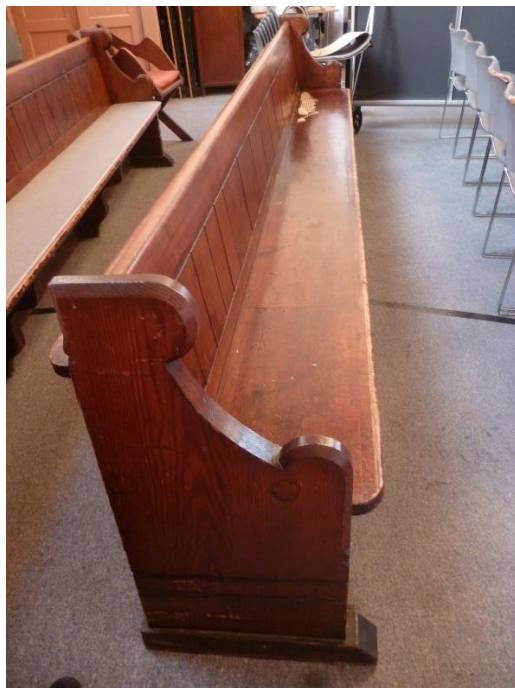


15/JH 15-2-24

St Johns Church, Lower Weston, Bath

Statement of Significance for proposed permanent removal of pews.



The Victorian Church of St John the Baptist at Lower Weston is situated in a prominent position on the north side of the Upper Bristol Road close to Windsor Bridge in Bath.

It consists of a large nave, 18x10 metres, with north and south transepts each 8.5x7.5 metres and a chancel 7.5x6.5 metres.

The church (or chapel) of St. John's was built in 1838 to serve the industrial and residential area of Lower Weston Bath. Sometimes affectionately referred to as '**St. John of the gasworks**', (see fig 4 circa 1970's in the enclosed photographs) the building was constructed to a utilitarian design that has seen a number of additions and changes over the years including a new chancel in 1869 to increase capacity. From the start, the church was all about the people of the neighbouring terraced housing in the rapidly growing suburb rather than beauty. Perhaps it was felt the latter could be found in the many city centre churches.

The church is described as having 'plain unbuttressed walls which **could** have been adapted to any style'. Ref 1. Essentially it was a blank canvas onto which ornamentation might have been added. It was not.

Perhaps because of the locality or for reasons of finance, no such style or ornamentation was applied and so both church building and pews were unremarkable but functional.

This 'functionality' of the whole church is shown in photographic records which indicate changing tastes in emulsion paint colours. The walls variously being green, ochre and yellow. Toilets were added, vestry added, pews removed, kitchens fitted etc all to suit the changing purpose and usage of the building that appears to have acted as both church and church hall.

A large number of pews (side transepts, choir stalls, clergy stalls and pews in what was formally the foyer) have been removed in previous re-orderings (see fig 1 and 2 of clergy and choir pews from that period in the attached photos).

Further to a licence and temporary Faculty application of 5-5-22, reference 2022-068980, the remaining pews are being suitably stored on church premises. They follow a simple low cost design using slatted pine panels to form the back rest and solid pew ends. There is no figurative carving or detailing on the pews that are generally in fair to poor condition.

It is difficult to discern any overarching or coherent 'theme' to the style of construction of St. John's Lower Weston. Anecdotal belief was that the church was designed by George Philipps Manners who was behind more beautiful buildings such as St. Michael Broad Street in central Bath. St Michael's having a civic function and greater wealth, commissioned oak pews now removed. It is the cemetery of St. Michael's close to St. John's that gives the name to the road where St. John's was built.

However, research by Douglas Bernhardt for Bath University in 2003 indicates that by the time St. John's was designed, the practice of George Philipps Manners had grown and was part of a very large and successful partnership of Bath architects (G. P. Manners, J. E. Gill, T. Browne, P. Morris and W. Gill) who were restoring civic buildings, designing water works, swimming pools and much else at the start of the Victorian era. With the contract to the Mayor and Corporation, it is arguable that St. John's was an identikit church 'off plan' by the company, rather than the ornate personal work of Manners visible elsewhere. (1)

The pews similarly lack any ornamentation and were the functional seating of their day. Each pew has a painted number and evidence of multiple coats of varnish. The fact that the building is unlisted and even church architecture enthusiasts are hard pressed to comment with anything more than a passing sentence (if at all) about the church, indicates a solid and spacious un-remarkability.

It became a District Parish Church in 1879.

The north transept was added in the 1880s, the new choir room added at the turn of the 20th C, and the reinforced concrete gallery inserted in the west end in 1988 with meeting room below.

The clergy vestry 5.5x2.5m is at the south east corner and the kitchen (ex choir vestry) 10x3.5m is at the north west corner.

The church is built of Bath stone with slated roofs to the nave, transepts and west end, with plain-tiled roofs to the chancel, vestry, organ loft and south porch. The Gothick windows have leaded clear glazing generally and stained glass to the chancel windows.

Internally, the walls are plastered and painted. The timber structured roofs are timber boarded internally, stained to nave and transepts, painted to the chancel. The floors are carpeted.

The PCC of Emmanuel with St. John's Lower Weston have been responsible for the upkeep of the building over several decades.

St Johns has been used by Grace Church since 2020 and a faculty (reference 068980) was obtained for the temporary removal of the remaining pews in 2022 to enable the more flexible use of the nave for worship and other events.

Since then the majority of the pews have been stored in the north transept though 8 of them are situated – and due to remain - on the tiered flooring of the gallery (figs 7 & 8), and one has been adapted for use as a storage cupboard (fig 10).

Grace Church now wish to obtain a Faculty for the permanent removal and disposal of the stored pews so as to allow more effective and flexible use of both transepts as well as the nave. It is proposed that any proceeds from disposal of the pews should be allocated to the funds for care and repair of the church. The market value of such pews is modest: from a brief web search, individual similar softwood pews are for sale at £50, £85, £120, £180, £190, £200, £250 and £295.

Given the plain and practical qualities of the pews and of the church itself, and the retention of the 8 pews as tiered seating in the gallery, the disposal of the stored pews seems eminently sensible in furtherance of the positive benefits of a more fully open church building with the success and ambitions of Grace Church Bath.

Ref 1. Douglas Bernhardt. 'A Victorian Practice' Uni of Bath 2003

Historical research by Michael Craine 2024.

Jonathan Hetreed, Church Architect

Hetreed Ross Architects, Bath

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4





Figs 5 & 6 Nave (from gallery) with North Transept occupied by pews storage.



Figs 7 & 8 8 pews in gallery to be retained

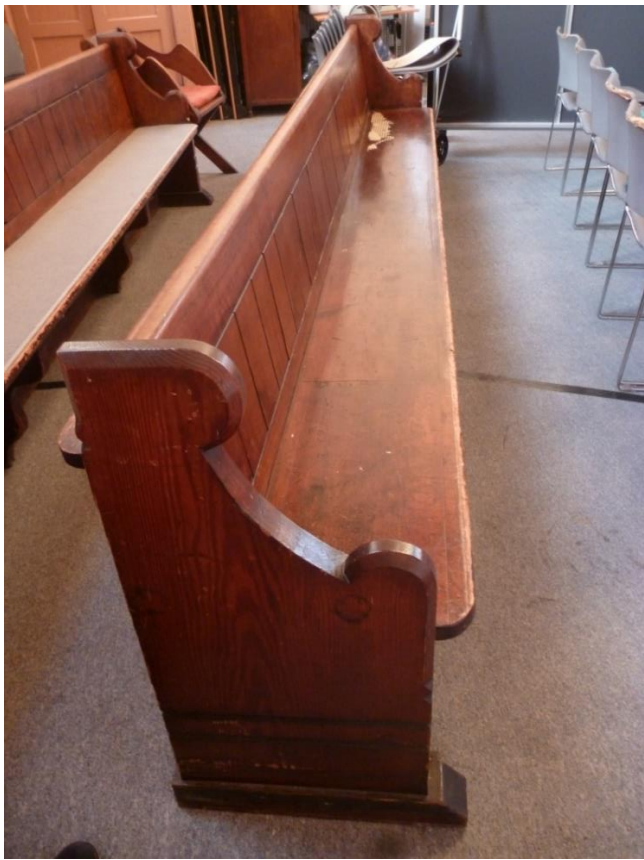
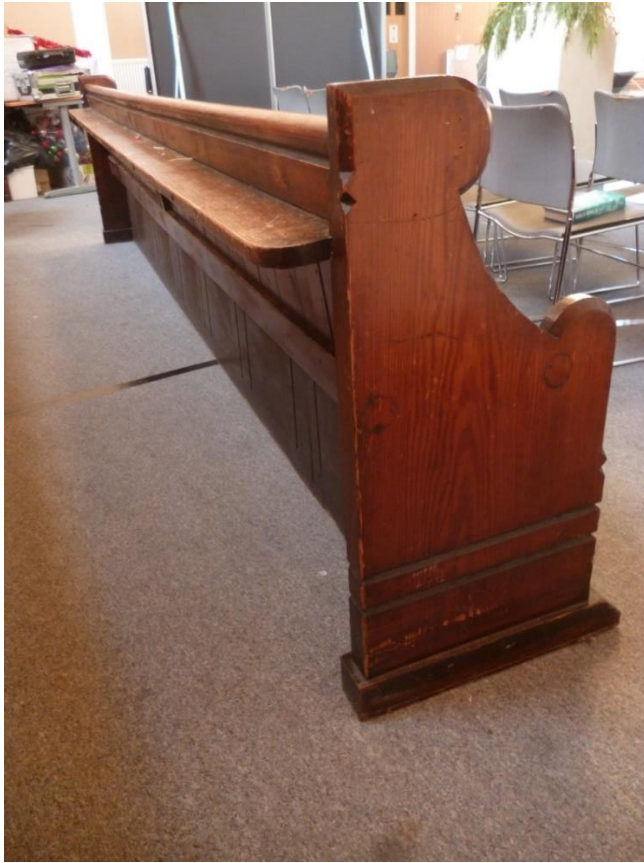


Fig 9 North Transept as pews storage etc

Fig 10 Pew as cupboard to be retained



Figs 11 & 12 Two of the pews for removal and disposal



Figs 13 & 14 Two more of the pews for removal and disposal