# St. Mary the Virgin
## Ashford

**Architects Lee Evans Partnership have just completed a highly successful contemporary scheme at a major Grade I listed Church, in Ashford, Kent in response to the community's need for 'shared space' and to host a much needed arts provision.**

PROJECT TEAM

Architect:
Lee Evans Partnership LLP

Main Contractor:
Farnrise Construction Ltd

A&V Consultants:
Ashdown Audio Visual
Bose Professional Systems Division

Services Consultants:
MLM Consulting Engineers

Quantity Surveyors:
Clifford Rickards Associates Ltd

Underfloor Heating:
Jupiter Heating Systems Ltd

Photography:
Pages 04-07
© Robert Greshoff
Pages 08-09 images supplied by Laurence Pierce of BOSE ltd

Until the completion of this project in August this year Ashford was the only town of its size within the south east without any dedicated community arts venue or flexible/multi-purpose community space, in or close to its town centre, readily available to all.

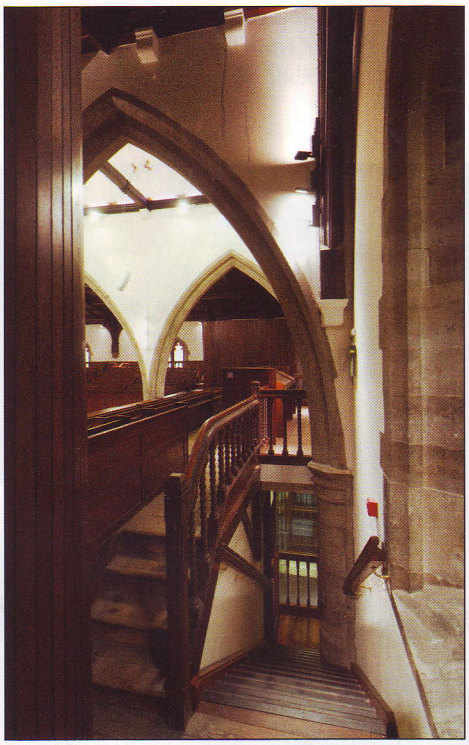
For many years, the Parish Church of St. Mary (first mentioned in the Domesday Book) has functioned predominantly as a place of worship and for the last 20 years in a minor capacity as a community arts venue, providing some cultural provision in the town by hosting music and arts performances from around the world.

The church is a much loved and significant local landmark located in the heart of 'old' Ashford. As much of Ashford's architectural heritage was destroyed during the Second World War and greatly affected by a race track of a new ring road constructed in the 1970s, the ancient building and its surroundings survive as a peaceful and historic enclave.

For priest-in-charge, Canon Colin Preece the focus of the entire scheme is to enhance St. Mary's as both a sacred and a "shared" space and to create an effective platform on which to deliver the Church's mission to the town and community.

At the request of the church family, the church has undergone a £1.8m revamp (funded by £1.3m Government growth area funding, Ashford Borough Council and the Church) to improve its long-standing offer as an arts venue and it now welcomes internationally renowned artists on to its stage.

The new arts programme, Revelation St. Mary's, is supported by Ashford Borough Council and aims to establish a centre of



excellence for the arts. This aim is tempered by the recognition that above all the parish church is a place of worship and must remain so.

**Unashamedly contemporary in design**

Although the entire church is of considerable historic significance much of its listing description and grade status rests on the eastern end of the building, and on the church's fine monuments. Lee Evans Partnership's (LEP) scheme proposed only minor alterations to this part of the church, all to nineteenth century and later work. >06

The majority of the changes proposed were to the nave, to the west of the crossing where happily very little of the fifteenth century work remains. Here there is a legacy of successive developments following the medieval period which include a combination of a 17th century roof, 18th century galleries, major 19th century expansions as well as a 20th century set of rooms under the galleries.

Project Architect, Nick Lee Evans' interventions are unashamedly contemporary in design.

To create the flexibility required for both liturgical and secular purposes the nave seating has been redesigned, removing the pews and platforms, to encourage a sense of the gathered community. In addition the nave's small, makeshift dais has been replaced and the pulpit and font relocated.

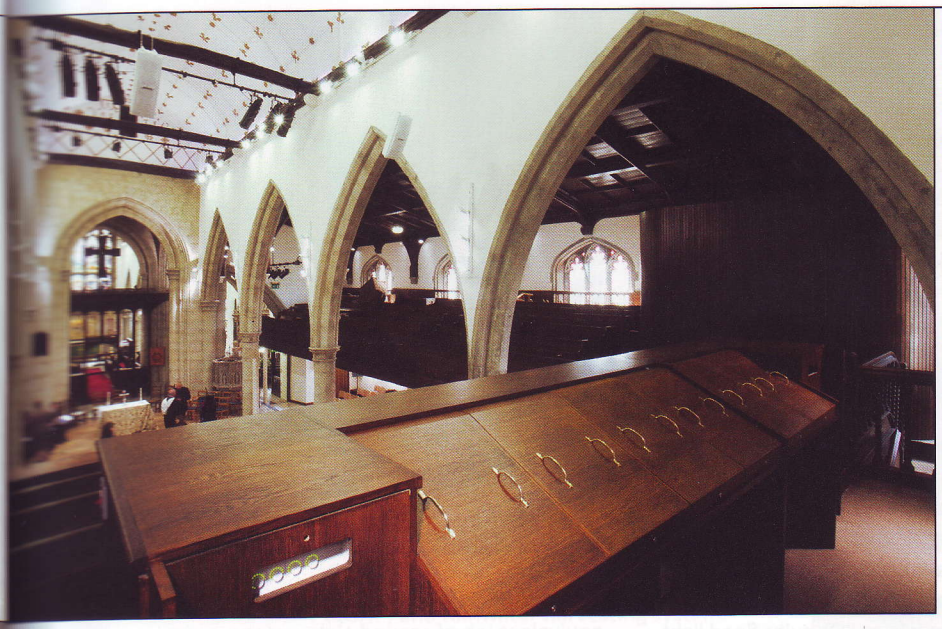
Removal of the pews was one of the more contentious proposals and LEP were fortunate to gain acceptance of English Heritage and the DAC who concluded that removal of the pews was central to the project's ambitious proposals for securing the building's long-term future. However the removal of the pews was contested by the Victorian Society but won at a consistory court.

Where the pews have been removed a Jupiter under-floor heating system, pioneered in churches by LEP & Jupiter-System Ltd at St. Mary's, Broadwater, has been installed beneath new German limestone tiles.
The existing central aisle flooring which dates from around 1826 has been extensively restored. New flexible seating is provided by the classic Howe 40/4 chair renowned for its elegant and spare aesthetic – at least one in 20 chairs will have arms, for the comfort of older occupants.

The new dais is larger and higher and can now accommodate the choir, servers and clergy to enable communions to take place,







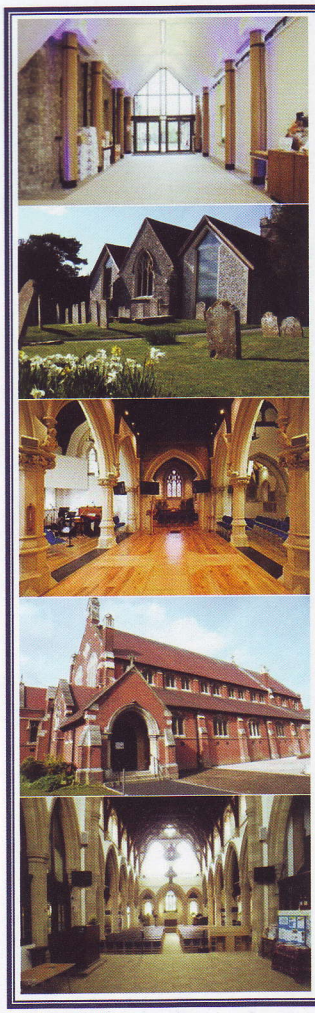
and be distributed. In addition a portable passenger lift has been incorporated to enable independent access to the dais for less-able people, as well as a permanent power lift for movement of equipment when necessary.

The chancel has historically been problematic because of three discordant areas of seating. Used for smaller congregations this has been redesigned to engender a sense of unity. Its original aisle pews are no longer fixed and can be easily reconfigured to face east or in a collegiate formation.

The entrance lobby to the church has been extensively remodelled to improve access and space for welcome and fellowship and can be combined with the adjacent Crothall meeting room too to make a larger space when needed. The former heavy Edwardian panelling and doors leading from the lobby into the church have been moved to the north transept and replaced with glazed doors, enabling the fine fluted oak columns from the late Victorian re-ordering to be seen once again.

Two new staircases with mouldings echoing the style of the lobby entrance's columns lead up to first floor level. At the foot of each staircase is a discrete glass sliding door which can be locked to close off the first floor galleries when not in use.

Four simple, dark stained vertical boarded oak 'pods' have been created. At ground floor level one pod provides kitchen facilities which serve both the church and the adjacent Crothall meeting room. The other provides extensive storage for the stacking chairs. At first floor level a pod provides toilet facilities and the other an additional meeting room. >08

Farnrise Construction

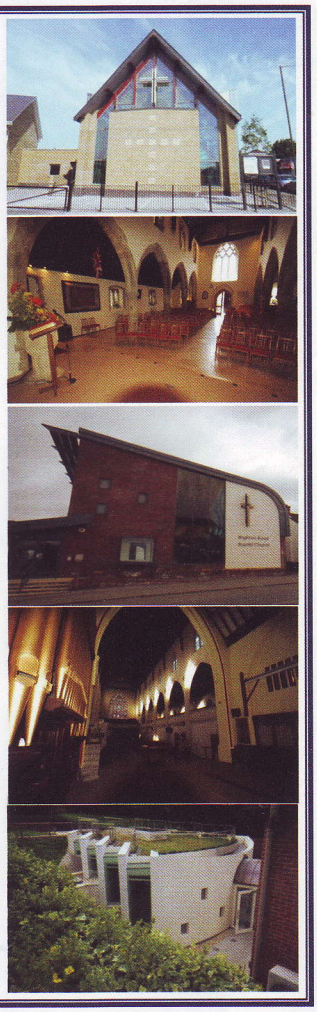
Regional Building Contractor working with the Community across London and Southern England

Farnrise have a wealth of experience in the ecclesiastical sector with projects ranging from the refurbishment of listed churches to new modern design and build projects.

"Recent Industry Award Winners for Sustainability, Design and Quality"

Farnrise Construction Ltd
Head Office: Southpoint, Old Brighton Road, Lowfield Heath, Gatwick, West Sussex, RH11 0PR
Tel: 01293 524 555 Email: info@hotmail.co.uk
Regional Offices also in Hampshire and Thames Valley

www.farnrise.co.uk





**State of the art lighting & audio visual systems**

The natural light in the church was poor and this was exacerbated by the presence of large deep Georgian galleries which loom over the nave on three sides, and an inadequate existing lighting system. Installation of new lighting was essential and a new audio visual system was also needed. Implementation of both was challenging as it was important to keep fastenings to the historic fabric to an absolute minimum – indeed it is fair to say that many of the meetings with English Heritage focussed on cable routing and its possible detrimental affect on the building.

The principal nave ceiling has been restored and painted white and gold and what seems like hundreds of tiny twinkling LED bulbs flood light into the church and highlight the attractive mouldings on the vaulted ceiling. LED lights with colour variations have also been incorporated into the flexible scheme for mood change. Theatrical lighting is mounted on gantries, which have been clamped around ceiling timbers to avoid drilling into historic fabric.

The Bose AV system is state of the art with elegant slim speakers attached discreetly to the church columns using flat cables that resemble mortar joints. These speakers do the equivalent job of around eight speakers of around four times the size. A sophisticated and future proofed AV system is housed in a modern custom-made desk at first floor level.

**Renewable technologies**

LEP has capitalised on a once in the century opportunity to reduce St. Mary's carbon footprint. The project was awarded European Union funding, through the Green Renovation Cluster programme (Greenov) to install a ground

St. Mary the Virgin
Churchyard
Ashford
TN23 1QG







source heat pump (GSHP) and rainwater harvesting system. A GSHP is the ideal choice to power the church's new under floor heating which works at relatively low levels of temperature, and an Econic System (a new system in the UK but not in Europe) has been employed which uses a 1.1m diameter chamber excavated to a depth of 1.2m. From this hole radial boreholes are then installed at approximately a 45 degree angle to a depth of approx. 50m. This system is ideal as it limits the amount of disturbance to any archaeology – ingeniously archaeologists were employed to carry out the excavation for the chamber.

Because of the increased numbers of toilets a rainwater tank has been installed in the south west corner of the churchyard. Water is harvested from the church roofs and carried via original underground pipework which has been re-laid and tapped into where necessary.

**A flexible shared space**

The architectural focus has centred on reordering the church to create a flexible building which can accommodate the 'shared space' requirements; first and foremost to improve and facilitate the delivery of religious sermons and ceremonies; and secondly to host music, drama and arts events. So far public reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. The successful realisation of this 'shared space' initiative' – which includes an enlarged seating area in the nave for up to 350 people, state of the art lighting, enhanced community facilities as well as a fully DDA compliant ground floor – will be the central plank of the church family's mission, and act as the social "glue" that can bring people from across the age and social spectrum together in shared, creative activities, where diversity will be valued... all this and sustainability too.




Keeping the past...

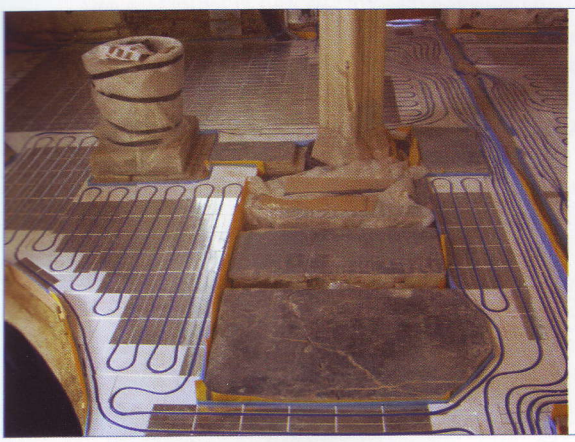
Our recent installation at St Mary the Virgin, Ashford required an easy-to-use Audio Visual System with a high level of seamless integration. Using specially modified equipment, coloured to blend in with its stunning environment, we provided the sound, video, lighting and projection capability for this Grade 1 listed church.

...beautifully present

ASHDOWN
AUDIO VISUAL

Unit 1 Ashgrove Farm Piltdown Uckfield Sussex
01825 721211

www.ashdownav.com



- Historic building floor constructions
- Underfloor heating without wet concrete
- Full design and installation service
- Heat pump design and installation
- Nationwide service

For experienced advice call 01276 859 066
Or visit www.jupiterunderfloorheating.com

HHA
Federation Stone Great Britain
JUPITER