

## The Conservation Office

### Removal of Pews from Historic Places of Worship

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**Permission is needed for the removal of any pews from chapels and churches which are listed buildings.**

Historic chapel interiors are exceedingly fragile and frequently rely upon their fittings to give them their architectural, historic and liturgical character. Fixed seating is often a very significant feature in most historic chapels. Its layout and quality can be important indicators of the way the building was originally and subsequently planned and used. It can define the character of the interior, making a major contribution to the spatial qualities and also the overall colour scheme.

Even minor alterations to pews can therefore have a major impact on the character of a chapel interior.

#### Changing patterns

Changing liturgical and social patterns such as the desire for increased flexibility, and more people involved in leading worship, often mean that the removal of a small number of pews from the front or back of chapels can be justified.

But the comprehensive removal of all the pews from a historic chapel (or from any one level in a galleried chapel) needs to be considered even more carefully. In the case of chapels which are listed as being of special architectural or historic importance, there is a general presumption in favour of the preservation of pews.

Pews have some advantages over chairs:

- they are unlikely to be stolen;
- if fixed they don't fall over;
- they accommodate more people; and
- they may minimise draughts.

#### Flexibility

The replacement of pews by chairs is usually proposed on the grounds of flexibility and comfort. Pews can sometimes be improved by the addition of cushions, but some pews are unreasonably uncomfortable and may even deter or prevent some people from attending. They may also create difficulties for ambulant disabled people and wheelchair users.

Each scheme involving the removal of pews from historic chapels will be considered on its merits by the connexional Conservation Officer and it is highly likely that any application would need to go before the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee (LBAC).

Where consent is granted for the removal of pews, conditions will normally be imposed as appropriate in respect of the retention of sample pews, the sale or disposal for use elsewhere of surplus pews and the creation of a photographic and/or drawn record of the pews in situ prior to their removal.

The long term costs of the proposals should be evaluated carefully. Pews need little or no maintenance and have a long lifespan. Chairs have a considerably shorter lifespan; their joints weaken and the upholstery becomes worn. Future generations will therefore be committed to a cycle of replacement.

#### Acoustics

The introduction of carpeting (which often accompanies the introduction of upholstered chairs) will change the acoustic qualities of the building noticeably and have an effect on the music and congregational singing. It may also increase or create problems of damp.

## Useful Questions to Consider

The following questions will, however, need to be addressed and managing trustees are advised to seek appropriate advice before applying for the necessary consents: Trustees may find it useful to use it in this form.

<p><b>1. Why is the removal of pews being considered?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Accessibility? Can pews be truncated instead of removed? Consider the most inclusive location for wheelchair users and their helpers.</li><li>- New Forms of Worship? Describe these and articulate on a layout plan.</li><li>- To create space for multiple uses? Describe these uses/groups and detail their needs. Again, articulate this on a layout plan. Have you considered accommodating these uses in other parts of the building? If this is not possible, why not?</li></ul>
<p><b>2. Are they defective in some way</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- if so what remedial action has been taken?</li></ul>
<p><b>3. Can some or all of the pews be modified to make them more comfortable? Or adapted with castors to be moveable?</b></p>
<p><b>4. Do all pews need to be removed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- When creating the required space can a partial pew removal scheme be adopted? Such as the removal of a central block, rear rows, front rows, pew panel removal or choir pews only? (Fixed furniture is finite and once removed is lost forever, therefore we should only remove the minimum required to ensure continuation of mission and a balance with the conservation of the building).</li></ul>
<p><b>5. How Significant are the pews (in terms of architectural, historic, social and aesthetic value)?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Are the pews of architectural merit?</li><li>- Were they designed to match other internal fittings as part of an overall scheme?</li><li>- Are they of a particular period or style? Do they form part of a later re-ordering scheme?</li><li>- What is it about their design which implies they should be retained? Do they have features such as numbering? Name plates? Umbrella stands? Bible boxes etc</li><li>- Are the pews of a particular historic interest?</li><li>- Are the pews of a particular social interest? Is there a hierarchy based on spacing and location?</li><li>- Is the pewage a complete set? Have there been others removed? If so, where from?</li><li>- Would the removal of fixed seating adversely affect the appearance of the interior? Would the architectural integrity of the interior be spoiled by the removal of some of or all of the pews?</li><li>- Do they reflect the same architectural detailing of other items of timberwork found in the church?</li></ul>
<p><b>6. How will removal impact on the physical fabric of the building?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Are they built into the wall panelling or floor, or are they just stood in place (screwed to the floor)? Will the wall panelling have to be made good once the seating is removed? Please provide details</li><li>- What would be the effect of the removal of pews on pew platforms, floor levels, the floor materials? Please provide details of how this will be remedied.</li><li>- Would there have to be alterations to the heating system? If yes, please describe.</li></ul>
<p><b>7. Can the pews be relocated or stored elsewhere in the building in case they are required again in the future?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Can they be reconfigured to create space for private prayer or re-used in an imaginative and creative way?</li></ul>
<p><b>8. Has there been any consultation on the proposal to remove the pews?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- If yes, please provide any relevant responses. Do any members of the congregation prefer the existing seating, for example the elderly or parents with very young children?</li></ul>
<p><b>9. Will the fixed seating be replaced by chairs or benches?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Please provide details. Are the proposed replacement chairs of an appropriate design and solid construction? Are they of sufficient quality to enhance the character of the interior?</li><li>- Will they be upholstered? as timber chairs without upholstery tend to be preferred as wooden chairs have the greatest sympathy with historic church environments. Upholstery has a significant impact in</li></ul>

terms of colour and needs regular refurbishment.

- Is there sufficient storage in the church for the chairs when not in use?
- Have you the sufficient number of able bodied volunteers to lift them, and move them?
- Have you contacted several manufacturers and trialled a range of designs?
- Is the strength and construction of the frame suitable for the intended usage?
- Does the seating complement and enhance the interior?
- Have you consulted with the church users on their chair preference?

Whilst we are unable to recommend a particular supplier or manufacturer of church chair there are some which, in our experience, have provided good quality examples. These include:

- Trinity Church Furniture i.e. Theo Stacking Chair and Pew, Abbey Stacking Chair
- Treske Church Furniture range of benches and chairs
- Luke Hughes range of benches and chairs
- Howe range of wood frame chairs
- Alpha i.e. Titus High-Stacking Wooden Church Chair or the Stacking All Wood Chapel and Church Chair

Any application for the removal of fixed seating should be accompanied by photographs, with particular reference to close up images of those pews to be removed or altered. Images of any features of interest, such as name plates and pew ends, should also be included. Those being consulted on your application for pew removal may not get the opportunity to visit and therefore you should supply as much information as possible, so your application can be dealt with without delay.

For further guidance on how to make changes to the interior of your listed place of worship please visit:

- Making Changes to Places of Worship: <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/places-of-worship/making-changes-to-your-place-of-worship/>
- New Facilities in Places of Worship: <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/places-of-worship/making-changes-to-your-place-of-worship/principles-for-making-changes/new-facilities/>
- Interiors of Places of Worship: <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/places-of-worship/making-changes-to-your-place-of-worship/principles-for-making-changes/interiors/>
- Methodist and Nonconformist Chapels in Cornwall: Guidance and Assessment Framework: <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/guidance-methodist-nonconformist-chapels-cornwall/>

**The Conservation Office** Central Buildings, Oldham Street, Manchester M1 1JQ

Website: [www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk)

Email [conservation@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:conservation@methodistchurch.org.uk) or Tel: 0161 235 6722

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