

## **Guideline Leaflet LB08: Furnishings in Listed Church Buildings**

Listing building controls cover everything within the church site. It is not just the architectural features noted in the listing description. Fixtures, fittings and other objects are protected by the listing. This leaflet offers guidance about pews, pulpits, platforms, organs, fixed projection screens, light fittings (luminaries) and sound systems and much more...

This Guideline Leaflet is regularly reviewed and updated. To ensure that you are using the most up to date version, please download the leaflet from the BUGB website at [www.baptist.org.uk/resources](http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources)

The date on which the leaflet was last updated can be found on the download page.

# LB08: Furnishings in Listed Church Buildings

## INTRODUCTION

These Notes are provided by the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee to assist Baptist Trust Companies, churches and their advisors.

See other leaflets:

LB01	<i>Introducing the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB02	<i>Applying to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB03	<i>Professional Advisors and Applications to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB04	<i>Listed Buildings Application Form</i>
LB05	<i>Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme</i>
LB06	<i>Looking after your Church Buildings</i>
LB07	<i>Building Materials and External Fittings in Listed Churches</i>
LB09	<i>Photographic Recording</i>
PC03	<i>Five Year Inspection Reports – Church Buildings</i>

## SCOPE OF LISTING

The listing of a church or chapel covers not just those elements noted in the listing and not just the structure and finishes of the building, but 'works to an object or structure within such a building'. Pews, pulpits, platforms, organs, fixed projection screens, light fittings (luminaires) and sound systems are among such objects and are covered by the Ecclesiastical Exemption. Alteration or removal of such items therefore requires consent from the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee.

## PEWS

Pews vary from beautiful carved oak pews, sometimes of great architectural and historic interest and importance, to modern or at least Victorian pine pews that may appear to be of little or no interest, be uncomfortable and be coated with a varnish that becomes sticky in hot weather. Older churches may have boxed pews, or some with gated ends and occasionally pews have a sliding pull out seat which can provide overflow seating in the aisle, although such a church may wish to consider whether such seats should be used as they significantly reduce the aisle width and could thereby cause a means of escape hazard and reduce access for wheelchair users.

Pews are often set on timber 'pew platforms' which may be supported by simple joists off dwarf walls or even over or in bare earth. Pews at the sides of the church may be let into a timber dado rail (a panel, often of vertically boarded timber, about one metre high). Heating pipes may pass under the pews or there may be radiators at the aisle ends.

In a society where people are used to comfortable upholstered furniture, pews can seem uncomfortable and unattractive giving a Victorian image to a church that is trying to show its relevance in the twenty-first century. To be more positive pews can add to the overall unity of a church building, seat more per row than chairs and do not need to be set out and straightened after every meeting. It can also be easier for parents to control children when seated on pews, especially where the child cannot fall through the back of a chair. Pews nearly always have a longer life than upholstered or rush seated chairs. While some old pews are very uncomfortable, with steep backs, narrow seats and/or little legroom, the comfort argument alone is not always convincing as 'unwanted' pews are often bought up and used as seating in pubs and restaurants.

If a church is considering seeking permission to remove pews it must above all make a case for this significant change. Is it for increased comfort alone, to enable greater freedom in worship, to facilitate greater community use of the building and, if so, what and by whom? In such a situation there are a number of direct questions that require an answer:

- How significant are the pews and how do they contribute to the church's character? A

dimensioned sketch, description or photograph is always helpful.

- What would re-seating enable a church to do that it cannot do already?
- Would the change seriously reduce the seating capacity of the church?
- Is it necessary to remove all the pews?
- If a limited number of pews are to be removed to provide wheelchair access, how many rows and of what width should be allowed and do pew platforms mean that access is not possible?
- What type, quality and colour of seats are proposed and how would they affect the character of the church? Will the proposed chairs meet the requirements of the Fire Officer both as regards flammability and linking to maintain means of escape?
- How may the introduction of upholstered chairs, and perhaps additional carpeting, affect the acoustics of the building?

And also several associated questions, including:

- What is going to happen to the pew platform, if any, and if it is to be removed, what is planned for the floor? Professional advice should be sought in this regard as just concreting over the floor can create further problems. Inappropriate floor coverings laid over wooden floors can cause severe damage.
- What is planned for alterations to any heating pipes or radiators?
- How will the dado be treated?
- Is the floor level or has it a slight rake?

All these questions and others that may be relevant to the particular church should be answered in the application.

There are two important books describing this history of pews and seating. Both may help a church and their advisors to evaluate the existing pews.

Pews Benches and Chairs  
Edited by Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown  
Published by the Ecclesiological Society  
ISBN: 978-0-946823-17-8

Sitting in Chapel  
The Chapels Society Volume 1  
ISBN: 978-0-9545061-4-8  
ISSN: 2051-6371

## **PULPITS**

The pulpit is often the focal point in the building and part of the focus of the worship area created by one or more of the pulpit, platform, with the communion table, and the organ, and sometimes a cross although these are traditionally less prevalent in Baptist churches. Areas used for worship need a sense of focus or direction, and probably more than just the siting of the music group! What has already been said about the quality, architectural and historic character of pews may well apply to the pulpit. Traditionally the pulpit in churches having a gallery was set high so that those in the gallery could see, and be seen. While week-by-week congregations may be smaller and preaching styles have changed, the retention of the high pulpit can be advantageous on special occasions.

Churches considering the removal of the pulpit should take account of not only of its architectural and historic significance but also of the sense of focus it provides and what the appearance would be if it were removed. They should also consider its potential use on special occasions when the gallery, if any, may be needed and what would actually be gained by its removal. Sometimes just turning the pulpit stairs through 90 degrees can release valuable platform space and avoid the need to remove the whole structure.

## **PLATFORMS**

Traditionally churches had a platform, or dais, at the front on which sat the communion table and chairs for those serving at the Lord's Supper. Sometimes this platform had a low, ornamental balustrade

around part of it and the style of this balustrade was the same as or similar to that to the stairs up to the pulpit. It is not unusual to have a door to either side of the platform.

In many churches in recent years the style of worship has changed, the number of people involved has increased and the need to see and be seen has become more important. The traditional dais is, therefore, felt to be too small. When considering enlargement the church needs to consider:

- Its effect on any pews and adjacent doors and means of escape;
- the reuse, where possible, of any significant balustrades;
- the height of the required platform and what stairs may be required, and the length and location of any ramps for wheelchair users.

While it is acknowledged that churches are primarily places of worship they can also be places of beauty and peace in the increasingly frantic lives of members of their community. It is unfortunate that the clutter often seen at the front of a church can prove a distraction to any visiting during the week.

## ORGANS

For many generations organs have led the singing and many hymns have been written with this in mind. Their pipes, cases and mechanisms often illustrate fine craftsmanship in woodworking and painters' skills using environmentally friendly renewable materials such as wood and leather. Each has a distinctive sound and they remain the instrument of choice for many traditionally inclined churches and chapels. A good organ, well cared for, will last indefinitely, and is an asset to a congregation. It can easily become a focal point for musicians and for wider musical activity in the community as well as being part of the focus and character of a church building. Indeed the front of a church was often designed with the table, pulpit and organ as a central focus in mind.

Regular maintenance need not be expensive. However, ignoring faults can increase the cost of periodic overhaul substantially. A booklet published by the Church Buildings Council, *'Sounds Good, A Simple Guide to the Care of Organs'* Church House Publishing ISBN 0 7151 7594, is a user-friendly guide providing advice on caring for existing instruments as well as on new and second hand ones together with sections on organ builders, contracts, grant-aid and finance. The British Institute of Organ Studies at <http://www.bios.org.uk/> publishes advice leaflets dealing with these and other organ-related topics such as historic instruments. As with the likely expense through failure to maintain a building, the cost of neglecting an organ does not give grounds for its abandonment, nor does the lack of an organist.

However, when an organ is no longer used and removal is contemplated the church needs to be sure that that is a lasting view rather than just a passing phase. The possibility of simply mothballing the organ should not be ruled out especially if the space it occupies is unlikely to be required for anything else. The impact on the appearance of a church interior resulting from the removal of an organ also needs serious thought and an equally careful design input.

Finding a new home for an instrument can often be protracted since it is first necessary to locate a new owner-user who will need to obtain estimates for dismantling, removal and any repairs and adaptations to the new site, and the necessary legal permissions. This process currently takes upwards of two years in the great majority of cases during which the organ, once advertised as available, must remain in situ and playable if anyone is to have an idea of its capabilities. An organ that is already dismantled is of no interest to potential users.

Where removal appears the only option, an organ specialist should be consulted to ascertain its merits, possible future use and whether a suitable new home can be found for it.

The British Institute of Organ Studies can arrange for a competent surveyor in most parts of the United Kingdom to visit a church and prepare a report at no charge. The report will advise on the significance of the organ, and opportunities to find it a new home if permission is given for its removal. If the organ needs repairs or an overhaul preliminary advice can be included. Initial contact should be made with

Andrew Hayden, Casework and Conservation Officer by email to [conservation@bios.org.uk](mailto:conservation@bios.org.uk) or by telephone on 01493 700258.

The Institute of British Organ Building hosts a list of organs available to be re-housed and publishes advice leaflets and details of accredited organ builders. Instruments may be advertised here on payment of a small fee provided all relevant permissions have been obtained. Their website is <http://www.ibo.co.uk/>

## **PROJECTION AND PLASMA SCREENS**

When the interior of a church is one of some beauty then, even if the furnishings are to be retained, it is a pity if they are hidden behind a bland white screen. Screens need to be sited at the right height so that the maximum number of people can see in comfort when both standing and seated. This is not always easy to achieve as people are different heights, shapes and sizes!! Some may use wheelchairs and others may not be able to fully discern the image on the screen. The Equality Act 2010 will apply and should be considered at the design stage, and as the building and equipment come into use.

Where possible, screens should be purpose made and retractable.

Care must be taken over the selection of fixings for screens and the method of attachment to the fabric of the listed building. Details will need to be shown and specified on drawings.

## **LIGHT FITTINGS**

For our older churches electric light came comparatively late and the fittings, also known as luminaires, have tended to get damaged or have been replaced over the years as fashions change and lighting standards have improved. While consent is required for the replacement of luminaires it is unlikely to be withheld when they are of modern or comparatively modern design or 'industrial' strip-lights.

There are however some churches which have fittings totally in keeping with and even designed for their particular building. In these cases the existing fittings should be retained where possible. Many can be adapted for modern use. If permission is granted for their removal, then they should be offered to a museum or suchlike, one at least being retained at the church as an historic record.

## **SOUND SYSTEMS**

- Churches will usually need to install a sound reinforcement system to aid hearing.
- Loop systems in churches must be installed to British Standard Code of Practice for Audio Frequency Induction Loop Systems BS 7594. Care needs to be taken to ensure that a suitable system is chosen, correctly installed, set up, calibrated and operated.
- An appropriate choice of speakers and other equipment must be made for the listed building.
- Professional technical advice is always necessary.
- Once again care must be taken over the selection of fixings and the method of attachment to the fabric of the listed building. Details will need to be shown and specified on drawings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The beauty of a building is made up of the sum of its component parts. Many church architects designed not just the structure but the furnishings as well, or at least had a say in their selection. To strip a building of architectural and historic merit of its heart can ruin it aesthetically. The Listed Buildings Advisory Committee gives full consideration to all applications whether it be to alter the structure or the furnishings but in every case the church must make a strong case for its proposals. It is hoped that the above notes give some indication of how that might be done and what is likely and what is not likely to be acceptable.

Association Trust Company	Contact
<b>Baptist Union Corporation Ltd East Midland Baptist Trust Company Ltd</b>	Baptist Union Corporation Ltd Baptist House PO Box 44 129 Broadway Didcot Oxfordshire OX11 8RT Telephone: 01235 517700
<b>Heart of England Baptist Association</b>	Heart of England Baptist Association BMS Birmingham 24 Weoley Park Road Selly Oak Birmingham B29 6QX Telephone: 0121 472 4986
<b>London Baptist Property Board</b>	London Baptist Association Unit C2 15 Dock Street London E1 8JN Telephone: 020 7692 5592
<b>Yorkshire Baptist Association</b>	17-19 York Place Leeds LS1 2EZ Telephone: 0113 278 4954
<b>West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd</b>	West of England Baptist Trust Company Ltd Little Stoke Baptist Church Kingsway Little Stoke Bristol BS34 6JW Telephone: 0117 965 8828

This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Legal and Operations Team and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff in the Legal and Operations Team at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Legal and Operations Team also support churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited.

**If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details is provided above. If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.**

**Contact Address and Registered Office:**

Support Services Team, Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44,  
129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT

Tel: 01235 517700 Fax: 01235 517715 Email: [legal.ops@baptist.org.uk](mailto:legal.ops@baptist.org.uk)

Website: [www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk) Registered CIO with Charity Number: 1181392

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