

In the matter of SS Peter and Paul, Rustington

Determination

1. By a judgment dated 8 June 2015, I authorised the issuance of a faculty for a substantial project at the church of St Peter and St Paul Rustington comprising the removal of pews and pew platforms, the installation of underfloor heating, the introduction of chairs to replace the pews and certain ancillary works.
2. I left undecided the choice of replacement chair, noting the strength of feeling within the letters of objection, which I described as ‘thoughtful and measured observations from people who share the vision for the reordering of this historic church and who will be instrumental in turning that common vision into a lived reality’. I was of the view that ‘there are persuasive pastoral reasons why the PCC should spend a little while reflecting further on its choice of chair, which is why I am placing a condition on the faculty reserving this matter to be determined by me at a later date’.
3. Sadly this has transpired to have been an error of judgment on my part. The process of choosing a new chair has not been well handled, and the correspondence sent to me has been undignified and ungracious. If events of the last two weeks have proved anything, it is that unbridled democracy is not necessarily a panacea for the nation. So also for a church community.
4. A climate of mistrust has taken hold and it is essential that the Consistory Court now brings finality to the matter so that the church can move on and healing can begin. I therefore arranged for an informal site visit. Neither the petitioners nor the writers of letters of objection were present. I had their observations in writing. Instead I was shown round by Mr Richard Andrews, the inspecting architect, and Mr Tom Mitcham who had acted as local project manager for the reordering.
5. My irritation at having to give up the best part of the day to visit the church was immediately displaced by a sense of wonder at the magnificent way in which the reordering project had been brought nearly to completion. The recovery of the medieval sense of presence is spectacular and the removal of the pews and their platforms together with the introduction of a level floor of purbeck stone creates a holistic interior which not only is profoundly spiritual but also has the capacity to accommodate a rich variety of secular events in a dignified manner. The opening of the chancel arch and the new curved proscenium work extremely well, and draw the eye to the sanctuary. Imaginative chancel furniture will be the crowning glory to this worthy and well-executed project.
6. The gift to the parish of this wonderful new worship space risks being compromised by the argument and dissent over the choice of chair. The petitioners have abandoned their proposal for Treske furniture (which had been sought in the original petition) and now seek permission for the immediate introduction of 80 *Howe 40/4* chairs which will be used for worship, then ‘relegated’ to the status of ‘supplementary seating’ upon the

introduction of 'core seating' comprising approximately 125 *Alpha LAMH* chairs part upholstered, some with arms and some without. At present, I am not being asked to authorise the second stage as the precise details are yet to be agreed. At some stage, the suggestion was made that a chair by Irish Contract Seating might be considered, and the somewhat inept handling of this possible alternative seemed to trigger the breakdown in trust. The issue of seating needs now to be resolved once and for all.

7. I asked that samples of all the above chairs were available for me to see *in situ* at the time of my visit. I spent quite some time considering the various alternatives and examining the interior of the church. It became obvious to me that the concept of 'core' and 'supplementary' seating is fundamentally flawed. Introducing a variety of chairs from two different manufacturers, some with arms some without, some upholstered, some not would compromise the genius of the reordering which is to create a unified and holistic worship space. The parish church is not large enough to be segmented into different areas with their own types of seating. The wish for flexibility in this small but beautiful church requires the choice of a single chair.
8. I am of the view that the chair which would best serve the needs of the church – both aesthetically and practically – is the *Howe 40/4*, and that this chair should be used throughout the building. It is light and easily moveable, as well as attractive and comfortable. I do not consider that an upholstered chair (whatever the chosen fabric colour) would be appropriate for building, and the *Alpha* chair has something of a utilitarian office feel. The great advantage of the *Howe 40/4* chair is storage. Far more can be stacked enabling them to be removed into a side room at times when a bare church interior is needed. The *Alpha* would require unsightly piles of stacked chairs to be left against the wall detracting from achievement of the reordering. I believe any concerns as to the quality of support for the elderly and infirm are misplaced. Single chairs have pads on the bottom which prevent slippage when weight is placed on them, and when linked in rows they become stronger still. The *Howe 40/4* is far more robust than its attractive slim frame makes it look.
9. I will therefore accede to the petitioners' request for permission to introduce 80 *Howe 40/4* chairs, but on the condition that when additional chairs are required the *Howe 40/4* is also chosen. Personal tastes will differ, but I have been required to make an adjudication and this I have done. Should the lead time in the delivery of the *Howe 40/4* chair require some temporary stop-gap provision, I would look favourably on any proposals from the petitioners.
10. My hope and prayer is that the church community will now put this unfortunate hiatus behind them and come to appreciate the product of their collective vision, realised through the skill and industry of their gifted and experienced architect, as they return to their lovingly reordered church and join together to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.