

RECENT INITIATIVES TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF SIGNIFICANT CHURCH FURNITURE

Peter Stone

In the late 1990s, it became apparent to some in the Regional Furniture Society that historically significant furniture was disappearing from churches and chapels at an increasingly alarming rate. Several cases of casual disposal, involving items of particular importance from churches in West Yorkshire and Suffolk, had highlighted the scale of this piecemeal erosion of original contents and revealed widespread ignorance, amongst ministers and their supporting laity, about the historical value of their furniture.

At that time I was fortunate to be in regular contact with the Lichfield Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) Secretary and her husband was the Bishop's Assistant. In discussion with the DAC it became apparent that the committee would have ex-officio members as consultants to advise on specialist matters e.g. stained glass, vestments, silver, lighting etc. I therefore came up with a way ahead. (See Appendix I).

It was duly agreed that there would be no objection to appointing a Furniture Consultant. I took up this post, and then the DAC promulgated to all the Church of England churches in the Lichfield Diocese of my availability to advise them on appropriate matters concerning furniture, and associated wooden fittings. Subsequently, in discussion with the RFS council members, a visit to Lichfield was proposed to see the Cathedral and other places of interest, and at the same time a short seminar to review the procedures for consultants and the role played by DACs in the management of church business. This duly happened one Saturday in September 2001. Some 20 members attended and after touring the Cathedral and lunching in the Visitors Centre, the DAC secretary explained the rôle and responsibilities of the DAC. It was emphasised that a church must not make changes to its structure or dispose of any material items until DAC approval has been granted. Any church contravening this procedure is liable to be 'fined' by the Diocese. In order to spread the word to other Diocese it was agreed that the Lichfield DAC secretary would explain to her fellow secretaries, at their annual meeting, what had been established in Lichfield, and so encourage similar procedures to be activated nationally. At the same time the RFS would call for volunteer members from around the country to act as advisors or consultants in their respective locality. The above procedures were established and publicised, but there was a rather disappointing response from DACs to take up the idea.

The next suggestion was to work through the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Society (NADFAS) sub group called Church Recorders (CRs). There are numerous CRs linked to their local parent society around the country. A local CR group will select a church in their district and conduct an extremely thorough and detailed examination of the church and then produce a comprehensive report, covering

architecture, decoration, material fixtures and fittings, and objects. Naturally this should include all aspects of wooden features and furniture and small objects. Approaches were made to the Chairman of the CR organisation as to how the RFS could help them in assessing furniture and fittings. It was agreed that they would publish an article in their annual magazine on the subject, emphasising the importance of fully appreciating the historical nature of their findings on furniture and fittings.

The article was published in the 2003 Church Recorders *News and Views* (Appendix II).

Whilst all these developments were happening the RFS Council asked me to produce a paper to standardise the procedures for RFS members to follow if and when they were requested to assist a local DAC or CR Group. After discussion and endorsement at Council, the paper was duly made into *Guidelines for RFS Members Acting As Furniture Advisors To Churches*, and made available to members (Appendix III). The notes include advice that can be given to clergy and laity concerning insurance and security as well as generating a report and recommendation for the DAC.

One Diocese where great success has been achieved is in Chester where Dr. Elly Macbeath has established excellent relationships with the DAC Secretary and is regularly asked to assist. She has also produced procedures for dealing with church pews, when approval has been given for their disposal (Appendix IV).

As with the DACs links, the contacts with NADFAS CRs have been rather disappointing and the efforts by members to assist both organisations have been unsuccessful towards fulfilling the original concept. As a result I felt that there was little more I could do to pursue the well-intentioned concepts of our Society concerning Church Treasures and resigned from the Council. However all the documentation for the procedures is still available through the RFS Secretary. Additionally I am entirely happy to advise anyone wishing to assist their DAC or Church Recording Group, or to just liaise with their local church.

APPENDIX I

PAPER PRESENTED TO REGIONAL FURNITURE SOCIETY COUNCIL

*Loss of Church Treasures: A Proposed Way Ahead**Introduction and Background*

Further to the articles by our Chairman and Vice President in the last issue and discussions at the A.G.M., concerning the actual and potential loss of Church Treasures, whether they be cupboards, coffers, chests or furniture in general, I wish to make a proposal for consideration by the Council, as a result of my discussions and correspondence in the Diocese of Lichfield, which could be activated within all Dioceses.

Discussion

An approach was made to the Bishop of Lichfield's Assistant (a friend and good contact) advising him of the problem experienced in Suffolk (Saxstead Church) and this led to internal Diocesan discussions and in particular with The Diocesan Advisory Committee (D.A.C.) For those not familiar with Church and Diocesan Committees – the D.A.C.s have the authority vested in them to approve, or otherwise, on matters relating to Church buildings and their fixtures and fittings; in particular for alteration to structures and in effect – planning approval.

However, many D.A.C.s will have specialist advisors associated with their Committee e.g. for lighting, trees, books, sound systems and so on. The Bishop of Lichfield has come up with a proposal that they appoint a consultant for furniture and I have been invited to take up the position. The Consultants are usually retired people who would give their time free, but P.C.C.s (local Church Committees, every Parish Church has to have such a committee), are asked to cover travelling expenses.

The proposal seems to me to be very apt and would establish a formal link between the Diocese and the Regional Furniture Society. The Diocese would publish the fact and invite, and in effect require, a Church Incumbent to seek the Consultant's advice before taking any decisions on Church furniture, wood fixtures and fittings.

If this proposal were to be accepted and incorporated into Lichfield Diocesan procedures, it would provide the basis for other Diocese to follow and by appropriate correspondence, establish it throughout the Church of England and, by arrangement, I am sure, denominations in other counties of the U.K.

The part that R.F.S. members could then play, would be to offer their services as Furniture Consultants in their Diocesan Area. Naturally, we are not all experts, like Victor Chinnery and others, but at least our knowledge will be greater than many local clergy and their P.C.C. Then, if anyone felt out of their depth, they could call upon the services of greater expertise within our membership.

Proposals for the immediate future

1. I intend to pursue the proposed arrangements in Lichfield and agree to be their Consultant and will now continue discussions with the D.A.C. to formalise procedures.
2. Invite R.F.S. members who would wish to be associated with the plan to register

their names with the Secretary and naturally indicate their preferred area of operation.

3. If procedures established with Lichfield are acceptable to the R.F.S. Council, the R.F.S. writes to the various Church of England Dioceses in the United Kingdom, explaining how they can provide a Consultant/Advisor on furniture matters. At the same time, the Bishop of Lichfield, through the Church of England offices, advises other Bishops of what they have established. If the two letters are co-ordinated, the outcome could be in everyone's best interests.

Conclusion

The above points have been endorsed, in general, by our Chairman, and I therefore invite members to submit their comments/observations on the subject through the Newsletter and/or advise the Secretary of their readiness to be a Consultant/Advisor.

P.S. Additionally, and in the fullness of time, the Consultants would establish a 'Register of Church Furniture' of special interest, which could be formally catalogued – thus meeting the additional proposal in the final paragraph of the letter in the last issue of the Newsletter.

APPENDIX II

CHURCH FURNITURE, WOODWORK FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

(Reprinted from an article published in *Church Records News & Views*, 2003)

The RFS is seeking to establish links with NADFAS Church Recorders in order to assist them in their work with respect to the furniture and woodwork found in churches.

As knowledge of the RFS may be sketchy I will explain our aims and objectives. The society was established in 1984 with a view to advancing the study of the history, design, production, distribution and use of regional furniture in the British Isles and to further the public knowledge and appreciation. The society's President is Dr. Bernard D. Cotton author of the book *The English Regional Chair*, and many other research papers and publications. The Vice President is Mr. Victor Chinnery the author of the book *Oak Furniture – The British Tradition*. The Honorary Chairman is Mr. David Dewing, Director of the Geffrye Museum. The society publishes regular Newsletters and an annual Journal, organises various Study Days and Conferences. The society AGM is always combined with a long weekend in a different venue each year. The local organiser arranges a comprehensive programme of visits to museums, period houses and very often private properties with special interest in their furniture, and a topical lecture. The event which is now renowned to be a cultural, social and extremely informative weekend usually concludes with a furniture clinic for pieces brought by members. The current membership is 620 and is well spread around the country. New members are always welcome!

The reason for this article is to help Church Recorders working in the woodwork field to become more aware and appreciative of the significance of pieces they may discover when recording. I will briefly mention two examples of what can be found and what can happen.

Firstly, this case initiated the RFS involvement in the field – a Suffolk church, without Faculty approval (remember the article on Faculty Jurisdiction in the Autumn 2001 CR Journal), disposed of a cupboard for a few hundred pounds to a local dealer. Shortly afterwards at Christies it was sold to Huntington Antiques Ltd a specialist in oak furniture, for about £8500. The proprietor held it for some 18 months after he learnt more about the provenance and was prepared to return it to the church but funding never materialised. It is now understood to be in private hands. The cupboard had been constructed from the rood screen of the church in about 1540 and some of the screen painted decoration was even found on the inside. The cupboard with a solid moulded double panel top above a central framed panel door applied with period metalwork consisting of one lock (sliding latch now missing) is crowned with typical pierced trefoil decoration and has two strap hinges with traceried terminal endings. Both sides have plain panels above foliate carved arches with splendid original medieval painted decoration to the inner sides. This very interesting piece in its own way tells a story of the Reformation. The outstanding medieval paintwork on the inner sides of the arches is in remarkably pristine condition as a result of its sheltered location where it has been protected from wear and damaging light. Colors of red and green, decorated with golden monograms IHC (IHCOYC – Greek for Jesus) and rosette and fleur-de-lys decoration

may be compared to the few surviving screen panels in the V&A, originally from Great Barton, Suffolk, Tatterford church, Norfolk and St John, Madden Market, Norwich dating from the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century. The foliate carvings on the arches, whilst incorporating stylistic details reminiscent of as early as the fourteenth century (juxtaposing leaves; deep relief and overall naturalistic treatment) share stylistic similarities with carving on tracery head panels now in the V & A Museum. A date of mid-to-late fifteenth century for the original rood screen would be most likely. The bottom boards appear to be old (19th century) replacements on this charismatic piece with a rich mature colour and good patina.

Therefore you will appreciate it is essential to inspect very carefully all items of furniture inside and out, and even underneath if possible! Unfortunately many churches do not realise the importance of the custodianship with their charge.

The second more recent example was reported in *The Times* newspaper article of 21 March 2003, and probably elsewhere, headed 'Churchgoers sat on £200,000 masterpieces.' The mahogany two seater benches, were almost certainly made by Chippendale for the dissolute connoisseur William Beckford's 21st birthday; he then disposed of them when times were tight! They have now, at auction, been sold for £276,000. The PCC of St Andrew's Church, Trent, Dorset, was given faculty approval by the DAC to dispose of them and has been instructed, to establish a Trust Fund to be used for the upkeep of the church.

In an ideal world the RFS would like to see furniture and fittings retained in the cathedrals and churches for all to appreciate, with an indication of the item's provenance, and we would recommend that this line should be taken whenever possible. Adequate insurance and the security of moveable items is essential and their importance recognised.

To establish a greater awareness and understanding by Church Recorders, the RFS wishes to offer its members' services to advise and if necessary to assist. The recent Study Day on Woodwork, in Sutton Coldfield, lead by Mr. Gerald Cole, (an RFS member) can without doubt further the appreciation, recognition and recording of woodwork and furniture and so ensure more thorough reports on this fascinating subject.

It is therefore proposed that any Recorders Group wishing to call upon the assistance of the RFS should ask their Group Leader to contact me in writing and I will endeavour to put the Group in touch with a local RFS volunteer. My address will be available from the Church & Heritage Department at NADFAS House.

Finally, if any Church Recorder would like to join the RFS please write to the Membership Secretary: c/o W.A. Pinn and Son, 124 Swan Street, Sible Hedingham, Essex CO9 3HP. 01284 830192.

Peter Stone. Member of the Council of the RFS.

APPENDIX III

GUIDELINES FOR RFS MEMBERS ACTING AS FURNITURE ADVISORS TO CHURCHES

Background and Introduction

The following text has been endorsed by the RFS Council to give members guidance when called upon by the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), of their Diocese, to provide advice and/or recommendations concerning church furniture and woodwork in a particular church.

In general, the need for such advice may come about because of the lack of appreciation by the church authorities of the significance of the contents of a particular church. However considerable tact and discretion may be necessary when dealing with the various levels of the established church.

The specific requirement may arise when the Rector, Priest-in-Charge, or member of the Parochial Church Council (PCC) wish to be advised of the identification, importance, correct manner of repair, conservation, or even disposal of a particular item.

It should also be noted that The National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS) have a comprehensive organisation called 'Church Recorders' who compile very detailed records of all aspects of a church and this includes furniture and wood fittings e.g. pews, screens, pulpits, reredos etc. and therefore the opportunity to co-operate with them in your local area is fully endorsed, and even considered essential, as recorders may not be very knowledgeable concerning furniture.

It must be emphasised that the DAC is the responsible authority for all decisions concerning my change to a church and its contents and therefore all actions are dependent upon that committee. If a parish church, Rector or PCC do not seek this approval they are breaking the law. It is therefore in everyone's interest to establish good relationships with the DAC Secretaries, who will have various other consultants for say stained glass, lighting, vestments, bells, clocks, heating and so forth. Additionally consultants must remember the sensitivities of church staff and congregations – views often differ.

Procedure for Establishing an appointment, tasking, visiting and reporting

Firstly, we hope that a DAC secretary would contact the RFS secretary enquiring whether a member would like to become involved in assisting their Diocese, Peter Stone our Church Treasures Council representative would then co-ordinate on the council's behalf and liaise with the DAC Secretary and a member on our register of interested members.

When an RFS member has been identified and volunteered for the post it is recommended he/she be officially appointed by the DAC Chairman or the Bishop of the Diocese. (In Lichfield the Bishop sent a letter inviting the appointee to take up the post of Consultant for Furniture Matters.)

The appointee should then be tasked by the DAC after a request by the Rector or PCC of a parish. This initial tasking can be done by letter or a telephone call.

The consultant would then expect the Rector or his/her representative to make contact to arrange a mutually convenience time and venue. At this point it is advisable to clarify

that reimbursement of travelling expenses is the norm but no specific fee is required for the consultation.

During the visit the consultant should make detailed notes concerning the subject matter covering: type of wood, dimensions, condition, provenance, estimated age, relevance to the church and any other significant points. It is worth reviewing the church notes, if available, which may provide useful information. It is strongly recommended, if approved, that photographs be taken. During the visit it may be prudent to look at other items of furniture or woodwork to establish a more fulsome record of the church.

It is not the intention of the RFS to give valuations during a visit and if pressed on the subject, the advice should be to contact a local auctioneer or other suitable authority or refer to a book. If it is for insurance purposes advise that a written valuation be obtained.

On completion of the visit a report should be submitted to the DAC secretary with a considered recommendation, but remember it is not wise to give too definitive a response to the issue in question, unless it is really obvious, because the DAC have the final say and may wish to amend or adjust the report. The DAC must inform the Church of their decision. From this aspect it is clear that the consultant again needs to be tactful over what is said to the church representative during the visit.

If for whatever reason the church wishes to dispose of an item, the norm should be to distract them from this approach, (unless there is an excellent reason), especially if one considers it to be of importance. Of course there may be a possibility of it going to another church. E.g. a surplus altar was transferred in the Lichfield Diocese recently.

It is strongly recommended the report be in a standard format as per the attached layout, so that in the fullness of time it will help cataloguing or entry on to a database.

Other points for consideration

If doubt should arise on any issue consultants should speak to other more knowledgeable RFS members e.g. for oak furniture, Victor Chinnery will be willing to help.

The general view is for a church to retain its heritage and therefore furniture and fittings should be properly and carefully preserved and maintained, with specific reference to cleaning and polishing. If found to be neglected their importance should be emphasised. It is strongly recommended that dusting, with a soft duster, or if carving is involved that a light brush, be used to develop the patina, the use of good quality wax polishes should be kept to a minimum and the complete ban of any silicone based ones should be drawn to the attention of all interested parties. Appropriate leaflets from UKIC can be made available or the National Trust book by Stainton is considered to be very good.

Concerning security, some churches have installed alarm systems for certain areas, which is greatly commended, however the method of securing specific items may need consideration, particularly for chairs and stools. For the latter, easily moveable items, a chain and padlock discretely placed is an effective deterrent and should be advised when visiting. Also the listing for insurance purposes of all items of furniture is strongly recommended.

Finally a copy of the report, along with any photographs, should be forwarded to the RFS Secretary for the recording purposes.

REPORT FORMAT FOR REGIONAL FURNITURE SOCIETY MEMBERS WHEN
MAKING A SUBMISSION TO A DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

TITLE OF THE CHURCH AND LOCATION

1. THE BRIEF: An explanation of the circumstances leading to the request for a consultation at the particular Church and what is to be examined and reported on and by whom it was initiated.
2. THE VISIT: Details of the visit, date, place, staff members present and lead person in the discussions. Is the church normally open or locked?
3. DESCRIPTION: Provide a comprehensive description of the article under consideration to include:
 - a) Dimensions
 - b) Wood type(s)
 - c) Condition
 - d) Decoration
 - e) History, verbally obtained and any found in the *Notes* available in the church, or have an Records Offices been consulted.
 - f) Age, whether verified or estimated.
 - g) Patination
4. OPINION: Give your views on the importance of the item, and its authenticity, the role it plays in the church and using your discretion what the staff members you have met appear to wish to achieve from your visit. Also whether any dispute amongst the church congregation or PCC is evident.
5. RECOMMENDATION: Indicate your recommendations, which are to be submitted to the DAC Secretary, it may not be appropriate to inform the Rector or his representative what your views are at this stage as the DAC have the final say which may not agree with yours. If the item requires conservation, restoration, or simple cleaning say so. If security is an issue indicate what form it could take. Is adequate insurance cover provided by the Church policy?

Note. If photographs have been taken, retain for your and in due course RFS records.

CHESTER DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**GUIDELINES FOR THE DISPOSAL OF PEWS IN DIOCESE
PARISH CHURCHES**

- Contact a selection of antique dealers/auction houses, but insist that the pews are viewed.
- Compare the prices offered
- Check the credentials of any dealer e.g. LAPADA member via www.lapada.co.uk/lapada
- Obtain an opinion from a nationally known auction house e.g. Christies (Simon Green: 0207 389 2761; sgreen@christies.com) &/or Bonhams in Chester. Their valuation will provide a bench mark valuation. Valuation can be obtained from a good photograph, either by mail or via their web sites.

Simon Green is a member of RFS (Regional Furniture Society) & a Furniture Consultant in his own diocese.

- Have a sealed bid auction within the church once the values of the pews are known. This could involve the church members, who are interested in purchasing the pews, in doing their own research.

The RFS recommends that disposal, if agreed, is ideal within the parish.

- An alternative to disposal, is to try to recycle the wood from the pews in the church concerned, or perhaps in the Parish Hall, if one exists, to make book shelves, panelling, radiator covers.
- Visit the Internet to reach potential buyers e.g. use the 'ebay' website.
- Nationally known auction houses may help with disposal, if the pews are valuable.
- Oak pews are more valuable/marketable than pine ones.
- Smaller ones are more valuable/marketable than larger ones.
- Well-known and documented provenance will increase value.
- Don't do anything in a rush!

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Furniture Consultant