

WELCOME SPACE

Changes to St John the Baptist Church, Holywell-cum-Needingworth

OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT

WHY?

The aims of the Welcome Space project are:

1. To install much needed facilities in the church for worshippers and visitors – a toilet (suitable for use by disabled people) and a place where refreshments can be served. The toilet facility will be much appreciated in particular by older people, those with young children, and guests attending weddings, baptism and funerals, who often have travelled long distances to attend.
2. To make the main body of the church an open and welcoming space that can be adapted for a variety of services and gatherings, with comfortable and flexible seating arrangements.
3. To make the interior of the church as safe as possible; this means removing the steps and differing levels of the floor (trip hazards) and ensuring that there is plenty of space to accommodate people in wheelchairs (and that the step up to the tower and toilet is replaced by a ramp).

The Parochial Church Council (PCC) has been looking for a long time at ways of achieving these aims. We have considered building an extension to the church to accommodate the toilet and refreshment area, either onto the tower or along the north side of the church, but both ideas presented difficulties of cost, planning permission and adverse effect on the fabric and appearance of the medieval building, which is English Heritage Grade I listed.

The present plan, developed with the church architect, Dr Nigel Walter, seeks instead to accommodate the new facilities within the church itself, and to create the flexible space by removing all the pews in the nave and replacing them with upholstered chairs that can be stacked out of sight when not in use.

The numbers against each item below match the numbers on the Concept Plan and on the list of elements of the plan on the Survey Form.

1. The toilet will be accommodated in the north recess of the tower. It will leave space for the entrance through the west door of bridal parties at weddings and coffins and followers at funerals. Facing the toilet, the south recess will be furnished with closed storage space.

2. The servery will be sited in the north-west corner of the nave. incorporate facilities for washing and storing crockery and simple catering, e.g. after-service coffee time and refreshments at events such as the church flower festival. The proposed serving counter in front of it will be moveable to make best use of space.

3. The pews in the nave will be entirely replaced by upholstered chairs, which can be set out in suitable numbers and positions for each gathering. When not in use, they will mostly be stacked in the new storage areas. The blue noticeboard screens currently in an awkward position at the back of the church could be deployed for exhibitions and to screen off e.g. children's activities.

4. The font at the moment is in a traditional place near the entrance to the church. This is symbolic – newly baptised infants and adults 'enter the church' thorough baptism. However, the position is very cramped and inconvenient for baptisms – the parents and godparents can't gather round the font and the other guests have to turn awkwardly in the pews to see the ceremony. We plan to move the font to under the north-east window – the 'Lady Chapel' – so that all participants have space to gather round and onlookers can face forward on their chairs. The raised platform here will be removed and the inlaid chest which presently occupies this area will be repositioned at the back of the south aisle.

5. Bell ringing (in which the church has a strong tradition) will take place on a new ringing floor above the tower floor.

6. Access to bell-ringing floor This will be by a new staircase from the nave to a gallery with a door into the ringing floor, and flanked by further storage cupboards. The gallery will be fronted by a glass screen.

7. A ramp will replace the step up to the tower, to enable wheelchairs to gain access to the tower area and the toilet.

8. Levelling the floor everywhere in the nave will remove trip hazards, ensuring the safety of children and older people especially. It will also be more convenient for visitors in wheelchairs. We hope to install a stone-paved floor, removing the degraded Victorian tiles and the wooden platforms on which the pews stand.

9. The 'Memorial altar' area consists of the wooden war memorial panel and the former church altar, which is not used for services. To create more space we would halve the depth of the altar but retain it in front of the memorial panel – both may need to be lowered to take account of the new lower floor level.

10. Heating Underfloor heating may be possible to supplement or replace the existing pre-war radiators. The external pipework will be hidden or rearranged. The radiators, if retained, would move to the sides of the nave. The present oil-fired boiler is capable of either option. Not necessarily part of this project, but something being considered for a later date, is to replace the boiler with a ground heat pump, to help us become a 'zero-carbon' church.

WHEN?

The PCC needs to finish its round of consultations with interested parties (which is why we are seeking your views now), including Historic England and other bodies and then agree the final plan with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). Then we can apply for a Faculty from the Diocese. Once that is granted, we have five years in which to complete the agreed work (though that period can be extended, and not every feature of the project needs to be carried out at the same time).

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

Once we have finalised the plan, taking into account all the views of the parish, the statutory bodies and the DAC, our architect and quantity surveyor can begin costing the works. The entire project clearly will not be cheap! We are fortunate in having a head start through some generous legacies and gifts already made towards the costs, but a lot of local fund-raising and applications for grants lie ahead.