

The finest seating to complement the finest lighting



You can't help but admire a church that appreciates the enormous importance of good lighting. All Saints Carshalton has splashed out and thereby done true justice to this beautiful building, enhanced as it was in the 1920s by the immensely gifted Ninian Comper. Such expenditure is never a waste, to create a range of atmospheres to enhance a remarkable interior.

After all, by tradition, church interiors were always lavished with the finest quality

available in every field. Only more recently, have we seen these precious spaces filled with the drab, inappropriate additions, where fluorescent blue upholstered seating comes to mind, amongst a jumble of other forgettable furnishings.

Since the recent feature in *Church Building*, All Saints has acquired another stunning addition. The new seating designed by Luke Hughes champions the need to maintain quality, while tackling modern furnishing requirements. Hughes' philosophy has always been that architecture and furniture must create a seamless harmony, where the latter does justice to the architecture, while not attempting to outdo it for the limelight. Secondly, he understands the need for designs that are neither slavish reproductions nor gratuitously modernist. Finally, he designs furniture to last, with the long term confidence inspired by a renaissance within our churches.

Initial discussion about the appropriate seating for such a church started in 2005. Meetings arranged with Father John and Luke Hughes could not have been easier, with a client who fully understood these principles. An example of this was the church's agreement that the benches should not be stained darker but left a natural oak, understanding that staining would have immediately given the fresh designs a drab, apologetic feel. Now, left alone in the light, the oak is fast gaining a richer tone. Seeing the benches in place, it has become obvious that this warmth perfectly complements Comper's magnificent polychromatic decoration and lavish gilding.

That and similar understanding held true through subsequent discussions on modern church usage. Again it is refreshing to find



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parishes in tune with the changing spirit of this “renaissance.” Ever more of them, recognise their church buildings as an important physical presence and passionately wish to see them once again drawing people in, not just for worship but for a whole variety of activities under their benevolent and omnipotent gaze.

Sir Roy Strong made the case strongly in a speech to the annual DAC conference. He decried the vast sums given at the millennium to village halls over churches, where churches were seen as contentious religious minorities. But he would surely agree, the Anglican Church more than any other, represents inclusivity, as sanctioned by the state. It would be hard to think of another denomination or faith better able to embrace the people of any community. The church building invariably stands as the largest and most distinguished space and how right that it should be the community's focus. For the average parish, the church is a great “chamber,” the domestic equivalent of a Westminster Hall at the heart of a community and therefore crying out for use for many diverse activities, blessed if not actually organised by the church itself. How

many parishes have that great empty “space” cluttered by Victorian pews, for hurriedly heated use once a week, while a leaking flat-roofed garden shed of a village “hall,” does for community activities.

The new philosophy sweeping the land sees this inspired space as it once was; an invaluable community resource. While the sanctuary always remained the undeniable spiritual space, medieval churches saw their naves used for meetings, festivals and on occasion even for storage, making them in effect a barn attached to the sanctuary. While no one is suggesting a stable for [>3](#)





Roundheads, churches are now using their naves as never before. The ability to stack away the furniture (even bench seating, as at All Saints), allows these magnificent spaces to gain new life. Sweeping away the invariably additional Victorian pews also allows the architecture to breathe afresh, where the full beauty of column base or monument can be revealed. It is extraordinary to see all over the country, the radical transformation from such a simple act.

The skill of Luke Hughes was that he saw the writing on the wall and understood the changing requirements not just in church buildings but in university colleges, schools and the great national institutions alike. And time has proved him right; within Oxbridge colleges alone, he has undertaken furnishing projects in 54 of the total 68 colleges. There has been the same realisation in every sector; that these fine buildings can and should be multi functioning, flexible spaces, whether for the benefit of the local community or more commercial fundraising. Churches have come a long way from the notion of serried ranks of seating with a strict hierarchy and the ubiquitous squire's pew. Same seat, same tired thinking, same predictable view, while a seat that moves changes and disturbs all. And in the case of All Saints, a bench that moves, is all the more daring. More than daring for some, quite unthinkable.

But it is right that churches should undertake a careful, considered consultation period to achieve broad consensus. This can admittedly be a long and frustrating process, where the most vociferous parishioners can often be those never actually seen in the church for a service. But a "bench" or "pew," call it what you will, has decided advantages over the chair. For one, seating capacity is maximised, families able to be closer and visual impact minimised. Also, it is easier to arrange or clear away bench seating and yet these are as comfortable a seat as is possible, without adding upholstery. All Saints went one step further, in ordering from the Dillon Studio, stunning kneeler designs, to sit on a shelf under the seat, yet large and flat enough to double as a seat cushion if required; a stroke of genius!

Hughes readily admits that past centuries have seen the basic four legged seat invented and refined to perfection. What matters now is adaption to modern needs, together with the careful consideration of a specific building's requirements, both architecturally and practically. Not that this hasn't seen some striking new designs from his hand but there is a timeless feel to them, which provokes from the viewer a double take, for they appear both familiar and yet refreshingly different.

The stacking bench may be a clever and original concept but when all's said and done, it's a simple device. However its subtleties should not be underestimated and even minor changes to its basic design require careful consideration so as not to compromise its effectiveness and practicality. For example, it is designed to stack yet be light enough to easily move, while heavy enough to hold its ground when laid out. It needs to have a physical presence, while appearing to melt into the interior scheme. It needs to have graceful lines and yet be robust enough to endure the knocks of time. It is therefore all the more impressive that clearly identifiable differences appear in every



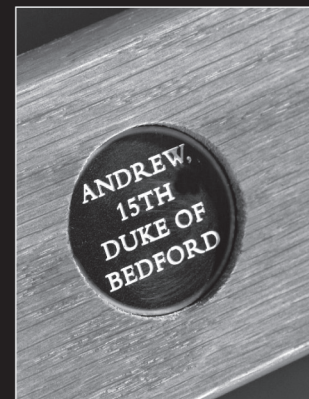
London church containing the bench, so that within such constraints, each church has a unique design, subtly different from the others and reflecting the surrounding architecture, as well as the particular parish requirements.

I take my hat off to All Saints and their inspired incumbent, for a rare understanding of the complex issues facing churches today and therefore requiring no lectures from us. ■

*Anthony Russell is Ecclesiastical Consultant to Luke Hughes & Co.
www.lukehughes.co.uk*

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