



ENGLISH HERITAGE

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

Ms Isobel Macdonald
(by e-mail)

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8 October 2014

Dear Ms Macdonald

Request for Pre-application Advice

PARISH CHURCH OF ST MARY, WEST MALLING, KENT

Thank you for inviting me to the church of St Mary, West Malling on 22 September and for setting out your proposals for new facilities to replace those currently provided in the church hall, the former school west of the churchyard. I have not seen your statement of needs, so at this stage I am only able to provide the following general advice on the various options you are considering.

The church of St Mary is a large and interesting church, with early Norman bookends in the form of the chancel and parts of what has come to be the tower around a later nave. The long, narrow chancel and squat tower are rare early survivals and of outstanding significance. As you would expect for the period, they are solidly built and with few small openings.

The nave dates from a substantial rebuilding of 1900-1 by JT Micklethwaite, a major late nineteenth-century church architect who had been GG Scott's pupil. His additions are low and therefore harmonise well with the Norman work. They are elegantly detailed in the Gothic style, with local ragstone cut and dressed in coursed blocks and punctuated by multiple crisp, flat-headed windows with reticulated tracery. The nave interior is consequently light and has an attractive sense of spaciousness. It is entered at the extreme north-western corner of the nave under a western organ gallery. Although of lesser significance than the tower and chancel, and late in the national context of Victorian church rebuilding, the nave's architectural composition, attention to detail and quality of execution are first rate and should be given appropriate weight in your statement of significance.



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Your architect has developed several alternative draft schemes for providing a range of new accommodation at the church, including toilets, meeting rooms, kitchen and hall, all of which on a similar scale to what is currently provided in the church hall. Just because this level of space currently exists does not necessarily mean that it is all needed, so your statement of needs should establish exactly what your needs are and how much space is strictly required to accommodate them.

Inserting all of the above accommodation in the nave, in a combination of mezzanines and pods, would undoubtedly be highly damaging to its light and spacious qualities, and to its architectural coherence, as demonstrated by your architect's sketch schemes. However, we would strongly encourage you to provide at least some of the proposed accommodation within the existing church building, where it will be close at hand, directly support the use of the church itself and reduce the scale, cost and impact of any external addition.

The base of the tower, the westernmost bays of the north aisle and the space beneath the western gallery are all capable of being altered, if handled sensitively, to create small partly or fully enclosed rooms. It may even be possible to move the church furnishings one bay eastwards so the nave seating is closer to the altar and the choir can sit in the long chancel. However, it would not be possible to incorporate a new hall within the existing building without doing considerable harm to its significance.

We would expect you to demonstrate in any future submission why it is necessary to provide a replacement for the existing church hall, where most of your larger activities currently take place. Subject to adequate justification for its disposal, we would be willing to consider an external extension or additional building in the churchyard. In either case you will need to think carefully to avoid an arbitrary relationship with the existing building.

For example, the proposed detached building appears to us to relate uncomfortably to the existing church because it is set very close to it and oblique to the church's main axis. The convoluted arrangement of steps and ramps giving access to it exacerbates this problem, but setting the proposed building further away would be a possible solution.

In the case of an extension, rather than a detached building, it is our experience that the most satisfactory solutions are those which form a harmonious composition with the building to which they are attached and consequently appear to be a natural development of it. Aisles, transepts, chapels, vestries and porches all provide an established vocabulary for the extension of churches. Detached rooms linked by a corridor to the main building, while minimising the impact on historic fabric, are difficult



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to design without detracting from the setting of the historic building (for further information on new additions see English Heritage's guidance '*New Work in Historic Places of Worship*' (2012), p. 10).

Your proposed new opening in the south wall is likely to be acceptable to English Heritage, and may offer the opportunity to give direct access to a new extension, taking care that this new work relates well to the existing building and does not dominate it. For the reasons given above, we do not recommend that you employ a corridor link, particularly one of any great length, to connect the new to existing. We also suggest that views of the south side of the tower should remain as uninterrupted as possible. The arrangement of monuments to the south of the church might, though, allow for an extension running perpendicular to the main building, somewhat like a transept. Although it would not be appropriate to relocate any of the monuments that have associated vaults, we would not rule out the possibility of moving the smaller monuments to allow for a new extension south of the church.

We suggest that your next step should be to work on your statements of needs and significance and to commission further sketch schemes following advice from the DAC and all its secular partners, of which English Heritage is just one. Any external solution would of course also require planning permission, so I suggest that you also seek pre-application advice from the local planning authority. I advise you not to work up detailed proposals at this stage and risk the possibility of abortive work. It would be far better to work up a scheme slowly so that you can attempt to build a consensus with the various advisory bodies that will be involved in a complex project like this one.

If I can offer any further advice on your proposals, please do not hesitate to contact me again.

Yours sincerely

Tom Foxall

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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cc Sarah Anderson, DAC Secretary



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