

## Statement of Significance 2022 (Rev A)

### St Mary's Church, Offwell

#### *History and Description of the Church Buildings, churchyard and setting*

St Mary's Church is set in the centre of the village of Offwell, population of circa 400, where the ancient crossroads between Dorchester and Exeter existed. Today it lies just over 0.5 mile from the A35. The site was probably the burial place for an early community settled in the well-watered valley which lies below the current village and church.

The churchyard to the north, east and west of the church is walled and well maintained. There are two pathways to the church, one from the north via the entrance gates erected as a memorial to those from the village who died in the First World War. The second is via a 19<sup>th</sup> century oak lychgate to the south east of the church. This lychgate was renovated and the steps to it rebuilt two years ago. On the north side of the churchyard across the village road is a thriving CoE primary school which holds twice weekly services in the church. This is adjacent to the Church Hall which the school uses, and which is also used by the church as well.

The earliest church building was the consecrated Chancel, date unknown, to which a Nave was added about 1200 AD. At the west end of the Nave is a tower, 45 feet high, said to date from 1450 AD. It has a small octagonal turret at the top North-East corner, through which stone stairs grant access to the tower top. The tower houses six good bells which have an active team of bell ringers for most services and which are in demand from visiting team of ringers. A north aisle seems to date from about 1500 AD and is divided from the nave by three arches made of Beer stone. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a vestry was added to the south wall of the Chancel and a porch to the Nave entrance. An early entrance is visible in the north wall but is now blocked up. Above this blocked entrance in the outside wall is an empty alcove, presumably housing a now missing statue of the church's patron saint. The church sits at the heart of the historic core of the village and is well loved by villagers, with many non-churchgoers supporting its maintenance and decoration.

The history of the church interior is of interest. The double deck pulpit was erected about 1724 and would appear to have had a sounding board in its early existence. Concealed below is stonework, presumably for an older pulpit. The font is in the former north chapel. It has late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> century panels enriched with four leafed motifs, carved foliage around the base and a panelled stem. It has a late 17<sup>th</sup> oak cover. In the south porch there is a broken stone bowl of very early workmanship which was presumably the original font.

Boxed pews were installed in 1798, but reconstructed in 1853, probably made lower than the original ones and moved slightly, at the expense of the Rector. The organ was built in 1859 by 'Father' Henry Willis, and more recently has been fitted with an electric blower and is still used for

all services. The lectern was made in 1935 by one of the churchwardens and includes some good 17<sup>th</sup> oak carving including a panel representing the Last Supper.

The screen at the west end of the Nave dividing it from the bell tower once formed part of the Chancel screen of the medieval church of St Mary Major in Exeter and was installed in 1970.

On a pillar adjacent to the north aisle and Nave adjacent to the Chancel Arch is a curious carving, thought to be of the church workmen exposing their bottoms.

Apart from a small old window to the south side of the Chancel containing fragments of ancient glass, and the west window which is a memorial to Dr Edward Copleston, the remaining windows are otherwise predominantly plain or have some undistinguished Victorian stained glass. There is some interesting French painted glass at the top of the east window. The Chancel also has monumental tablets recording other members of the Copleston family.

### The Chancel

There is a list of Rectors on one of the Nave pillars beginning with Michael de Archidiakene in 1263, through to the present day. It includes several members of the Copleston family, whose family held the living from 1773 to 1954. The village was largely rebuilt and modernised at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Dr Edward Copleston, Bishop of Llandaff and Dean of St Paul's in London. He rebuilt the rectory on the east side of the churchyard and left it to the Copleston family. There is now a modern rectory situated 300 yards to the east of the village cross roads and church, with an uninterrupted view of the church across the new and old churchyards.

### ***Impact of the Proposals on the Significance of the Building***

The proposals are intended to restore the deteriorating historic pews and ensure that they can be reopened for use for services, where condemned, and to prevent the deterioration of other pews where the same rotting is underway and is now visible in some of the pews on the South Aisle. Previous substandard repairs will be rectified and original wood used. This original wood will be taken from the proposed three removed pews at the front of the north aisle which have no view to the Sanctuary and are therefore not used. This will enable the font to be moved to its original and rightful place near the south door, close to where it was placed as late as the 1960s, and the north chapel to become a larger area to be used for informal church gatherings, CoE primary school activities and for children's in church activities. At the same time, defective plaster will be repaired on the walls above repaired pews, cabling chased in and some new electrical sockets installed in the north chapel to enable more diverse use of the now more flexible north chapel area.

The relocation of the font nearer the south door will require the moving of the central pew aisles to their original locations abutting the pillars between the central and northern blocks of pews, as detailed in the archaeologists' report. The rear central pews will move back a little way to the rear of the church to create room to accommodate the font between the rear and front central pew blocks. This is thought to be the original location of the font and will enable it to be visible from

every area of the church as it will be in the central part of the Nave, providing better visibility for large baptisms. A photograph dating from the 1960s shows the font in this general area.

The plan is to maintain the historic nature of the church interior, still retaining a large majority of the boxed pews, but at the same time to provide a larger informal area to enable a wider range of church activities to be held and to restore the font to its rightful place. Ideally, the church will not look reordered at all but simply better and more 'original' than before so the impact should be minimal.

## **Statement of Need 2022 (Rev A)**

### **St Mary's Church, Offwell**

#### ***General Information***

The church is used for regular services, with two of the monthly services being followed by refreshments which provide an opportunity for fellowship among the faithful and allow visitors and occasional congregants to get to know the regular churchgoers. After some large festival services, such as Harvest and Christmas, we can have as many as 70 people staying for refreshments for over an hour after the service. The current flexible social space is entirely inadequate for this sort of number, as it is for more than a few children when we run a children's activity as part of a service.

The parish has about 400 inhabitants, and for a popular service or indeed for our Open Days we can have well over 70 people attending, overwhelmingly from the village. There is a good store of goodwill to the church from the vast majority of villagers and quite a few non-churchgoers help out at the church for things such as bell ringing or flower arranging. Since the village lost its shop, the church is becoming by default the central mover in village community life, which creates an opportunity for outreach and engagement with non-traditional churchgoers. The village hall is used for larger social and fund-raising events, but there is scope for using the church for smaller activities such as Bible Study, church related coffee groups/meetings etc in which the village hall is too large and uneconomic to hire.

The church is also used by the CoE primary school in the village for two services a week, but the current rigid box pew layout restricts opportunities for more use by the school or indeed for some form of informal family/child-oriented services. We also run a popular Benefice Coffee morning every month for which we have to hire a local social club – the proposed minor reordering would enable us to undertake this and other similar activities in the church itself.

Additionally, the church has regular exhibitions by local enthusiasts on all aspects of community life, its own and village history, and related subjects such as bell ringing. It is rare that an exhibition is not underway in the church and the North Chapel area is where they are located. A larger more flexible space would enhance this additional sympathetic activity run in the church.

The church has a good set of bells with an active ringing team, and also hosts quite a few visiting teams. We also have a good number of visitors to the church, many with family associations with the church, some from other parts of the world. There is nowhere comfortable for such visitors to rest or to read the church literature, take notes etc.

### ***Our Needs***

The wooden supports holding up the box pews have either given way due to rot, and the pews been condemned as unsafe, or are starting to sag and bow, thereby indicating that they are deteriorating and may not be usable for much longer. Pews in the South Aisle are also evidently suffering the same process to the visible sagging evident. The pews rest on bare earth. They must be repaired and put back into use.

Another block of pews in the centre of the Nave are seeing their rearmost back and front-most front start to detach as well due to wear and tear, and also the weight of hymn and service books on a shelf on the back of the rear pew over many years (no longer used for this purpose due to its weakened nature). The church also has some plaster deterioration in the Nave which needs addressing and is chronically short of 13 amp sockets (only three in the entire Nave and Chancel, near the organ).

While this work is underway the PCC would like to implement a minor reordering to improve the flexibility of the building to allow us to offer a wider range of worship, fellowship and study related church activities, using the same craftsmen. The only flexible space at the moment is the small North Chapel which holds the font and which is completely inadequate in size for what we need, and where a pinch point forms between the front north aisle pew and the Chancel arch and organ, which inhibits movement.

The font would also be moved to its original place near the south door, creating more flexible space in the north chapel,

The South Aisle is also too narrow for two adults to walk comfortably side by side to the Chancel, which makes life very difficult for weddings and funerals, and it is proposed that we widen the aisle by moving one block of pews by 12" to the north while they are being repaired.

Previous repairs to woodwork and pews have used inferior materials such as unstained softwood and hardboard, not oak. The PCC would like to address this as part of the project by using the oak from the removed pews, and to improve the provision of electrical sockets and to chase in exposed wiring when repairing plasterwork.

In summary, we need to undertake some significant repairs to the Nave and north aisle, would like to take the opportunity to put right the mistakes of yesteryear while making the building both more flexible to accommodate changing congregation and village needs, while retaining and restoring its traditional interior.

### ***Our Proposals***

1. To take out blocks of pews in turn for repair, and to address the causative damp issue underneath as described in the specification of works, then to reinstall them.
2. To take out the front three pews of the north aisle (whose view of the Sanctuary is blocked by the organ and Chancel arch pillar), render the exposed wall and install reclaimed flagstones to

match. Also break up the bare modern concrete floor in the north chapel and replace with traditional flagstones. The font to be moved as above.

3. Use the oak from the removed pews to repair the others, replacing inferior materials and workmanship so that the remaining box pews (over 90% of original) are restored to prime condition. We also wish to deepen where possible the narrow pew seats by 1-2" in the most used pew blocks by inserting oak from the removed pews wherever possible to ensure that today's larger people are more comfortable, and to improve the under pew heating at the same time.
4. The front centre Nave block of pews in front of the Chancel needs repair. It also narrows the south aisle and is out of line with the pews in the Chancel. The south aisle is too narrow for a bride and her father/groom to walk downside-by-side (this has cost the church a number of weddings over the years), and is indeed very narrow for carrying a coffin making the latter a risky undertaking. It is proposed that we move central aisle pews a few inches towards the north aisle so they wrap around the pillars slightly, restoring their original pre Victorian position. This would widen the south aisle and bring them into sight line with the Chancel pew.
5. Chase in any exposed wiring on any walls requiring plaster work, installing new 13 amp sockets in the north chapel, and in both Nave walls. This will enable the church to put in additional heating, lighting or audio-visual equipment as required, and to replace extension leads which are trip hazards.

### ***Justification for the Proposals and Timing***

The PCC wishes to retain and restore the traditional character of the church, which is a draw to visitors, but also to broaden the range of church centred activities it can offer, with a particular emphasis on families, children, the primary school and outreach work, There is nowhere else in the village suitable, and the success we have enjoyed with our Open Days and large festival services indicates that there is demand from the village and we must make minor adaptations of the church to facilitate this work.

The required repairs provide us with a synergistic opportunity to make some limited changes to the interior which will also improve its appearance. It's a complementary balance between restoring the traditional features to prime condition while also making the building more flexible for a wider range of fellowship and outreach purposes. It will also make the building more comfortable, look better and mean that it can cater to weddings, funerals and family/children-oriented activities more effectively.

The repairs cannot be long delayed as some pews are now unusable and others will become so. At the same time we have had a number of supportive young families move into the village and a very supportive new school headmistress. We are confident that our outreach work will be made more effective if we can undertake this work, while also retaining the beautiful and traditional character of the building.

The church is not a museum but the living heart of the village community. It is a wonderful historic building which we wish to restore into prime condition. We wish to correct some mistakes of the past, to restore the font to its proper place and to cater better to today's needs without compromising its heritage aesthetics. We do not believe that it will detract at all from the building

or its purpose but will help grow it as the focal point of village worship and fellowship. Some would wish to go further in the reordering but the PCC wishes to balance different needs and recommends this proposal.