RE-ORDERING THE NAVE

MAY 2012

An Introduction from The Dean...

The key to all that we do as a Cathedral is expressed by the vision statement that Chapter adopted: “Our vision is to discover and live out the beauty of holiness”.

Those few words resonate to the psalms and also capture the essence of our endeavour. In the spirit of that vision statement a seminar was held on 7 October 2011 to have a completely open-minded look at the arrangements for the nave, the needs it is required to serve and whether its present arrangement is best suited to meet those needs. Chaired by Bishop David Stancliffe, formally Bishop of Salisbury and son of Winchester Deanery, the seminar also had the benefit of the wisdom of Dr John Crook, Cathedral Archaeologist and three Cathedral Precentors – Winchester, Salisbury and Norwich. Our, then, recently appointed Cathedral Architect, Nick Cox, was able to be present and contribute to the discussion. About 60 people attended the seminar including those from our own congregation, from the College of Canons, from the Diocese, from the Fabric Advisory Committee, as well as representation nationally from the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England (CFCE).

Seminar Recommendations
A surprising unanimity and enthusiasm emerged during the day for the way ahead. Rather like an ellipse there were two foci, very much related to each other:

There was clear advice for the repositioning of the fine Romanesque font in a more central position towards the west end of the cathedral’s nave. There was firm consensus for the redesigning of the nave sanctuary area with a Romanesque-style “Winchester” altar corresponding to the design of the font. It was strongly felt that the arrangements for the nave sanctuary and the altar should emphasise the inclusion of the congregation in worship, the primary purpose of the cathedral, and that the action at the altar should be clearly visible to the congregation. However, such arrangement must be flexible enough to be adaptable for concerts and other events that the nave has to accommodate.

Mock up of the Font and a Cathedral Exhibition
The immediate outcome of the seminar has been an archaeological investigation of the font by Dr John Crook and some further thinking and architectural interpretation of the ideas of the seminar by Nick Cox (Cathedral Architect). To take things a stage further, a model of the font has been created, to see how it might look if relocated. Our thanks to the maintenance department for achieving this useful replica. It is now, therefore, possible to take the outcomes of the Seminar to wider dissemination and discussion. During May there will be opportunity to experience the impact that the font would have on the Cathedral space if it were moved. There is also an exhibition in the cathedral which explains what is involved in the re-ordering, so that the complementary font and altar become the two focal points of the nave. For the moment we are
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concentrating on the font. May will be a month for
us all to understand and wisely consider the
recommendations coming out of the Stancliffe
seminar.

What drives the proposed changes?
The Cathedral could read much more dramatically as
a place that witnesses to the Christian journey. The
west-east axis of the Cathedral has been called “the
highway to resurrection”. The starting point is our
baptism at the font where we “enter” the church, we
are sustained around the table of Christ’s hospitality,
then enter the jewel-box of the quire and home of
the saints. The proposed alignment of font and nave
altar, with the quire and high altar beyond, would
make this highway evident to all, whether to
worshippers or visitors who have never experienced
the Cathedral at worship.

Does the present arrangement work well?
In sheer practical terms the Font does not work well
as a place of baptism, or of renewal of baptismal
vows on Easter Eve, when the drama of being united
with Christ’s death and resurrection should be made
evident to all and where the community may gather
around. The nave sanctuary furnishing is clearly in
need of inspiration. It has become tired and rather
ad-hoc. The two sacraments of baptism and
eucharist, at the heart of our Christian worship and
identity, deserve to be more evident in our stunning
Cathedral.

Do we make the most of our treasures?
The Winchester Bible and the font are both
treasures bestowed on us by Bishop Henry de Blois.
Both are currently marginalised and difficult to
access and equally deserve a more central and
evident aspect in the cathedral’s consciousness. A
relocated font could take centre stage and be seen
to preside over the west end of the cathedral.

Why not a mobile font?
The response to that question has to be: “why don’t
we worship in a mobile classroom?” The Cathedral
has a beautiful font, with a beautifully large basin; it
is very practical. We are an operational cathedral,
not a museum. The font is capable of projecting
every bit of the sense of presence as the new font
brings to Salisbury Cathedral.

Why are we consulting on moving the font and
not on the detail of the whole reordering scheme
including the nave sanctuary?
The seminar made it clear that the font is the key to
everything as regards reordering. We need to test
the possibility of moving the font to unlock the
whole potential. This will have to include seeking
permission from the Cathedrals Fabric Commission
for England. Only when the font is in place, can we
evolve a good solution for the nave sanctuary. The
font is the given. A new altar has to be designed in a
way that establishes a proper tension and
complementarity with the font. We are therefore
proceeding one step at a time. The moving of the
font is that first step.

Why now?
Potentially our generation has the opportunity to
make two simple but significant developments
which will enable the sacred space of our beautiful
Cathedral to sing for a new generation. It is a
breathtaking building that resonates the beauty of
holiness. Font and altar have the potential to define
the source of that beauty for worshippers and
visitors.
Some other perspectives

Consultant Archaeologist, Dr John Crook writes...

The proposed relocation of the font raised some interesting historical questions. How long has the font been in its present position? What is the date of the platform on which it is raised? Assuming the present location does not go back to the later twelfth century when the font was made, where was it situated previously?

In order to elucidate some of these issues I undertook a desk-based assessment of the font, and with the permission of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission a small excavation was undertaken beneath the font platform. This showed that the font itself was supported on a short rubble pier that had been constructed on the bedding of the original Norman pavement. The flanking steps were formed at the same time as this support, and the space between them was filled with rubble, predominantly Beer stone, on which the Purbeck marble slabs around the font were laid. The presence of Beer stone suggests that the platform was created in the final stages of the remodelling of the nave in the early fifteenth century. The font platform was built before the present fifteenth-century nave pavement was laid.

I doubt that the font was located here in the Norman cathedral, and a more likely location would be in the demolished western massif, either centrally or in one of the flanking towers.

The Canon Precentor, Michael St John-Channell...

Much of existence is spent in the ordinary things of life, but moments occur occasionally which are life-changing. Being baptized in one such event. It is the public recognition of the start of a journey in faith: each time when water is poured and the sign of the cross made, a triumph is celebrated in a world, much of which is tired and broken.

That is why the font is one of the truly and vital living symbols of the kingship of Christ, and its place in the building is of immense significance. We are the custodians of one of the most beautiful and important fonts in Europe. It is a place where people from every walk of life, young and old, have experienced a transformation of their whole being, and a vehicle of which we must be justly proud.

From ancient times, the location of the font has been an indication of just how important in our living and teaching baptism is. Over recent years, it has become more common to relegate the font to an obscure place and promote a more private understanding of the service, becoming more a matter between God and the individual.

More recently, there has been a rebirth of interest, and as a consequence, many cathedrals and churches are choosing to bring the font back into a more central location. Winchester is no exception, where we are considering the very questions which this article raises. Its present position in the north aisle proves adequate for private ceremonies, but is both awkward and difficult for either a service with more than a few gathered or as a statement of what we are trying to say about the importance of baptism. Along with many other members of the congregation, the Choir is unable to see any of the actions or to feel part of them. Our Church was not built for such difficulties, nor was this ever the intention of those who constructed the cathedral.

Our recent experience of a temporary font in the nave sanctuary is proof positive that better ways are available. Everyone was a witness; all participated.

The present proposal to erect the font on a platform centrally and near to the west end, speaks volumes of how important baptism is in Christian teaching, and is a public expression of that belief. It marks a return to the original use and structure of the building and is an obvious witness to the visitor. It helps establish the faith of the community.

Cathedral Architect, Nick Cox...

Attending the October seminar was one of my first activities as the newly appointed Cathedral Architect. It was a hugely stimulating day for exploring ideas and how the architectural space of Winchester Cathedral might evolve to serve better its primary purpose.

The current position for the nave altar sits awkwardly with the steps. The aim with the new design is to provide a platform with a gracious amount of space around the altar and also to bring it forward to the congregation. The curved shape at the front of the platform helps to avoid a sequence
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of straight line barriers in front of the altar and engenders a sense of gathering around.

Winchester is known for its beautiful and impressively long nave. This length provides a wonderful opportunity to create a sense of place for the other focus, the font. Raised on a plinth to the same height as its existing one the shape echoes the curve of the nave platform and eases movement around it. The proposed position makes a powerful statement and strongly connects the font to the nave altar and the sight lines to the quire and sanctuary beyond.

Bishop David Stancliffe...

I was greatly impressed at the gathering in October, which the Dean asked me to chair, by the overwhelming sense of momentum for helping the nave to speak more powerfully to visitors and worshippers alike of the two foundational sacraments of the Christian life, baptism and the eucharist.

At the moment, the font is largely hidden and difficult to use in worship effectively; and the altar and nave sanctuary furnishings are a conglomerate of pieces which sit up and down the steps, and do not speak clearly of the way in which we celebrate the Eucharist as the key rite that forms the church.

The resulting thinking explored re-positioning the font – perhaps the Cathedral’s most significant treasure in general view – in the centre of the space at the west end, and remodeling the steps at the east end to provide a more visible and accessible setting for a new nave altar, designed to complement the font at the west end of the nave.

The resulting reshaping of the nave would have enormous benefits. It gives a clear focus to the west end of the nave, making baptism visible and central to the congregation as well as to the visitor. But it links this to a more homogeneous and flexible setting to the superb stepped area at the east end of the nave, whether for the regular Sunday Eucharist, or for concerts, special services and other events which require complex additional staging to be brought in and out at the moment. This is a complete project which draws the two ends of the long nave together.

I look forward to the next stages of testing the architect’s designs in a useable form, and hope that we can achieve the right result for the cathedral nave’s many-faceted use in the next period of its life.

Find out more...

We will be holding three short information sessions in the Nave at the following times. All are welcome.

Thursday 17 May (Ascension Day) 3.00pm & 7.00pm (following the 5.30 Sung Eucharist)
Friday 18 May, 10.00am

Speakers: The Dean, Bishop David Stancliffe, The Precentor & our architect, Nick Cox.