

# Simplification, flexibility, space and light



Christ Church New Malden is certainly not Gothic Revival in the grand style. Like many Victorian churches it is built in the organic pre-Wren gothic form (nave, aisles, chancel) but without the classic gothic embellishments. In fact it truly is organic, having grown with the needs of the Church as the village grew, but over a period of 50 years rather than the 500 of some village churches.

New Malden was created as a new village a little before 1850, but the people had to find their Church elsewhere until a 'temporary church' was built in 1857. But the congregation soon outgrew this and the first part of the present church was built in 1866.

and extended twice before the end of the century. In the last 110 years, however, it had hardly changed at all, except for the introduction of some stained glass, a huge organ case (that blocked out two windows) and improvements to the North Aisle roof.

Like many churches of the period it was built with cost in mind. Indeed a planned tower was cancelled for lack of funds, but the building was solid and decently proportioned. Indeed, it had only one serious flaw: a factory style saw-tooth roof over the North Aisle, whose leaky valleys provided endless concern to churchwardens and discomfort to the congregation. This was finally corrected in the 1980s, when additional rooms were added alongside the church, including a lounge which could also be used as an 'overflow' and a large kitchen. Indeed, our first task was to bring the kitchen up to modern catering standards, since hospitality is an increasingly important part of the ministry here.

After more than 100 years, the interior of the church itself was 'tired' and out of time with the needs of the church. Early in 2004 the PCC resolved to modernise in order to produce an





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“As the PCC study had progressed, it had become clear that the plan was moving towards a design concept that could be expressed in four words: simplification, flexibility, space and light.”

- 1> View east no lights
- 2> Before
- 3> Looking south west
- 4> Platform
- 5> Priests chair & kneeler
- 6> Communion rail, pulpit & lectern
- 7> Detail of pulpit steps
- 8> Holy table
- 9> Font
- 10> Lectern

interior more suitable to modern worship and to the service of the local community.

This was very much a PCC led development and a period of study quickly produced a list of the problems to be overcome. Some were stated in practical and others in theological terms but it became clear that there was no real distinction. They were the same problems which limited our ability to serve and worship and live for God. It was really all about practical theology.

The only notable structural problem was with the floor which needed complete replacement. This involved removing the pews and we decided that we would not put

them back, opting instead for the flexibility of stackable chairs. The floor work also gave us the opportunity to dispense with the redundant choir stalls and extend the chancel level forward to form a large nave platform. The old floor was partly carpeted and partly bare unfinished boards. We decided to replace it all with European Oak – from sustainable forests of course!

Our contractor for the building work, Lytchfield Construction, was chosen with great care and this proved to be time well spent. The success of the project owes much to the thoughtful supervision of the owner Roger Scudamore and the detailed careful > 30

## FURNITURE

**Pulpit:**

Made in European oak with Brown Oak detailing, there are three steps, an adjustable reading stand, shelf and built in wiring for a Microphone

**Communion rails:**

Four sections in European Oak on Stainless Steel floor arcs they fasten to the floor using a wooden knob & Bolt which fits to the underside of the rail when not in use

**Lectern:**

In European Oak with integral step for shorter readers! and built in wiring

**Font:**

A Cylindrical Pedestal and elevated round top pierced by a Brown Oak Dart with a hand blown Glass bowl and turned lid The fiddles around all the panel items mimics the details of the legs on the Holy Table and Flower stands

**Holy Table:**

A near semi Circle of Solid European Oak on Tapered legs with scoop detail, there is a smaller arc removed from the inner edge so when the Holy Table is taken back to the Silk panel at the rear wall there is a permanent Half Cone in brown Oak (which echoes the Dart of the font) against which the Holy table fits

**Priests Chair & Kneeler:**

An Asymmetric matched pair that form a Cylinder when not in use one half has an upholstered seat and the other has a kneeling pad, an angled shelf for a prayer book and a horizontal shelf for storage



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work of his craftsmen. In particular the woodwork, which is so very important in this church, is a delight to behold.

The old organ was removed, reclaiming the forgotten windows, and a new organ commissioned from Phoenix Organs. Many readers will regret the change from a real pipe organ to one without pipes, but the old organ was not a very fine one. The sound of the Phoenix organ, which uses digital samples from 'real' pipe organs, is indistinguishable to most people and the new organ is superior in many ways. For example, it is smaller, never needs tuning, has more variety of stops, can tolerate changes of humidity and temperature and can easily be adjusted to play in tune with other instruments as well as being much cheaper.

As the PCC study had progressed, it had become clear that the plan was moving towards a design concept that could be expressed in four words: simplification, flexibility, space and light. This realisation was to prove helpful in making all sorts of detailed decisions later.

After the removal of everything that would not be needed again, the freshly painted uncluttered walls took on an almost Puritan

simplicity. A wonderful feeling of space arose from the removal of the dark pews and this, with the lighter colour of the floor and the two revealed windows made the church much lighter. But the electric lighting also had to be addressed. The pre-existing installation was the very latest thing in its day – fluorescent tubes! – but they did not give either the quality or controllability of light that was required. A complete relight of the church was commissioned from Bruce Kirk of Light Perceptions, who is well known in church lighting circles. His scheme returns the church to something like the pattern of illumination



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that would have been used with the original gasoliers, but with much greater controllability of course. A combination of 12 'electroliers' and a number of spot lights along with a programmable dimming system contributes to both our 'light' and our 'flexibility' ambitions and entirely transforms the appearance of the church.

Flexibility was achieved in two ways. Firstly the nave platform was made unusually large, with a semi-circular front. The congregational seating will usually be set to follow this shape in concentric curves. When necessary, hardwood screens in the north wall can be opened to access a large overflow area and the sweep of chairs is then extended into this, helping to unite the two areas. Visibility was an issue, as in almost every church with pillars, and this is solved by a video system.

The second point of flexibility relates to the chancel/ platform furniture. Our existing pieces were of various dates, styles and qualities. We were advised by the diocese that, in a simplification of this kind, much greater attention would be focussed on the principle pieces of furniture and that it would be wise to commission a complete matching suite of furniture rather than merely buying stock pieces from the catalogue or replacing only some of the items. The only problem was to find the right workshop for this important work and this took several frustrating weeks. Finally, another church in the diocese directed us to a company they had used – SF Furniture, which has since been featured in this magazine (November/ December '06).

The brief was to produce a complete suite of furniture, all of which could easily be moved so as to provide the flexibility for all kinds of worship services as well as community events, concerts, etc. Declan O'Donaghue, one of the partners at SF, visited the church and immediately picked up on the curve of the platform as the unifying feature that would be reflected in the designs. His plans were enthusiastically approved. The furniture was made in SF's Gloucester workshop by a handful of craftsmen over the next few months, then delivered and installed in the completed church. It is beautifully crafted, modern, imaginative and fits in perfectly with our de-cluttered church! We expect that it will be enjoyed equally by generations to come.

I will not bore you with details of the plumbing, electricity, sound and video systems, but merely say that we have ended up with a building which will free the Church of many things which inhibited our work.

Our first public event, as part of the opening celebrations, is to be a youth big-band concert. We could not have done this with the old interior! ■

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