossing reordering.

Has the congregation changed/increased/decreased?

The congregation has remained about the same, and in that sense is against the current trend of decreasing church attendance. We have introduced two new services that are dependent on the open crossing space.

Were there any unexpected conflicts between church and community?

No conflicts have been encountered.

Is the project sustainable in the long term?

Yes, it is sustainable.

Does the PCC have any future plans?

We have recently completed the re-flooring and redecoration of the north porch. We also wish to provide a glass screen in the Molland Chapel in the north aisle to form a separate area that we can heat separately for small services and to provide a special quiet area. We also need to update the kitchen space.

Best Piece of Advice?

Keep the project aims simple and garner the full support of the congregation as this project took about two years to complete.

Parish website details and contact

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Photographs and church plan courtesy of Clague Architects except view of church on page 1 courtesy of churches-uk website.



View of crossing and chancel from the north transept



Floor memorials and border in north transept