

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF SOUTHWARK

IN THE MATTER OF ST BARNABAS'S CHURCH, ELTHAM

AND IN THE MATTER OF A PETITION BY REVD STEPHEN COOK, MRS TRACEY HAWNEY
AND MR KOLA ODUNLAMI

JUDGMENT

Introduction

1. This matter concerns a petition by the Revd Stephen Cook, Mrs Tracey Hawney and Mr Kola Odunlami, the Vicar and Churchwardens, respectively, of St Barnabas's Church, Eltham. The petition, which was received in the Registry on 10 August 2016, seeks a faculty to remove the chancel and sanctuary furniture (with the exception of the Holy Table); the removal of a row of pews at the east end of the nave; the creation of a new raised floor (to be carpeted); the installation of underfloor heating; the installation of additional lighting in the chancel; and the replacement of the electronic organ console with a new one in a different position.
2. The proposals were unanimously endorsed at a meeting of the PCC held on 7 August 2016. They were subject to publicity in the usual way by way of notices being displayed on a notice board inside the church and a notice board outside the church. There were no objections. The church is unlisted. However in circumstances which I shall explain below, I did ask that Historic England, the local planning authority (the Royal Borough of Greenwich) and the Twentieth Century Society should be consulted. Historic England do not wish to comment and the Royal Borough of Greenwich have not responded to an invitation to comment. The Twentieth Century Society did respond and objected, although it did not want to become a party opponent. This judgment addresses that objection.
3. I visited the church on 28 November 2016.

St Barnabas's Church

4. Many people will be familiar with the Well Hall Roundabout, where Rochester Way meets the South Circular Road. They are less likely to be familiar with St Barnabas's Church, which lies just to the west of that roundabout. It has however a fascinating history and, despite being unlisted, is an attractive building of some significance.
5. The building began life as the chapel for the Royal Naval Dockyard at Woolwich. Designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, it was built in 1857 – 58. However the dockyard closed in 1869 and the chapel became redundant. It was dismantled and rebuilt in Eltham in 1933. This was particularly appropriate since the expansion of Eltham had begun in the First World War with the provision of housing for those working in Woolwich Arsenal. The rebuilding was to designs of Thomas Ford whereby the church was reduced in height and length and the galleries removed. In 1944, the church was gutted following it being hit by an incendiary bomb. Following the war it was re-roofed and restored under the direction of Alan Ford (Thomas Ford's son). The interior now presented a marked contrast to Scott's Gothic exterior. The high-pitched open roof was replaced by a barrel vault, the chancel apse was covered with a semi-dome and the ceilings were lowered and redesigned. Interestingly, part of the reason for making these changes was to make the church easier to heat. In the new apse, Hans Feibusch painted a mural of Christ in glory. The choir stalls,

pews and font came from St Michael's Church, Lant Street, Southwark, which had become redundant in 1953. The church was re-consecrated in 1957¹.

The current proposals

6. The congregation is a small one and the church is cold in winter. Those who worship there at the moment should be able to do so in better conditions; moreover, the present situation represents both a psychological and also an actual barrier to mission. The chancel could be ordered to accommodate about 100 people and could be properly heated. The plan is to bring this about. In due time, the nave might be converted into a community facility. In the meantime, however, the nave can be used for larger services such as funerals (and potentially could continue to do so after conversion to a community facility). The proposal before me is to provide a raised platform in the chancel (at broadly the same level as the present sanctuary) which will be carpeted and on which about 100 new chairs will sit; the new "worship area" will be heated by new underfloor heating. The existing conventional chancel furnishings (which are not intrinsically distinguished) will be disposed of. The (electronic) organ console is currently located at a mid-point on the south side of the chancel. It is obsolete. A new console will be acquired which will be positioned a short distance further west of the position of the current console.
7. When I read the papers, it seemed to me that, although this was a proposal that did not affect a listed building, nonetheless the building was of architectural and historic interest and that, accordingly, Historic England, the local planning authority and the relevant amenity society might wish to comment. The relevant amenity society was the Twentieth Century Society. Following notification to it of the proposal, the Twentieth Century Society did wish to comment. It did so as follows:

The Society regrets the proposal to remove the choir stalls from the chancel as these were especially designed for the space. Of greatest concern, however, is the proposal to remove the altar rails. These are stylistically identifiable as being Thomas Ford's work and form part of the ensemble of fittings that complete his vision for the church. The Society considers therefore that these should remain in the church unaltered and ideally in situ. If this proves impossible, only then should their retention in another location within the church be considered.

Consideration of the objection of the Twentieth Century Society

8. I think that is wrong to say that the choir stalls were designed for the space; I think that they came, with the pews, from St Michael's, Lant Street. Also, as I have said, I think that the post-war restoration was carried out by Thomas Ford's son and not Thomas Ford himself (although Alan Ford worked for a practice that bore his father's name).
9. As the Petitioners point out, the removal of the choir stalls is a key element in the proposed re-ordering. The building is unlisted and the choir stalls, which were not, I think, designed for the space are not intrinsically distinguished. It seems to me that there would have to be something very special in the case if, in these circumstances, I were to say that the removal of the chancel furniture could not go ahead, given the clear benefit that would flow from the implementation of the proposal. It does not seem to me that there is anything so special in the case. I do not think

¹ A detailed history of the church is set out at pp 53 – 57 in *The 'Twenty-Five' Churches of the Southwark Diocese* (2002) by Kenneth Richardson, published by the Ecclesiological Society.

that there is any loss from the removal of the chancel furniture *per se*. I would accept that there is some visual loss by the replacement of that furniture with about one hundred chairs. I have considered this loss in reaching my conclusion that any such modest loss is more than outweighed by the benefit of the proposal. I should add this. Mr Cook and the congregation are currently facing many challenges. I have been impressed by the courage and enthusiasm with which they are tackling those challenges and there are grounds for hope both by virtue of what they do and also by reference to the fact that the near presence of a substantial body of the students at the University of Greenwich presents new opportunities. But the task is not easy. Unless changes like those proposed here are permitted, it will be difficult for the Church of England to maintain churches like St Barnabas's. One cannot know, of course, but if it were to close, it is unlikely that the outcome will be positive for those who care about it as a building of historic and architectural interest. Indeed, given that it is not listed, the most likely outcome if it were closed would be that it would be demolished.

10. As regards the communion rails, the Petitioners have taken advice from the Church's Architect, Mr Roger Molyneux. They have responded to the Twentieth Century Society's objection by proposing that the communion rails be retained but moved to a position further east.
11. It seems to me that this is an admirable compromise and I am pleased to endorse it. It is clear that the rails do have to be moved if the proposals are to be implemented and its benefits secured; on the other hand, I do agree with the Twentieth Century Society that the removal of the rails would be unfortunate.

Formal decision

12. I direct that a faculty should issue.
13. The works are to be completed to the reasonable satisfaction of the Church's Inspecting Architect. The communion rails are to be re-located as shown on Drawing 12-65/2/DAC/SKI.2C. Details of the new chairs are to be agreed with the DAC; in the event of disagreement, the matter is to be referred back to the Court for determination.

Concluding observations

14. I am grateful for all those who helped in the formulation and presentation of this petition, including of course the DAC who had valuable input to make. I should specifically say that I am grateful for the contribution of the Twentieth Century Society. They will see the reasons I have not accepted their comments in their totality but will be pleased that the communion rails are to be retained. It is of course their input which has led to this result.

PHILIP PETCHEY
Chancellor

4 May 2017