

Bowbrook Group



A guide to seats and benches in churchyards



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

SECTION 1 - THE BACKGROUND

1. Churchyards and memorials

1.1 Churchyards are special places which exist for both the living and the dead. Together with the church building they are vested in the Incumbent and as consecrated ground they are set apart for the reverent and Christian burial of parishioners.

1.2 As they are shared spaces, churchyards need to be looked after for the benefit of today's generations as well as those to follow. The Churchyard Regulations seek to encourage good practices in order to create and maintain a place of peace, dignity and respect for the departed.

1.3 There is no automatic or legal right to place a memorial in a churchyard. The authority here rests with the Chancellor of the Diocese, who has granted delegated powers to incumbents and parish priests (i.e. rectors, vicars, priests in charge and team vicars), who have the discretion to allow memorials into their churchyards which are consistent with the Diocesan Churchyard Regulations. During a vacancy, this authority is exercised by the rural dean.

1.4 Any departure from the Churchyard Regulations requires permission by way of a faculty.

2. Faculty Jurisdiction and the DAC

2.1 Changes to church buildings and churchyards are governed by Faculty Jurisdiction and permission is required from the Chancellor of the Diocese or your Archdeacon for most works of repair, adaptation and improvements to churches.

2.2 Faculty Jurisdiction is legal exemption from requiring Listed Building Consent from the local authority but many works will still require Planning Permission.

2.3 The Chancellor and Archdeacons are advised by a diocesan body called the Diocesan Advisory Committee. The DAC is a formal group of volunteer specialists who give their time freely to assist parishes in the care of churches. This support is offered both through considering applications for permission but also by aiding churches in developing proposals and in the general management of churches.

2.4 In exercising their role, the DAC must have due regard to church as a local centre of mission and ministry in addition to considering the special character or significance of the church building.

2.5 If you would like to request a meeting or a site visit from one of the Church Buildings Team staff (who support the DAC) or a DAC specialist adviser, please make contact via churches@cofe-worcester.org.uk or 01905 732809.

SECTION 2 - PRACTICALITIES

3. Seats and benches

3.1 Seats and benches have been common in churchyards, probably for centuries.

3.2 Benches (seats without backs) have probably the longest history and they are still frequently found in porches and lych-gates. One advantage of a bench is that it faces two ways and so does not have the directional emphasis of a seat.

3.3 Both provide for rest and quiet contemplation in areas which are traditionally detached from the hustle and bustle of the everyday world. Today seats are most frequently provided as memorials but occasionally, for instance in a cremated remains area, a seat is given by the church for the use of friends and relatives visiting the churchyard.

4. Siting

4.1 The site chosen needs to satisfy a number of functions:

- (a) a quiet spot, away from traffic noise;
- (b) a place where there is a pleasant prospect, perhaps over part of the churchyard or maybe over a wider prospect;
- (c) the site should not be too shaded, either by the building or by trees and it would be preferable for the seat to have a southerly prospect;
- (d) some shelter shielding from the north might be necessary on an open site.

4.2 It should be borne in mind that the seats will often be placed in prominent positions in the churchyard and so will contribute to the appearance of the church and its setting to the passing public. The site and design should therefore be carefully chosen to ensure that this view of the church is enhanced.

5. Materials

5.1 There are three traditional materials, timber, stone and metal (wrought or cast iron) and possible combinations of any two of these.

5.2 Timber seats are most common. Wood is a material which will be in harmony with any churchyard setting. Hardwood, left to weather or oiled, is best. Varnishes and other proprietary finishes will all deteriorate in time and experience shows that these finishes are unlikely to be maintained. The selection of hardwood is important both from a weathering and ecological point of view.

5.3 The DAC (Diocesan Advisory Committee – see section 2) considers the environmental impact of all proposals and the origin of all timber is important. English Oak will always be the first choice for a seat or bench in a parish churchyard.

5.4 Wrought or cast iron seats have advantages, in particular in so far as longevity is concerned. With minimum maintenance iron seats will last for 200 years.

5.5 A combination of an iron frame with hardwood slatted seat and back is a good compromise, providing the more comfortable seat which is replaceable, allied to the permanence of the iron frame.

5.6 Stone benches and seats are uncommon but, of all the materials, can be the most at home in a churchyard. The stone must be selected both for its weathering properties and its visual suitability. A stone similar to part of the church will be most apt; failing that a stone from the British Isles should be a priority, as with tombstones exotic stones are out of place. Artificial stone may be acceptable but the design will need to be recommended by the DAC.

6. Design

6.1 There is a fairly wide availability of off-the-peg timber benches most of which are of the sturdy local authority park bench type. Something more subtle and less of a standard pattern would be more appropriate in a churchyard and, where it can be afforded, a bespoke design will speak its individuality to its site.

6.2 Similarly off-the-peg light metal seats, usually cast aluminium with slatted seats, are found in garden centre catalogues, but these tend to be flimsy in appearance, more suited for a domestic garden than a churchyard, where something more robust is called for. Wrought iron would have to be purpose made, there is no reason why a modern design should not be used, but care should be taken to ensure that it is not of a type that is often seen in high streets. Some traditional patterns in cast iron are now available from manufacturers, generally these take the form of seat ends to which are fitted timber slats, and these would usually be quite suitable in a churchyard.

7. Inscriptions

7.1 Most new seats are memorials, generally to individuals associated with the church and buried there. It is therefore fitting that an inscription or dedication should be incorporated which will need to be approved by the incumbent or the incumbent's delegate.

7.2 Brevity should be the key. A name and two dates are often quite sufficient to indicate that that person is remembered in this place.

7.3 With a timber or stone seat a carved inscription is most suitable as it becomes part of the seat and will remain so. A well carved inscription along the back rail of a seat will not only be a memorial but will be an element of the design.

7.4 Cast metal plaques, which should be secretly fixed for security, are most common on timber seats, but they do have municipal connotations. On metal seats such plaques would have to be riveted. Brass is not acceptable for external use because it weathers badly.

7.5 Due to the increase of theft of metal, slate plaques can be considered as an alternative to bronze plaques.

8. Fixing and setting

8.1 Sadly it may be necessary to fix seats down securely. If this is necessary it will be discussed with you upon application.

8.2 Thought should be given to the immediate setting of the seat. If only occasional use is likely, setting the seat in a grass sward would be ideal. Where more intensive use is possible a simple area of stone or brick paving would be suitable.

9. Policy

9.1 All applications need to take into account environmental issues and select materials that are both environmentally friendly and in harmony with the setting.

9.2 Care needs to be taken with both the design and wording of inscriptions. The former should be integral to the design of the seat; the latter should be suitably concise. In all instances, any inscription will need approval from those administering the churchyard.

9.3 The fixing of seats should be discreet and the immediate setting should be in harmony with the churchyard. The local Parochial Church Council will work with the applicant to ensure that this satisfies immediate needs and those perceived needs for the future.

9.4 The local Parochial Church Council reserves the right to move seats if:

- ◆ they fall into disrepair
- ◆ they become a concern for health and safety
- ◆ there is a need to use the location which cannot be fulfilled in any other way.



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