

ST NICHOLAS' CHAPEL KINGS LYNN

by Richard Griffiths, Richard Griffiths Architects

St Nicholas' Chapel is a magnificent Grade 1 listed building in the north east of the historic centre of Kings Lynn in Norfolk, the largest and finest Medieval chapel in the country. In 1993 it was vested with the [Churches Conservation Trust](#) for the benefit of the local community and visitors from afar. Events in the church have included major choral and orchestral concerts in the Kings Lynn Festival, but community and cultural uses have been hampered by the lack of facilities and modern services. The recently completed refurbishment programme, carried out with Heritage Lottery funding, entailed major conservation repairs and re-roofing, and new interventions to provide St Nicholas' Chapel with a sustainable future as a community and cultural venue, while preserving and enhancing its architectural splendours for the enjoyment of visitors. With a brief skilfully interpreted and executed by Richard Griffiths Architects it once again welcomes and serves the needs of a wide community of residents and visitors.

St Nicholas' Chapel was founded in c1140 as a chapel-of-ease to the parish church of St Margaret's. The c1225 Norman tower reveals the outline of an abutting roof believed to belong to the nave of an earlier chapel of c1200. The present building is mostly the result of a substantial re-building between the late C14 and early C15, and of a comprehensive reordering in 1852. St Nicholas is the patron saint of mariners and appropriately the spire of its tower, blown down in the great storm of 1741 and replaced in 1869 by Sir George Gilbert Scott with a wonderful pattern of diagonal leadwork, was the most prominent landmark to welcome them on the return from their voyages.

It was essential to renew the leadwork to the nave and south aisles in order to stop water penetration and saturation threatening not only the structure but also the glorious carved angels for which St Nicholas is renowned. Water ingress had led to serious decay of the ends of some of the timber trusses where they sat on the walls, and their structural integrity was restored by splicing on new oak ends fixed with resin dowels. By using modern technology rather than traditional carpentry splices it was possible to retain the whole of the outer visible

historical surface of the affected structural timbers, and thereby to preserve their archaeology of marks, carving and Medieval paint traces. Interestingly, the historic timbers span the life of the chapel ranging from Medieval to Victorian and are of highly varied provenance. For instance, the oak trusses have been identified as 16c oak originating from Poland, no doubt reflecting Kings Lynn's intensive Hanseatic League trading.

The Consistory Court is a rare survival of 1617, originally presided over by the Archdeacon who decided on matters of ecclesiastical law including divorce cases and marriage disputes. It incorporates much Medieval woodwork, indicating a major dismantling of choir stalls and other woodwork at this date. Paint analysis indicates that originally the pews re-used in the consistory court were painted in a combination of red and green that formed the basis for the redecoration of the restored main west doors to the chapel.

The doors to the north and south aisles had been shortened in the 19c after the ravages of a Victorian heating installation and were > restored to their original lengths. The removal of Victorian timber boarding revealed the northeast door to be of Medieval construction including the extraordinary almost rococo ornamentation of the framing of door following the flamboyant stone arch above. It is unfortunate that this is now hidden behind the restored Victorian planking. Paint analysis revealed a similar medieval colour scheme using green for the fluted mouldings and red for the wave section planks.

Both canopies on the north façade were badly decayed and repaired after many years of neglect. The northeast canopy over the medieval door dates back to 15c or 16c. It was expertly repaired with replacement sections to match the existing where irretrievably decayed, reusing as much of the original timber as possible. The repairs, though now readily apparent, will weather in over the course of time in harmony with the weathered original oak timbers.

The design of the new interventions required to serve extended cultural and community



uses of the chapel proved to be a matter of supreme sensitivity, because of the archaeological and visual difficulties of inserting new services, toilets and a kitchen into the tower space. After investigating endless permutations it was finally resolved to provide two toilets and a kitchen at ground level in the tower, reached through a low Medieval archway from the nave, and faced with an elegant screen of oak planks. The centrally located accessible toilet provides a space through which bells can be lowered from the bell-ringing chamber above, and the kitchen worktop extends into the reveal of the Medieval doorway into the basement of the tower, the basement door being rehung to swing outwards to clear the worktop.

The design of an appropriate method of heating such a large space in an economic and sustainable manner was also the subject of intense design investigations. The cost of heating the chapel to steady comfort conditions in winter using central heating would be prohibitive and unsustainable, and the nature of the uses is intermittent. Instead, the existing ‘lobster pot’ chandeliers were modified to incorporate low energy lighting as well as radiant heaters switched on for no longer than the duration of events, giving instantaneous heat to the occupiers rather than to the whole of the chapel. Electricity for the radiant heaters is provided by means of sensitively designed array of 92 photoelectric panels on the south roof of the nave, blending in well with the lead roof, the largest array of PVs so far installed in any church. By virtue of their large south facing nave roofs, churches are ideally placed to accommodate PV panels, provided that this can be done in a visually acceptable manner. At St Nichols the panels are only visible in more distant views, from which they read as a black rectangle within the larger lead rectangle of the nave roof, and are not visually intrusive.

Other adaptations for extended uses include the creation of a much enlarged area at the west end of the chapel to host activities such as markets, exhibitions, functions and a diverse programme of learning and events for the

community and visitors, and a dedicated storage area for staging and chairs curtained off in the north aisle.

The refurbishment programme was carried out in furtherance of the Churches Conservation Trust policy of sustaining and enhancing the significance of their heritage assets and putting them to viable uses, consistent with their conservation, for the benefit of the whole community. The resurrection of St Nicholas as a venue to be used and enjoyed by the local community and visitors from farther afield demonstrates once more, if further proof were needed, that our glorious Medieval churches are not just the heritage of the past to be conserved, but also a vibrant and beautiful setting for contemporary life, to be adapted and extended to serve contemporary and future needs. ■

- 01 The northeast canopy reconstructed and before decoration
- 02 The roof of the nave
© Charlie Marshall
- 03 View of the nave with the enlarged gathering area in the foreground
© Andy Marshall
- 04 View of the nave from inside the arch of the Norman tower
- 05 The array of 92 photovoltaic panels blend in well with the new leaded roofing
© Andy Marshall
- 06 Discovering the Medieval door upon stripping the Victorian boarding during repairs
- 07 The north aisle with the lobster pot chandeliers modified with radiant heaters
© Andy Marshall
- 08 One of the many beautifully carved angels, each unique, on the ends of each hammer beam in the roof of the nave
© Andy Marshall

PROJECT TEAM

Client:
Churches Conservation Trust

User Group:
Friends of St Nicholas Chapel Kings Lynn

Architect:
Richard Griffiths Architects

Structural Engineer:
Price and Myers

Services Engineer:
SGA Consulting

Contractor:
William Anelay Ltd

Chandelier Heating:
Electric Heating Solutions

Window Conservation:
Martin Johnson & Co

Quantity Surveyor:
Sawyer and Fisher





