



Fig. 1: The interior of St Lawrence, Ipswich, looking west, a church cared for by the Ipswich Historic Churches Trust. The photograph is taken from the mezzanine office inserted where the organ used to stand.

Ipswich Historic Churches Trust: a personal view

In May this year I spent a pleasant day visiting the five medieval churches now or at one time cared for by the Ipswich Historic Churches Trust.

Trevor Cooper

All of them have interpretative displays, and there is a great deal of historic interest. My focus, however, is on their current use, and I will say little about the architecture, and will only glancingly describe a selection of the fittings.

What follows are my personal views.

Background

IPSWICH NOW HAS TWELVE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES, one of which was closed after being bombed during the war. In the 1970s, a tough period if you were a Suffolk church, it became clear that another four of these churches were to be closed for regular worship – to be made redundant, as we used to say. They were all in the town centre where there had been drastic depopulation.

In response to local concerns about what would happen to these buildings – and, it has been suggested, in the expectation that profitable uses would easily be found – Ipswich Borough Council bought these four churches from the Church Commissioners for the sum of one pound sterling each (Fig. 1). To look after the buildings, the Council set up the Ipswich Historic Churches Trust (IHCT), and in 1981 they were passed to the Trust on a 99-year fully repairing lease (though the Borough pays the insurance premiums, and on occasions assists with major or urgent repairs). Another church closed and was passed to the Trust in 1985. All of these buildings are listed Grade II*.

The aims of the Trust for these buildings are their ‘preservation and maintenance for the public benefit’, but it was never intended that the buildings should remain unused – rather that they should remain preserved through occupation by long-term tenants, preferably for cultural, educational or community purposes. Given the care taken today to check the viability of proposed new uses for closed Church of England churches, it is astonishing to learn that there was no firm use in mind for any of these buildings when they were acquired by the town.

The IHCT has an interesting structure. Up to twelve Trustees may be appointed by Ipswich Borough Council and up to six are elected by people who are members of the Trust (of whom there are something under one hundred). Among the Trustees are a number who bring extensive professional expertise relating to historic buildings and their management, and this is provided to the Trust *pro bono*.

Description

Cares for four (previously five) medieval churches in Ipswich, used for a variety of purposes.

Founded

1981

Location

Ipswich

Access

Three are open daily.

Website

www.ipswichhistoricchurches.trust.org.uk

How the churches are used				
Church	When acquired by IHCT	Current use and date new use started (all are long term)		Is church normally open to public?
		Date	Use	
St Stephen	1979	1994	Tourist Information Centre	Open
St Nicholas	1986	2001	Transferred back to the diocese. Used for meetings etc.	On request
St Lawrence	1979	2008	Modestly-priced café and community venue, providing protected employment via a social enterprise.	Open
St Peter	1979	c.2008	Converted to concert space, home of the (first-class) Ipswich Hospital Band, rented out for other musical use.	Open
St Clement	1979	ongoing	Under discussion	Closed

I will discuss each of the churches in turn, in the order in which they have found long-term uses (see table).

The churches

St Stephen's church was the first to find a long-term use, when the Council took it over as a Tourist Information Office in 1994, as part of the development of the Buttermarket Shopping Centre.

The wooden fittings created for its new function are beautifully made and have weathered the years well (Fig. 2); on the north their design is reminiscent of a college library whilst on the south they respect the articulation of the arcade, and overall they do not clutter up or fight the space, which is light and airy; a very welcoming interior. The chancel has less furniture, and on the day I saw it, less sense of purpose (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, it is easy to read the building as a church, with differentiated spaces, helped by the splendid Charles II Royal Arms hanging in the chancel arch to separate chancel from nave. (On the reverse of these arms are now framed another set of arms from the church, the Prince of Wales feathers, hidden during the Interregnum.) The monuments, Royal Arms and hatchments are all in excellent condition. The Leman monument (1634) is particularly fine.

One surprising decision was to leave the font standing at original floor level, sunk into the new wooden floor. It is made of Coade stone, so is of some interest, but it does look a little sad and puzzled squatting in its hole (Fig. 4). And did it really have to be left at the west end, where it is rather in the way? (There is another example at St Lawrence's.)

St Nicholas was the second church to find a permanent use. It was sold back to the diocese in 2001 (cost: one pound); the diocese had moved its offices into next-door Churchgate House, and saw the church as a useful conference centre and meeting space. The church is now linked to Churchgate House by an



Fig. 2: (above) St Stephen's, Ipswich, looking east. The church has been used as a Tourist Information Office since 1994.



Fig. 3: (left) St Stephen's, the chancel, used for various purposes.



Fig. 4: The Coade stone font at St Stephen's, in its hole near the door.

atrium which is used as a coffee-shop and café, the link taking you into the east end of the south aisle of the church. This now forms the main entrance to the church.

The pews have been removed, and the floor carpeted (Fig. 5). The east end is screened off with mobile screening, and has been left unchanged; I understand it is used by diocesan staff for daily services. It is also used for intermittent storage. The west end of the church is also screened off: when the screens are rolled back, a cheap and cheerful servery is revealed, which seemed to me to bear a slightly risky relationship to the fine medieval font. I cannot help feeling that new fittings of this relatively poor quality would be refused permission in any living church in the diocese, especially in such close relation to the font.

A number of brasses are displayed on the south wall, but the great treasure of the church is the set of Romanesque sculptures, displayed in front of the old organ chamber at the east end of the north aisle. Recent research suggests these lively carvings may have come here in 1538 from the demolished shrine of our Lady of Grace in Ipswich, a famous pilgrimage destination in pre-Reformation England.¹

The day I was there an exam was taking place. Even with the clutter of screens and other bits of pieces, this seemed a natural place in which to be silent, serious and focused. But breaking up the space with screens has undoubtedly lost the building its sense of purpose. It has become – simply – a spacious hall.

St Lawrence's is a major landmark in the town with its wonderful faux-medieval tower of 1882, alternately visible and hidden as one walks through the narrow streets of the centre (see front cover). In bellringing circles, it is famous as having the earliest set of five pre-Reformation bells in England, dating from the fifteenth century, all in good condition and with their original tuning. They were recently restored, and are now regularly rung. Thomas Wolsey would have heard them as a boy, sounding just as they do today.

But for many years this was the 'problem' church, with no water or electricity, poor access, and a big repair bill. Despite its importance and centrality, by the late 1990s no use for the building had been found, and the building was falling into serious disrepair. The floors had become dangerous and some were taken up; a monument fell off the wall (though was soon repaired); no-one was allowed in. A pub chain which had shown an interest in the building walked away, not least because of the huge sum involved in restoring it.

Between 2006 and 2008 the 'problem' was at last solved. About £1.2m was spent on the building, one third of which came

¹ John Blatchly and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Miracles in Lady Lane: the Ipswich Shrine at the Westgate* (Ipswich, 2013), 58ff.



Fig. 5: St Nicholas's, Ipswich, looking east. On the day I visited it was being used for an examination. There is mobile screening at the east end, separating the chancel from nave.

from the Council, the rest from central grants. The interior was converted to a café (Fig. 1), with a thirty-year lease on the building, and it is run by a local social enterprise which provides protected employment.

The interior has been restored, with a new floor and lighting, and an office built in the old organ loft. Tables and chairs are in the nave, the servery is in the chancel, and the altar rails and sanctuary area have been left untouched (Fig. 6). The Victorian stencilling around the walls has been restored, and this, together with the wall panelling, provide an important guiding line for the eye. Overall there is still a strong sense of segregated spaces, and the original purpose of the building is easily understood, helped by a layout of chairs and tables which respects the interior. My only concern was the normal one, that clutter expands to fill the space available, and here the available space is behind the communion rail. The day I was there the church (is it still a church?) was full of noise and joviality, but there was still a real dignity to the space.

There is an informative guide book, which sells steadily, and an interpretative display in the porch. The IHCT has taken particular care with the (very interesting) monuments, recently

Fig. 6: St Lawrence's Ipswich, the east end of the chancel. The servery is in the chancel. The east end arrangements have been retained: as so often, clutter expands to fill the space available, in this case the sanctuary area, though this is hardly noticeable to the ordinary customer or visitor.



replacing a putto stolen in the 1980s, creating a facsimile of a missing brass, and piecing together for the first time a broken brass indent to reveal a previously unsuspected early fourteenth-century military figure with sway. As at St Stephen's, the Coade stone font is centrally placed by the west door, in its very own hole in the ground, nicely positioned for carelessly driven mobility scooters to crash into (Fig. 7). In a church no longer used for worship, how important is it to respect the west-end positioning of these fonts, particularly as many fonts have been moved many times? – I was told that one of the statutory advisory agencies was clear on the point, which decided the matter.

St Peter's is one of three medieval dockside churches, standing relatively close to each other. One of the others is St Clement's (see next entry) and the other is St Mary-at-Quay, bombed during the war, and now cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust. In recent years the dockside area has been undergoing massive development and regeneration, with the dock converted into a marina.

For twenty years the IHCT rented the church to a model railway club, until at about the turn of the century planning permission was given for the building to be converted into offices and a furniture showroom. In the end this commercial use did not materialise, and in 2006 the Ipswich Hospital Band were awarded £772k by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to convert the interior to a centre for music and the arts. The Council and the IHCT gave further help, and the band did its own fundraising to find the balance. After major refurbishment, the church opened



Fig. 7: The Coade stone font at St Lawrence's, something to swerve around when entering the building.



Fig. 8: St Peter's, looking east. On this occasion a two-man rock band was practising. Behind them is the tiered platform for the resident Ipswich Hospital Band.

for business in May 2008, branded as ‘St Peter’s by the Waterfront: a great place for music’(www.stpetersbythewaterfront.com). The band is closely linked with Music for Health, a charity which also uses the church, and the space is available for general hire (Fig. 8).

One of the conditions of the HLF grant is that the church should be opened as a Heritage Centre, so it opens five days a week during the summer months, manned by volunteers. The church is closely connected with Cardinal Wolsey (he made it the chapel of the college he created at Ipswich), and at the north-west corner there is an exhibition about the church and Wolsey’s connection with it (Fig. 9). The great glory of the church is the huge Tournai marble font of about 1130.

When I arrived to look around, the church-sitters were gathered in the porch. The reason became obvious when I opened the door to find a small rock group practising, quite loudly. Behind them was a raked stage with timpani and music stands; it occupies the east end of the church but is part of the same room as the nave as there is no separate medieval chancel – Wolsey chopped it off. The new floor pattern respects the division of the space into aisles and nave, and thus avoids the airport lounge effect of totally uniform flooring. It is a pleasing space, with the sense of unity just right for a concert hall. I understand it has been a great success.

Fig. 9: St Peter’s, looking north-west. The interior has a spacious feel. In the far corner is an exhibition relating to the church and Thomas Wolsey, the local boy made good.



St Clement's is the only IHCT church at present without a settled use. It is tucked away in an enclosed graveyard, and in the 1980s suffered from vandalism. In 1995 there was an arson attack when intruders set fire to theatre costumes kept in the church, and this led to significant roof damage, with almost two-thirds of the roof covering lost, though the Victorian rafter sections only needed cleaning.

The church has been restored to good condition (Fig. 10). It has a fine carved Charles II coat of arms, some interesting monuments and good glass and (for the cognoscenti) Victorian scrolled texts at the east and west end. The pews have been removed, though the pew platforms remain. The chancel has kept all its mid nineteenth-century furniture, none of it (to my eye) particularly distinguished.

The building has no current tenants, but I had the feeling of a well-kept interior waiting for a use. And, walking round the area, it was impossible not to notice the extensive regeneration and banks of new housing and flats, bringing a once blighted area back to life, and surely meaning that a use can be found for this space. At the time of writing a number of enthusiasts, some with personal links with the nearby University Campus Suffolk, are forming themselves into a limited company with a view to using the space for the performing and visual arts.

Fig. 10: St Clement's, looking west. On the far wall are some Victorian scrolled texts and a fine carved Charles II Arms. The pews have been removed, the pew platforms remain.



Final thoughts

So four of these churches have a sustainable use, and the other is in good condition with hope for the future. Thus all have been ‘saved’, in the important but limited sense of not being demolished and retaining their townscape presence. But it seems to me they have been ‘saved’ in a much stronger sense than this – they are still owned for public benefit and still operate (to various extents) as public spaces and concourses. Furthermore, none have had their interiors subdivided into offices or dwellings, and their original spatial arrangements can still be read. It is interesting to ask what else one might hope for when ‘saving’ a church.

Since their transfer to the IHCT, I understand that the desire has always been that these churches should be used for cultural, educational or community purposes, though there was a period when this seemed unlikely to be achieved, and commercial uses were given more consideration. But the large expense involved in bringing the buildings up to scratch, the need (or at least desire) for public access to the interiors, the intermittent planning blight which has arisen as the town has been redeveloped, the difficulties of servicing some of the buildings from narrow streets, the lack of parking in the town centre, the growth of out-of-town facilities over the past thirty years, and raised expectations about the condition in which such buildings should be kept – taken together, these have meant that in the end public and charitable money has been needed to restore the buildings and to convert them for new uses.

But these churches were never commercial buildings, and were largely built through wealthy patronage; perhaps it is not surprising that major capital expenditure today needs to come from equivalent twenty-first-century public and charitable sources, in order to give these buildings a sustainable use providing public benefit.



The subscription for membership of the Trust is £5 a year. Life membership costs £50. You can join via the website www.ipswichhistoricchurchestrust.org.uk or by writing to The Secretary, The Ipswich Historic Churches Trust, 24–26 Museum Street, Ipswich, IP1 1HZ.