



ST. MARY'S CHURCH, BLOXHAM

"BUILDING OUR FUTURE"

PROJECT FAQs

FEBRUARY 2021

Building Our Future (BOF) is a significant project to make our magnificent parish church a fully usable, lively centre of community life in Bloxham. We hope that over the following pages you will find the answers to any queries that you have about the project. We welcome discussion with all church users, villagers and the wider St. Mary's community; please do get in touch via bofcomms@gmail.com.

What's wrong with the church building as it is?

It's not so much a case of there being anything "wrong" with the church building (though the absence of some basic facilities such as WCs and satisfactory heating needs addressing), as that there needs to be some changes in order to support the vision for the future growth and sustainability of the church and its development as a focus of community life.

The church is nationally recognised as "one of the grandest churches in the country" and is a large Grade 1 listed building with an imposing spire. As such, it is much valued by the local community as a place of worship but also as a significant landmark, and attracts visitors from near and far.

Between 1991 and 2030 there is predicted to be a 70% increase in the population of Bloxham. Growth is almost at that level already. Many incoming residents are young and have dependent children.

While St Mary's is at the heart of the village, it is not at the centre of village life and, under normal circumstances, is only effectively in regular use two days a week. The Parish Rooms are used more often but are too small for many purposes and cannot be expanded due to the limitations of the site. As the largest interior public space in the village, the church is used by a wide range of groups for different activities. However, the current fixtures and fittings and lack of facilities and accessibility are serious constraints.

Now, over 25 years since the last significant re-ordering, further upgrades are necessary to assist the church in pursuing its mission within a rapidly growing and developing community, to better realise the opportunities at hand, and to generate income to meet the not inconsiderable costs of running the building.

The opportunity is to create a more flexible, better appointed space which supports the growing need for less formal and communal forms of worship and which complements and builds on the existing village facilities to serve the wider community.

So what do the plans involve?

The proposals have been evolving through discussion with the Diocese, conservation bodies and users of the building. In summary, the scheme - which is subject to Diocesan approval at various stages - involves:

Phase 1

The priority for Phase 1 is to make St. Mary's more practical for existing users and the wider community by undertaking essential repairs and upgrades to include:

- A new heating system
- Adding facilities such as toilets, a kitchen, storage and a choir vestry
- Upgrading the Audio Visual system, essential for delivering remote services

Phase 2

St. Mary's is renowned as one of the 'grandest churches in the country'. The focus for Phase 2 is to "shine a light" on the beauty within, by:

- Fully restoring the disintegrating floor as well as restoring key features of the Chancel such as the Rood Screen
- Making the seating more practical - retaining two thirds of the existing pews, making them shorter and movable, and supplementing them with new chairs to deliver a maximum seating capacity of 700
- Installing improved lighting to present the building to best effect and to highlight the most notable interior features

Phase 3

The final Phase will focus on making St. Mary's more welcoming to all visitors by:

- Extending the clergy vestry (adjacent to the chancel) to provide meeting and office space
- Opening up the west door, making it useable as an additional entrance and more welcoming by adding internal glass doors and a lobby area within
- Raising the bell ringing chamber as part of repurposing the tower area

Given the church's status as a Grade 1 listed building, incorporating particularly fine medieval and Victorian features, it is a key goal to ensure that the project moves forward with due sensitivity to the historic significance. As part of this, the project includes significant elements of restoration, for example of the tiled floor and the Rood Screen.

How long will it take?

All the work has been prioritised and phased over three years, subject to funding availability. This is intended to be a once in a generation reordering.

Will there be disruption to church services?

It's difficult to say for sure, but it's hoped that any disruption to services will be minimal. The church is, for example, advising those wishing to book weddings of possible disruption and offering alternatives (the other churches in the benefice) given the understandable need to avoid uncertainty. It is unlikely the building will need to be shut completely during the construction works. Work to the floor for example is likely to take place on a zoned basis.

Will there be any changes to church opening times?

Due to current Covid restrictions, St. Mary's is open from 8am – 2pm on Sundays and 2pm – 5pm on Wednesdays. We hope to return to normal opening hours in due course and there are no plans to change normal opening hours on account of the construction works. However, we will need to keep this under review.

Will all the pews be replaced?

Seating will be provided by a mix of 26 shortened, movable pews and freestanding, stackable chairs. Currently we have 39 pews, many of which are long and difficult to move. The new seating arrangements will enable up to 700 people to be accommodated, and allow flexibility so that the specific needs of different gatherings and events can be met.

Seating: why a mix of chairs and pews?

The aim is to have seating arrangements/configurations that are flexible for different formats of worship and different community uses, while ensuring that we can accommodate current and foreseeable numbers of people using the space. We believe that the mix of chairs and pews meets future needs while respecting the place of the pews in the overall historic interior.

Have short, stackable pews been considered?

We intend to retain 26 shortened, moveable pews as above. We have decided against buying new pews as they would be an unnecessary cost and would not provide the flexibility required. 26 is the number of shortened pews that could be accommodated in the Memorial Chapel (intended to be a pewed area in any event), the Milcombe Chapel and around the edges of the building on the occasions when the Nave needs to be cleared of pews altogether, so the ability to stack the pews is not necessary in order to create a large, pew-free space.

Will there still be kneelers and somewhere to put hymn/prayer books and personal items such as spectacles during church services?

All of this will be taken into consideration once we reach the stage of sourcing the chairs. There are options to purchase chairs or chair accessories to accommodate these practical needs. It will be a requirement of new chairs that they will be stackable.

What will happen to the High Altar – will it still be used?

It is not envisaged that any changes will take place to the current status of the High Altar.

Where will the choir go?

There are no plans to move the choir, nor the organs. We do envisage investing in movable choir stalls as part of the investment in new seating, in order to provide the choir with additional flexibility.

Will we have communion rails?

Yes. There will still be communion rails at the Nave Altar. We intend to reinstate the original Victorian altar rails at the High Altar.

Will the Chancel screen be moved?

No.

Will the font be moved?

No.

What will happen to the Millennium Screen?

The Millennium Screen is a valuable and significant feature of the church building – any changes by way of opening up the west end will take this into consideration.

What will happen to historic gravestones and memorial plaques?

There are some historic gravestones (believed to be about 65 in number) under the current tiled floor of the church and these will remain, untouched. They may become exposed as a result of work on the floor. This will provide an opportunity to capture a visual record. Any memorials at the back of the church that may be obscured by the new facilities will be looked after and/or moved to preserve their integrity.

Will the West Door become the main entrance and, if so, could this create a traffic hazard?

In Phase 3 the West Door will become an additional entrance to the building and be used more often than at present. The South Door will remain the primary entrance and, during Phase 2, will be adapted to allow better disabled, pram and buggy access. The intention is to lay paths from the current south and north entrances to the churchyard that lead to the West Door.

We will consult with relevant local authorities to ensure there is no traffic hazard at the West Door, for example by exploring the desirability of barriers at the edge of the pavement.

Will there be toilets? Where will they go?

Yes, one of the key elements in Phase 1 of the project is to install toilets and comply with relevant access/disability legislation. The scheme envisages two toilets being located at the back of the building (one disabled), behind a curved screen, and a further toilet in the extended Vestry will be added in Phase 3.

How does the scheme meet the needs of the older members of our congregation?

We hope that the needs of the older members of our congregation and community will be well served by all of the above, specifically, better heating, sound, lighting, access, loos and kitchen facilities and more comfortable seating. It is hoped that these things will make church attendance a much better experience for our elderly people. And by enabling a greater variety of events and activities to take place in the church, there will be a benefit for people of all ages.

Will there be a separate area for children – will it be screened off?

We aim to have warm and inviting spaces for children. The redeveloped interior creates various options for accommodating children's worship and activities – both as part of the congregation and self-contained. The PCC's view is that children are an integral part of the congregation, our worship and our community.

What will the kitchen be used for?

The intention is that the kitchen facilities will be adequate to service current activities such as Tea and Toast, Parish Breakfast, Harvest Breakfast, Soup Saturday etc. but also to cater for funeral wakes, refreshments during concerts and other functions. The PCC has also charged the BOF Community Use Group with investigating the feasibility of a regular café in church.

How would a café work?

The BOF Community Use Group is investigating the potential and feasibility of a café in church that makes use of the new facilities. This, clearly, needs to take account of other hospitality offers in the village.

Will an area of silence be available at all times?

It's very important the church remains available for prayer and quiet contemplation. Under normal circumstances, there are various daytime activities (eg school services, rehearsals for concerts etc) that mean there isn't an area of silence at all times, but often a quiet area can be set aside. For example, during the Christmas Tree Festival, the chancel was set aside for prayer - and much used.

It is envisaged that the BOF project will result in more activities taking place in church as part of stimulating greater congregational activity and community engagement. The PCC will need to consider whether the impact of this means that it will be desirable to set aside a dedicated area of the building for quiet and prayer. The greater flexibility of the internal space resulting from new seating arrangements will assist in any zoning plans.

How will the space be used?

The objective is a large flexible space in the main body of the church. Different activities will take up different parts of the space. There will be some activities such as concerts that take up the whole building. Some activities needing catering will use the back of the church near the proposed kitchen. One can imagine parenting groups or Alpha courses, as well as Café Church, using chairs and tables around the present Nave dais. Meetings of up to say 20 people will be able to take place in the extended Vestry that is part of Phase 3.

Who would operate an information service area?

The BOF Community Use Group is investigating the possibility of a community information hub. This might be a static display/leaflet pick up point for various local service providers, public and private, or might involve organizational representatives being present from time to time e.g. for public drop-in sessions.

Would the building be used for conferences?

“Conferences” embraces a wide spectrum of events but certain sorts of conference could potentially be accommodated in the redeveloped interior of the building, though realistically this is likely to be an infrequent usage. A conference could, for example, involve plenary sessions with projection for about 150 people; a number of break-out workshops taking place at different points in the day; information displays; and catering – all delivered in the new large, single, flexible space. If large numbers of cars are expected for such an event it could be necessary to arrange for dedicated parking space to be available, elsewhere in the village.

How much will it all cost?

We estimate the overall project will be about £1.1 million but this will be raised and committed in phases over 2-3 years.

Project element	Est. cost	Sub-totals
Phase 1		
Heating	127	
Facilities/screen	278	
Further audiovisual	44	
<i>Total Phase 1</i>		449

Phase 2		
Floor restoration	127	
Seating/pews/furniture	139	
Lighting/electrics	146	
<i>Total Phase 2</i>		412
Phase 3		
Clergy vestry extension	139	
West Door	51	
Raised ringing chamber	114	
<i>Total Phase 3</i>		304
TOTAL		1,165

Where will the money come from?

A variety of sources: undoubtedly there will need to be fund raising from within the community and congregation but the project will be significantly grant-funded. We may be able to apply for lottery funding. We engaged professional fundraising consultants in 2020 to conduct a financial feasibility study and this was updated to reflect the impact of the pandemic. A dedicated fundraising consultant has been appointed to develop and deliver a fundraising plan, including making applications to charitable trust / grant giving bodies. The BOF Fundraising Group is working hand in glove with the consultant.

Who will do the work to the building?

After a rigorous selection process we appointed architects for the project - JBKS - who have experience of delivering redevelopment projects at other churches and who were recommended by the Diocesan Adviser. Information about JBKS is available on their website www.jbks.co.uk.

Particular areas of the works are being undertaken by specialist contractors e.g.: floor, heating. Other professionals are/will be involved such as Quantity Surveyors, professional project management and historic buildings consultants.

What sort of help is the project group making use of?

In addition to working with JBKS and other specialists, we are keeping Historic England informed as the project progresses. We are in regular contact with the Church Buildings Officers of the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches (effectively the planning authority for the church).

We are also liaising with The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, The Victorian Society and Historic England. We see it as a key part of the project to consult with the congregation and other users of, and stakeholders in, the church building, and to build as much consensus as possible around the changes. The consultation process itself stands to help with this.

Who has the final say?

Decisions on the project are taken by the Vicar, Church Wardens and the PCC but approvals are needed from various bodies such as the Diocese and the Church Buildings Council with which we have been consulting at various stages of the project.

Which local churches could I visit to see other examples of internal redevelopment?

There are an increasing number of examples of local interior redevelopment projects. You could for example visit Deddington, Hook Norton, Burford and Charlbury – all offer different visions, but all illustrate ways of creating a more flexible space for worship and community use. Examples of JBKS' work are at Greyfriars' Church, Reading and the churches at St Leonards, Watlington, St Mary's, Wallingford and St Mary's, Thame.

What has been the impact of the pandemic on the project?

The pandemic has clearly created considerable uncertainty in many areas of life. Uncertainty over fundraising has prompted the restructuring of the project into a number of sequential project elements as set out above in order to avoid the risk associated with an "all or nothing" approach to the project. We will progress through the project elements as far as funding availability will allow. In sequencing the project we have prioritised the elements that stand to deliver greater usability, particularly the new facilities.

We have taken additional professional fundraising advice in order to evaluate the particular impacts of the pandemic on e.g. grant-funding bodies. This advice has also led us to intensify our focus on the heritage and community use dimensions of the project, with the establishment of dedicated work groups involving a mix of church goers and non-church goers.

The overall impact of the pandemic on our planned timings has been to extend the project's duration by some 12 months against original plans, though some activities have nevertheless been able to take place as originally intended (for example, much of the work in designing the new heating system). We have sought to use the lockdown for further planning, preparation and consultation. One of the encouraging aspects of the lockdown has been a strengthening of community spirit which we hope the BOF project is starting to tap into and further develop.

Who is the Building Our Future Group?

The PCC is the overall Steering Group for the project. There is a core team dealing with day-to-day matters involving:

The Rev. Dale Gingrich – Vicar, Flexible Worship Group Lead

Barbara Walklate – Churchwarden

Liz Farmer – Churchwarden

Jon Carlton – Joint Project Lead, Community Use Group Lead

Ian Myson – Joint Project Lead, Heritage Group Lead

Sir Tony Baldry – Fundraising Group Lead

Phoebe Hart – Communications Group Lead

Helen Hedley – Project Plan Owner

If you are able to offer any experience relevant to the BOF Project, or have an interest in joining one of the work groups, please get in touch using the email below.

We expect to appoint a professional project manager when we reach construction implementation.

Who can I contact if I have a query?

Please contact the communications lead for the project: Phoebe Hart via bofcomms@gmail.com

Building Our Future Group – February 2021