

The Parish Church of St Nicholas  
Marston

Congregational Seating Assessment

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## Introduction

This report on the seating in the parish church of St Nicholas, Marston was researched and written by Jane Root in collaboration with Hugh Harrison. It sets out to assess the significance of the existing seating scheme and to respond to a series of questions posed by the DAC:

- Which of the pews are copies and which are originals or are they a kind of hybrid made up of salvaged and new materials?
- How complete is the 1855 scheme?
- Was there a significant event which triggered it?
- Are the pews associated with a well-known designer or craftsman?
- What is the quality of the joinery and workmanship?
- Is the scheme unique?
- Are the pews an early example of a particular technological or liturgical development?
- Are they a late example of an earlier stylistic form?

These questions are based on the known history of the seating at the time this report was commissioned, and this text reflects the findings of the more extensive research which has now been undertaken. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the church or a complete analysis of the complex evolution of the congregational seating, but does examine these in sufficient detail to enable an assessment of the significance of the seats the parish now wish to remove.

This report has inevitably been researched and written over an extended period of time as a result of the 2020-21 pandemic. Liturgical orientations are used.

## Summary Description and Designations

The parish church of St Nicholas, Marston is a Grade I listed building:

Church. C13; externally C15 and Cl6. Limestone rubble and ashlar; stone-slate and lead roofs. Aisled nave, chancel, west tower and south porch. C15 chancel, with moulded plinth, has side windows of 2 cinquefoil lights under labels with carved square stops, a Tudor-arched priests door with carved foliage in the spandrels, and a 3-light east window with Perpendicular tracery. The south aisle, with steep-pitched

roof, was rebuilt in 1562 and has a moulded string under the eaves, a re-set C15 window in the ashlar south wall, and 2 uncusped 2-light windows. The porch has a 4-centre arched entrance, with wrought-iron gates, and shelters a re-set Decorated doorway. The monopitch-roofed north aisle has 2-light windows and, to east, 3 graduated cinquefoil lights. Clerestory has 2-light windows. C15 tower has 2-light belfry openings and corner gargoyles below a crenellated parapet; 3-light west window has Perpendicular tracery. Interior: C13 chancel arch and nave arcades of 4 bays to north and 3 to south. Chancel has elaborate C19 arch-braced collar-truss roof; C15 nave roof has cambered tie beams and moulded purlins; north aisle roof is of similar character; 5-bay south aisle roof has queen-post trusses, moulded tie beams and curved windbraces; porch has coupled-rafter roof. Medieval encaustic tiles in chancel floor. Fittings include many C15 and C16 bench pews in nave, and return stalls in chancel with medieval poppy-head bench ends; C17 communion table and turned rails; C17 hexagonal pulpit on single stem with arched panels and tester; C17 screen in tower arch with pierced flat balusters. Stained glass includes many C15 fragments in the heads of lights and some old geometrical glazing in one chancel light, plus C15 panels inserted into east window. Traces of medieval wall painting over the chancel arch. Monuments include a large alabaster wall monument to Richard Croke (died 1683) with an elaborate frame and double pediment. (V.C.H. Oxfordshire, Vol.V.; Buildings of England: Oxfordshire, pp.699-700). (NHLE list entry no 1181921)

The war memorial cross in the churchyard is separately listed at Grade II (NHLE list entry no 1441014). Five other memorials in the churchyard are also Grade II listed (NHLE list entry nos 1047608, 1181933, 1284776, 1369204, 1369205).

The Victoria County History published in 1957 also provides a description of the church:

In the 15th century the aisles were widened, the nave roof raised, and a clerestory built. A modest west tower and a new chancel completed what must have looked almost like a new church. The chancel is well proportioned, and there is attractive carving in the spandrels of the hood moulding over a doorway on the south side. In the deep external hollow moulding of the three-light east window is carved some unusual leaf ornament. The recess of the first window on the south side has been carried down to form a sedile, and to the east of it is a small square piscina. A hagioscope looks into the chancel from the south aisle, and above the present pulpit is the blocked entrance to a vanished rood loft. There are fragments of glass and some encaustic tiles with floral and heraldic patterns which date from the 15th century. The plain oak benches and bench-ends and the remains of the chancel screen and return stalls may have been put in shortly after the rebuilding. In 1520

the chancel was reported to be out of repair.... In 1562 there were considerable repairs to the fabric, especially to the south porch and the south aisle, which was largely rebuilt, only one of the old windows being retained. The pulpit probably dates from the first half of the 17th century. In the early 19th century the tower and the nave roof were repaired, and in 1883 the church was intelligently restored, the architect being H. G. W. Drinkwater of Oxford, at a cost of £1,400. A new roof was built over the chancel, and the south wall of the chancel and the buttresses of the north aisle were rebuilt. A western gallery was removed, a new floor was laid, the tower arch was opened, and the ground floor of the tower became a vestry. In the course of the work an aumbry was discovered in the north aisle and traces of wall-paintings were uncovered. (VCH 5, 219-20)

The church is in the Old Marston Conservation Area

([https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/17/old\\_marston\\_conservation\\_area](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/17/old_marston_conservation_area)).

## Historical Introduction

In their present form, the seats in St Nicholas Marston are the product of two significant interventions in the nineteenth century, a period of huge change in thinking about church buildings. Church seating was a particular focus and ideas about it were inextricably linked with wider questions about the role of the church in society. Chronic shortages of seating in Anglican churches were exacerbated by population pressures and the drive to provide more free seats was fuelled by moral panic and a deep mistrust of nonconformity and Catholicism (Parry 1984, 7-10). The 1811 census recorded a population of 11 million, but the number of churches was essentially the same as it had been in the Norman period, when the population was two million (Parry 1984, 2). The responsibility of Anglican vestries to provide the parishioners with seats in the church had long been complicated by the creation of what was effectively private ownership of pews by appropriation: seats could be built by faculty, held by custom associating them with particular property in the parish, or reserved by payment of a rent (Clarke 1963, 22-4; Cooper and Brown 2011, 198-203). This system frequently gave rise to disputes and led to the practical exclusion of the poor from many Anglican churches; it was also seen as a significant factor in the rise of nonconformity (Cooper and Brown 2011, 200).

A number of initiatives were taken in response to the church seating crisis. The establishment of the Incorporated Church Building Society, formally inaugurated in February 1818 to fund the provision of free seats in Anglican churches, was bound up with the passing of the first Church Building Act and the creation of the Church Building Commission, and with other charitable enterprises including the National Schools Society founded in 1811 (Parry 1984, 27-8).

From the late 1830s, local and national responses to practical church seating issues were heavily influenced by the architectural and theological ideas championed by the Cambridge Camden Society. The CCS, later renamed the Ecclesiological Society, was founded in 1839 by a group of Cambridge undergraduates to promote Gothic architecture and the use of church arrangements and furnishings based on those in place before the Reformation. A key feature of these was the provision of open bench seating in the place of closed pews, which were symbolic of the system of appropriation. Open bench seating also offered practical advantages in the efficient use of space. The Society was motivated by theological views and attitudes to ceremonial which were broadly Tractarian or High Church, and it had a major and enduring influence on the style and planning of Anglican church interiors (Cooper and Brown 2011, 197). During the 1840s, the ICBS not only financed the provision of free seats but also increasingly influenced the design of church interiors along ecclesiological lines (Andrew Townsend Architects 2015, Appendix I).

Marston's physical location on the fringes of Oxford placed it close to the heart of developments in architectural taste in the diocese in the nineteenth century and under the influence of key individuals. The history of the seats in the parish church can be related directly to the practical and ideological concerns which influenced changing practices in seating design across the country in the nineteenth century. In 1855, the seating was remodelled to the designs of the diocesan architect G E Street, although Street's scheme was modified in execution, and in 1883 it was again reworked by Street's pupil H G W Drinkwater (*cf* Appendix I).

The careful and relatively modest interventions in the seating at St Nicholas Marston must also be seen as a product of local circumstances. Despite its proximity to Oxford, Marston seems to have been something of a backwater. The patron was not an Oxford college, and from 1547 most presentations were made by the Lords of the Manor of Headington (VCH 5, 218-9). The population of Marston increased significantly in the early nineteenth century but its inhabitants remained relatively poor:

Early in the 19th century the population began to increase noticeably, and by the middle of the century it was well over 400. In one respect the character of the community had not altered: the land was still held in small parcels. There was only one owner of more than 100 acres, Brasenose College. Altogether there were 49 other owners besides the other two colleges, and of these rather less than half lived in the parish. The blacksmith and one labourer were among them. The main reason why small landowning persisted in this parish seems to have been that Oxford afforded a good market for the characteristic produce of small-holders, whether owners or tenants. Nor was there any nucleus round which a residential estate was likely to grow. The lords of the manor had never lived in the parish. The colleges

were only interested in drawing rents or fines on the renewal of leases; the Croke family had never been of much account as landlords; there were neither woodlands nor anything else to attract the sportsman, and there was no site obviously suitable for a mansion.

... The growth of Oxford increased the demand for garden-produce and the like, as did no doubt the rise in the standard of living in both town and university. Possibly men who worked in Oxford or its suburbs were already coming to live in Marston. There were various other ways in which the prosperity of the world in general enabled more people to live here. The roads were given a metalled surface. In 1851 the first elementary school was built. This meant not only that there was work for schoolteachers and cleaners, but in time it meant that others had to do work which the children had done before. In the middle of the century, however, one phase of increase ended and until 1871 there was a slight decline in numbers. From then the census records no marked increase for twenty years. The establishment of the Workman's Hall in the Oxford Road in 1871 marks a change in the village and in its relation to Oxford. (VCH 5, 218)

The vicars of Marston were non-resident from early in the eighteenth century until 1849 when

... Richard Gordon, already Vicar of Elsfield, became Vicar of Marston, and for some time held the two livings in plurality. A curate performed the Sunday duty at Marston but the vicar visited the sick and his incumbency began a period in which the standard of assiduity was much higher than it had been. In the middle of the century there were 15 to 25 communicants at the monthly celebration. (VCH 5, 219)

There was a privately owned school for 20 children in the village in 1816 (VCH 5, 221). Richard Gordon's arrival seems to have been the catalyst for efforts to provide a National School and in December 1849 the Vestry considered giving up the parish orchard to provide a site for a parish school (Parish Collection: Vestry Book). A

... new building was erected in 1851, the running expenses of which were largely borne by the vicar, Canon Gordon, with aid from the National Society. This provided accommodation for 145 children, and was an 'all age' mixed school until September 1947 (VCH 5, 221)

The parish does not seem to have provided a return to the Ecclesiastical Census in 1851, when the Registrar estimated 'as near as I could ascertain' that there had been a 'General Congregation' of 75 and 60 Sunday Scholars present at the morning service on 31 March



(TNA HO129/157). Even allowing for a very inefficient use of space in the seating scheme as it existed in 1851, it does not seem that the church was overcrowded. Figures provided by the architect Harry Drinkwater in 1883 show that the church as then constituted provided 89 free seats for adults in the nave, aisles and chancel, and 40 dedicated seats for children in the chancel and west gallery. There were in addition 78 appropriated or 'other' seats for adults in the side aisles, making a total of 207 sittings (LPL ICBS 8819). It should be noted that the VCH found 'no evidence of Protestant nonconformity in the parish until 1871' (VCH 5, 220).

## The History and Development of the Church Seating

### *Early History*

Two volumes of churchwardens' accounts for Marston covering the periods 1540-1610 and 1669-1732 have been reviewed briefly during research for this report and neither seems to provide any significant evidence for seat repairs or alterations, the allotment of seats or collection of seat rents (OHC PAR 165/4/F1/1, 2). In any case, the physical evidence discussed in this report suggests that these volumes probably do not cover the period when the nave seats were installed. The VCH notes that, after 150 years, Marston became a separate parish from Headington in 1637 when a vicar was instituted on the presentation of the crown 'perhaps as an incident of the Laudian ecclesiastical revival' (VCH 5, 219). It is possible that this was the catalyst for the installation of the nave benches.

### *The Nineteenth Century*

In 1846 John Henry Parker, the architectural writer and publisher, contributed an article on Marston church to the *Guide to the Architectural Antiquities in the Neighbourhood of Oxford* published by the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture. He noted:

The seats are mostly good old open benches, but many of them have sloping book boards added, which would be better taken away again, and others have modern deal boxes built upon them. (Parker 1846, 187)

The *Guide* was also published by Parker, who was an influential figure 'strongly sympathetic to the Tractarian movement, particularly as it related to ecclesiology' (Oxford DNB). G E Street, newly appointed as Oxford diocesan architect, used the *Ecclesiastical and architectural topography of England, Diocese of Oxford* published by Parker in 1850 as a guide whilst familiarising himself with the churches of the diocese over the winter of 1850-51 (LPL MS4441). Street's own interleaved copy, annotated with notes and sketch plans, is now in Lambeth Palace Library. St Nicholas is only briefly mentioned in this publication: there is no

reference to the seats and there are no additional notes about the church in Street's copy (LPL MS4441: No 107).

## The 1850s: G E Street and William Steele

It can be assumed that G E Street had been familiar with the church for some time before a Vestry Meeting was called in Marston on 16 August 1855 to consider a plan for 'altering & re-distributing' the seats in the north and south aisles (Parish Collection: Vestry Book). The meeting was poorly attended and was consequently adjourned until 22 August when the Vestry considered a plan prepared by Street for

... altering & redistributing the seats in the North & South Aisles of the said church whereby greatly improved & increased accommodation will be afforded.... (Parish Collection: Vestry Book)

The details of this plan are not known and the reference to altering and redistributing seats in the north and south aisles is confusing since other evidence discussed in this report confirms that the aisle seats were made new in 1855. It does seem that there was an intention to retain and conserve the existing early benches in the nave, and the limited extent of the work may also reflect a shortage of funds, although it should be noted that no ICBS grant application was made. There is no record of a faculty for this work.

Street's proposal was unanimously approved on 22 August and it was agreed that subscriptions should be sought 'forthwith'. Tenders were received at a further meeting on 18 October, when it was resolved

That the Specifications altered ... to include doors, to substitute the best yellow deal for oak floors, & to avoid the excavation specified in Mr. Street's plan, be adopted, and that Mr. William Steele's tender for executing the work be accepted. (Parish Collection: Vestry Book)

A committee of five – the Revd C P Golightly, the Revd R Gordon, the unnamed churchwardens and Mr John Cannon - was appointed to enter into the 'necessary agreement' with the contractor and put the resolution into effect (Parish Collection: Vestry Book). The wording of the resolution suggests that Street was not involved in supervising the execution of the scheme, which had been significantly modified probably on the advice of the contractor William Steele.

No contemporary newspaper descriptions of the work have been found, presumably reflecting the modesty of the scheme, but deductions can be made from the physical evidence and later documentary sources. Given the lack of later references, it seems likely that the 'modern deal boxes' noted by Parker were removed during this phase of work.

New seats in the north and south aisles were copied from the existing seats at the east end of the nave. Information provided by the parish to support the ICBS grant application they did make in 1883 shows that the seats in the north and south aisles were appropriated and there is physical evidence that these seats formerly had doors when the free seats in the nave did not. Further evidence discussed in this report shows that most of the benches were altered in 1883 (LPL ICBS 8819).

The limited extent of the work undertaken in 1855 is confirmed by a newspaper account of a visit made by the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society in March 1874 (*Oxfordshire Weekly News* 18 March 1874 p6 col 2). James Parker, John Henry Parker's son and successor, provided an introduction to the building, concluding that

... it was a particularly interesting little Church, the like of which few now remained, they having been for the most part so vastly altered by architects.

The [Rev. Canon Gordon, the incumbent] here took the opportunity of thanking Mr. Parker for his instructive observations. He could only hope that when Marston Church was restored that the whole of the work would be under the supervision of Mr. Parker, who would, no doubt, take care that modern restoration was not in that case modern destruction – (applause).

The party then quitted Marston, by way of a splendid walk across the fields ....  
(*Oxfordshire Weekly News* 18 March 1874 p6 col 2)

## The 1880s: H G W Drinkwater

A Vestry Meeting was held in Marston on 15 January 1883 'to consider the state of the Parish Church' (Parish Collection: Vestry Book). It was proposed by Mr E Rippington, seconded by Mr Hills, that

Steps be at once taken for the complete restoration of the Parish Church and that the Parishioners and others be asked to subscribe towards a fund to carry out the undertaking. (Parish Collection: Vestry Book)

This was carried unanimously and a committee was formed consisting of the vicar, the Revd J P Smith, Messrs Rippington and Broughton the churchwardens and seven other named individuals. The churchwardens were appointed to act as treasurers and it was agreed that an account should be opened immediately at the 'Old Bank' in Oxford to receive subscriptions. The parishioners present at the meeting subscribed £475.0.0 (Parish Collection: Vestry Book).

It is evident that the matter had been under consideration for some time and a scheme had already been prepared by the local architect Harry Drinkwater (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970). His report on the building, addressed to Mr Smith, is dated 29 December 1882:

In accordance with your request, I have made a careful examination of the Church of S. Nicholas, Marston, and I have the honour of forwarding you the following report of its state and of the works requiring to be done.

I have prepared in order to explain more fully this report, two plans, one shewing the Church as it is now, and the other shewing the re-arrangement I should recommend in the seating and the portions of the walls which I think it will be necessary to rebuild, and which I have coloured red on Plan No. 2.

The Chancel is in a bad state of repair, and it will, I fear, be necessary to put an entirely new roof to this part, but before preparing any design for it I should prefer getting access to the present roof above the ceiling to see if there be any remains of the old roof or any trace of its construction.

The south chancel wall is very much bulged, and a portion will require rebuilding; this should be done, and each stone carefully marked as it is taken down, so that it can be rebuilt in its original position.

Some of the buttresses on the north aisle wall will also require rebuilding, and the weatherings of most of them are very much decayed and broken and will require replacing.

The tracery of the west window of the tower, the west window of north aisle, and of two clerestory windows, will require restoring, and some of the mullions of the other windows should be renewed.

The roofs of the nave and aisles appear to be in a fairly sound state, but the boarding seems in places to be much decayed; it will be necessary to take off the lead and put new oak boarding and replace any decayed timbers.

The south aisle roof should be stripped and re-covered.

The plaster gable of the porch should be taken down and rebuilt in stone, and I think a new roof will be necessary; I should recommend that the present outer door be removed and open iron gates substituted.

The floor of the entire Church should be taken up, and a layer of concrete put over the whole surface; the passages and chancel should then be laid with tiles, preserving

any memorial stones, and the space under the seats with wooden blocks laid in boiling tar and pitch.

The seats, which are all good, and many of them old ones, should be carefully replaced, making such alterations only as would be necessary to make them fit their altered position.

The interior stonework of the Church should be cleaned of its many coats of whitewash, carefully preserving the face of the stone, and in no case should it be touched with a tool; those portions that have been cut away should be replaced.

The western gallery should be removed, and the tower archway opened out leaving the present screen so that the tower may form the vestry. The present ladder to the belfry should be removed, and either an upright ladder put against the south wall of the tower or a turret staircase built on the north side; I think, however, that the former plan will be found the better, and by far the cheaper one. A new floor should be place in the tower.

The pulpit with its canopy should be preserved and kept in its present position, but should be slightly lowered and supported either on legs or a wooden base.

The remains of the old chancel screen are still visible in the jambs of the chancel arch, this should be restored with return clergy stalls to suit the old choir desks.

The font should be new and should be placed in the south aisle near to the principal entrance to the Church.

The ground round the outside of the Church should be lowered to a depth of at least 6 inches below the floor line, and for a width of 3 or 4 feet, so as to allow of it being properly channelled and drained.

The eaves of the roof should be spouted.

The remains of the old glass in many of the windows are very interesting, and should be carefully preserved and worked into any new glass that may be put in at any future time.

As regards the heating of the Church, I think the simplest method will be to put a Remington stove at the west end of the nave; it is for small churches found to act efficiently, and is not unsightly.

The cost of carrying out the various works which I have thus briefly mentioned would be, I believe, about one thousand pounds, and in case you may think it desirable to carry out the work in sections, I should divide it thus:-

		£	s.	d.
The Chancel	...	400	0	0
Nave and Aisles	...	500	0	0
Tower	...	<u>100</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
		<u>£1000</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>

In conclusion I would urge the desirability of commencing the work as soon as possible, for the longer it is delayed the greater will be the cost of carrying it out, and I feel sure that if the works I have suggested were carried out the Church would be in every way suited to the requirements of the parish, and that it would be rendered thoroughly secure and substantial without destroying any of its interesting points. (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970)

Drinkwater's plans are not with the faculty papers at OHC but there is a plan signed by him with the ICBS file in Lambeth Palace Library which is also dated December 1882 (LPL ICBS 8819: Fig 1). The faculty granted on 10 May 1883 gave the parish permission:

... to take down and remove the present Gallery at the West end of the Church, to remove the present Reading Desk or Pew, to re-arrange, if necessary the Sittings throughout the Church; to take up the present Floor and lay down a new Floor; to repair the Roof, to take down and rebuild in Stone the present Gable of Porch; to remove the outer Door and substitute open Iron Gates for same, to restore and repair such other parts of the Fabric of the Church (both internal and external) requiring restoration and repair, and generally to do and perform all such other works and operations in or about the Church as might be fairly implied in fully carrying out the Plans and Specification of the Architect aforesaid.... (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970)

The schedule of seats with the ICBS grant application completed by Drinkwater on 27 April 1883 provides important detail about the extent of change to the seating (LPL ICBS 8819). This itemises both the existing and proposed provision and there are clear differences between them. The existing arrangement provided 89 free seats for adults in the nave, aisles and chancel, and 40 seats for children in the chancel and west gallery. There were in addition 78 appropriated or 'other' seats for adults in the side aisles, making a total of 207 sittings. The measurements of the existing benches were:

In the nave:

- 14 free seats for adults each 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>' long accommodating 4 – total 56
- 5 free seats for adults each 5' long accommodating 3 – total 15
- 4 free seats for adults each 4' long accommodating 2 – total 8

In the side aisles:

- 5 'other' seats for adults each 5' long accommodating 3 – total 15
- 8 'other' seats for adults each 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>' long accommodating 4 – total 32
- 3 'other' seats for adults each 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>' long accommodating 5 – total 15
- 4 'other' seats for adults each 8' long accommodating 4 – total 16

In the chancel:

- 2 free seats for adults each 10' long accommodating 5 – total 10
- 2 seats for children each 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>' long accommodating 5 – total 10

In the west gallery:

- 3 seats for children each 10' long accommodating 8 – total 24
- 1 seat for children 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>' long accommodating 6 – total 6

The ICBS had a standard formula for measuring the seat space required by adults and children and it is evident that Drinkwater had calculated the number of occupants per existing bench according to these rules. The Society's requirements were adjusted over time but the form completed by Drinkwater in 1883 states:

The Society's Instructions direct that 20 inches in width on the seats be allotted for each person, except in those intended exclusively for children, where 14 inches may be allowed. The distance from the back of one seat to that of the next must depend in great measure on the height of the backs and the arrangements for kneeling. Where the funds and space admit, convenience will be consulted by adopting a clear width of 3 feet; but a width of not less than 2 feet 9 inches from centre to centre will be allowed when the backs are perpendicular and of not less than 2 feet 10 inches from centre to centre when the backs are sloping; if the back of the seat be not more than 2 feet 8 inches in height. This height is in all cases to be preferred, both for convenience and for appearance. If a greater height be adopted, the distance from back to back must be increased 1 inch at least for every additional inch in height; but under no circumstances must the height exceed 3 feet. There should not be any projecting capping on the top of the backs. Seats for children are to be 24 inches in the clear. (LPL ICBS 8819)

Given that the primary purpose of the ICBS grant scheme was to provide free seats for the poor, Drinkwater's challenge in reordering the church interior was to maintain an acceptable number of sittings whilst meeting the Society's requirements – including 'an open central Passage from West to East' between the seats - and fulfilling wider ecclesiological ideals such as the removal of the west gallery.

The new arrangement at Marston provided the same number of sittings – 207 – but there were two fewer free adult seats. The 87 free seats for adults in the nave, aisles and chancel, 40 children's seats in the north aisle and chancel and 80 'other' seats in the side aisles were arranged:

In the nave:

- 11 free seats for adults each 7' long accommodating 4 – total 44
- 7 free seats for adults each 5' long accommodating 3 – total 21
- 4 free seats for adults each 4½' long accommodating 2 – total 8
- 2 free seats for adults each 2' long accommodating 1 – total 2

In the side aisles:

- 9 'other' seats for adults each 6½' long accommodating 4 – total 36
- 8 'other' seats for adults each 7¼' long accommodating 4 – total 36
- 4 'other' seats for adults each 5¼' long accommodating 3 – total 12
- 6 children's seats in north aisle each 6½' long accommodating 5 – total 30

In the chancel:

- 2 free seats for adults each 10' long accommodating 5 – total 10
- 2 free seats for adults each 2½' long accommodating 1 – total 2
- 2 children's seats each 7' long accommodating 5 – total 10

Drinkwater reported that the seats were spaced at 34" and the 'old' seat backs were 36" high. The children's seats were spaced at 27".

The new seating scheme provided 57 benches with a total length of 349½', which had been created out of the 51 existing benches which had a total length of 362½'. It is evident from the figures that all of the aisle seats were adjusted in length, and the majority must have been shortened. Nearly all of the nave seats were also shortened, although in most cases only marginally, but five may have remained the same length.

In their response to the grant application, the ICBS architects' committee noted that no drawings or other details of the seats had been provided, and that there was a gap of only



three feet between the fronts of the chancel stalls. Mr Smith wrote to the Society on 7 May 1883 quoting Drinkwater's reply:

The whole of the present Nave which are very good plain seats are reused, those at present in the Nave are old ones & those in the aisles were made about 50 years ago & copied from the old ones & are oak.

The reason why only three feet is shewn between the fronts of chancel seats is that the old return desks only allow of that space unless they are altered which I did not think advisable. (LPL ICBS 8819)

The application form completed in April 1883 provides further information about the state of the parish and the finances of the restoration scheme. The population in 1882 was 578, of whom 450 were identified by the incumbent as 'poorer inhabitants' (LPL ICBS 8819). Their chief occupation was agricultural. The estimated cost of 'reseating and restoring' the church was £1150, of which £980 had been raised by subscription and £120 by a grant from the Diocesan Church Building Society. Mr Smith anticipated a further £50 might be raised, reporting:

I shall be unable to get any more Subscriptions from the Parishioners or Residents in the neighbourhood: and I am for the remaining £50 mentioned as "further means expected" trusting to the Patron who is invalided & unable to transact business.

Although we have estimated the work at 1200 of course there are very many extra expenses which will probably raise the expenses to a sum considerably over that sum. (LPL ICBS 8819)

On 17 May 1883 the ICBS agreed that the work at Marston could proceed on the basis of the plan submitted without prejudice to the future consideration of grant aid (LPL ICBS MB 24, 119). On 21 June the ICBS general committee voted a grant of £20 on condition that 207 sittings were provided of which 127 must be for the free use of the parishioners (LPL ICBS MB 24, 133). On 19 July 1883 Marston was included in a list in the ICBS minute book recording parishes that had sent letters of thanks for grant offers: this also noted those who had 'not replied' (LPL ICBS MB 24, 144)! The certificate of completion was signed by Harry Drinkwater, Mr Smith and representatives of the parish on 7 February 1884 and the grant was paid promptly before the end of the month (LPL ICBS 8819).

On 11 October 1884, the *Oxford Times* reported that the

... old and interesting church, dedicated to St. Nicholas, has undergone a long-needed reparation and restoration. The chancel roof was in a very bad state, and of very rude workmanship. This has been replaced by a new open timber oak roof, the

principals having carved braces, as nearly as possible on the lines of the old roof, and the spandrils filled in with tracery. The roofs of nave and aisles have been stripped, the framework being thoroughly examined, and renewed where necessary, and covered with new oak boarding, and the chancel and south aisle have been covered with Coley Weston slates, with stone ridge, and the nave and north aisle re-leaded. The interior has been cleaned of its many coats of whitewash, and the plastering repaired. During this work several fragments of decoration were discovered, but these were all so small that it was difficult to make out what the subjects were. Some remains of texts with Jacobean borders were also discovered, and an aumbry at the east end of the north aisle. The old seats have been re-placed throughout the nave and aisles, and in the chancel the old return stall-desks were retained with new stalls and screen across the chancel arch. Many interesting remains of old tiles were found, and were copied for the chancel flooring. The church is built principally in the late perpendicular style, the arcades and chancel-arch being of transitional Norman. The old glass was carefully preserved and was re-leaded by Messrs. Bell and Beckham, of Great Russell-street, London. The works were carried out by Mr. J. Honour, of Marston, under the superintendence of Mr. H. G. W. Drinkwater. (p7 col 1)

## *The Twentieth Century*

A series of faculties dated 1903, 1919 [3], 1920, 1921, 1936 and 1951, an Archdeacon's certificate dated 1953 and a further 21 faculties and Archdeacon's certificates to 2002 have not been fully investigated for this report (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970). The most significant interventions in terms of the congregational seating are likely to have been the installation of the present west gallery in 1962, the creation of a side chapel in the south aisle resulting in the loss of two benches in 1965 and the construction of a new clergy vestry outside the north door in 1977 (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970; LPL ICBS 15175).

## The Congregational Seating

The congregational seating has been altered several times. Evidence discussed in this report suggests that all the seats have been taken out and reinstalled at least once, and the seats have been modified relatively recently by the addition of ply panels to the seat backs to house the heating system. When Hugh Harrison visited the church on 17<sup>th</sup> August 2020 it was heavily occupied with electricians installing heating panels below the seat boards and access to the seats was restricted. In addition, the ply panels on the seat backs obscure all the details of the outer face and the view from the rear of the connection of the seat back to the pew end, and the analysis of their construction given in this report must therefore be treated with caution.

## *Description*

The floor is of one design throughout the church with raised platforms in the aisles, but the floors beneath the nave seats are level with the gangways. The tiled floors appear to be restricted to the west end of the church and the centre gangway, with the north and south gangways floored with ancient stone paving and ledger stones, but access in August 2020 was restricted. All the floors beneath the seats are oak parquet with an oak sill edge.

The seats are of three different dates: those in the nave east of the cross aisle, in the nave west of the cross aisle and the seats in the north and south aisles.

### The Nave Seats:

All of the nave seats have the same design ends and seat construction but are significantly different in other ways. For example, the top rails and moulds on the bench ends are different: see Plate 14 for east of the cross aisle and 21 for west of the cross aisle. The seat fronts are also very slightly different, see Plate 12 for seats east of the cross aisle and Plate 5 for west. The detailing of the seats is discussed below.

The very similar construction of the two sets of benches suggests either that they were made at a similar time or that the same carpenters made both sets at different times. The dates and sequence are not certain, but the moulds on the seats at the west end are quite similar to the benches at St John the Baptist, Tisbury, Wiltshire which are thought to date from the early 1630s.

The similarity in construction of both sets of seats can be seen in the panelled bench ends, see Plate 15 for seats east of the cross aisle and Plate 20 for west of the cross aisle. The ends are similar to normal frames with a stile each side and top and bottom rails linking the stiles with a thin panel filling the space inside, but unusually in this case there is no separate bottom rail and the bench ends are tenoned directly into the continuous sill rail. Although this is quite logical in construction terms, most panelled bench ends do have a separate bottom rail which is tenoned into the platform sills. Additionally, there is no rail at seat board height for the seat back bottom rail to fix into and no structural timber to carry the weight of the seat board. Instead, both the seat back and seat board are merely nailed to the thin infill panel which is seen to split (Plates 15 and 20) and certainly has no real strength.

The most likely explanation for this unusual construction is that both sets of seats have been reduced in height, but the design of the seat backs at the east end of the nave makes it hard to believe they were ever higher. In such cases it is usual to find that the seats have been cut down at the bottom, since the joint of the top rail of the seat back and the bench

end is an important one to maintain stability and so is best left undisturbed. Unfortunately, the added ply backs at Marston (see Plates 17 and 22) obscure the seat back seat rails which often provide evidence of earlier panelling. If we assume that a complete panel with rail was removed from the bottom of the bench ends, it seems that the seats would have been quite tall with very plain ends. There is no consistent evidence that these seats formerly had doors, since with one exception there are no old hinge marks. Plan B shows that one seat at the west end of the south block in the nave does have hinge marks.

It is not clear how the nave benches were originally laid out but the 1883 ICBS application confirms that those at the west end had already been significantly shortened (LPL ICBS 8819). It is likely that there was a central aisle the full length of the nave from at least 1855. Two seats on the north side have since been shortened to accommodate the gallery staircase but the nineteenth century parquet pew platform remains, and one seat has been removed from the west end of the north aisle. Two benches were removed from the south aisle in 1965 (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970).

### *Nave Seats East:*

The two blocks of bench seating in the nave east of the cross aisle were used by G E Street as a pattern for the nineteenth-century seats in the north and south aisles. The roll mould top rail and the long horizontal seat back boards link back to late mediaeval seat design and suggest that these seats are earlier in date than those at the west end of the nave (see Plate 14). The mould is more typical of earlier gothic moulds with a combination of a roll and deep hollow moulds. However it also includes a typical Jacobean bolection mould with a square nosing between two quadrants.

The fronts to these seats have no muntins but the boards are jointed to each other with wide moulds down the edges which give the appearance of muntins. There is no obvious evidence that the benches east of the cross aisle have been shortened although evidence supplied to the ICBS in 1883 shows that most must have been altered (LPL ICBS 8819). It would be rare to find oak wide enough to produce single board seat backs longer than they are now.

### *Nave Seats West:*

The recessed mould on the top rail of the bench ends and seat backs on the benches west of the cross aisle is very typical of their date of circa 1630.

These benches appear to have been shortened to approximately half their original length, see Plate 19. The photograph shows that the back of this seat was made from a section of an original seat back but with the centre stile only a short distance from the north end. In

addition, the long south section of panel has been reduced in length as it is not now chamfered off on the south end as it is on the north end where it houses into what was the centre stile. This bench was therefore originally at least twice the length it is now. The top rail of the back bench also visible in Plate 19 has pin holes to secure a stile tenon in the same place as the bench in front. However, there is no muntin and the seat back panel is the full length of the bench suggesting that this seat may have been more than double its present length. Further evidence of intervention is that the moulds on the back rails do not neatly intersect with the mould on the inside faces of the bench ends, see Plate 19. All of the benches at the west end of the nave south of the central aisle have a centre stile in the seat back panel, see Plate 21. These are not original and are applied to make the benches look as though this was their original length and construction. The fronts to these benches are of conventional construction with panels contained between muntins.

Evidence supplied to the ICBS in 1883 shows that the nave benches were then slightly shortened but were approximately the lengths they are now at that date (LPL ICBS 8819).

### The Aisle Seats:

The north and south aisle seats were designed by G E Street c1855 following the pattern of the surviving early benches at the east end of the nave and made in oak. Street's design was modified in execution by the addition of doors, probably at the suggestion of the contractor William Steele. The 1882 Drinkwater plan shows that these seats, with the exception of the block at the west end of the north aisle, were the only appropriated seats in the building and there is consistent physical evidence that they formerly had doors (Plan B). Photographs taken c1890 do not show doors, confirming the physical and circumstantial evidence that they were not replaced when the seats were altered and reinstated in 1883 ([https://historicengland.org.uk/englandsplaces/1500/4864/4864\\_014.jpg?width=1940&height=auto&mode=max](https://historicengland.org.uk/englandsplaces/1500/4864/4864_014.jpg?width=1940&height=auto&mode=max); [https://historicengland.org.uk/englandsplaces/1500/4864/4864\\_020.jpg?width=1940&height=auto&mode=max](https://historicengland.org.uk/englandsplaces/1500/4864/4864_020.jpg?width=1940&height=auto&mode=max)).

The fronts and the backs of the back seats are also close copies of those in the nave. There is one surviving example of each of these on either side of the south porch door and another front at the west end of the north aisle. The Drinkwater plan confirms that the west block of seats in the north aisle was dedicated for the use of children. However, one bench has been removed and the adjacent seats shifted to make up the gap. The back seat against the west wall seems to be a standard adult seat but the front four seats have narrower seat boards which are set much lower – around 15” rather than 18” from the floor – in standard height bench ends. The back bench in the east block in the north aisle is an ordinary seat with a book rest for use of those in the seat behind, probably as a result of

alterations to construct a new vestry outside the north door in 1977 (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970).

### *Post-1883 alterations to the seating:*

There is no evidence that any seats have been moved since the floor was put in except at the west end of the north aisle where one bench has been removed and the adjacent benches shifted to make up the gap. Two seats on the north side of the west end nave seats have been shortened to accommodate the gallery staircase but the nineteenth century parquet pew platform remains. Two seats were removed from the south aisle in 1965 (OHC DIOC/1/C/5/1970).

It would appear that the nave seat boards have been renewed with wider boards and now rest on noggins screwed to the back of the panels in the bench ends. The back seats and seat fronts look original and unaltered. There is evidence that a small number of original top rails to the nave seats have been replaced with new, and what looks to be two or three new seat back boards and one or two ends.

## Significance

The date of the seventeenth century benches in the nave makes them of high significance. The seats at the east end of the nave have particular significance because their top rail moulds are more late mediaeval than Jacobean in design, as are the seat backs with their single wide horizontal board.

It is assumed that Street designed the aisle seats as copies of the Jacobean benches but in their low open form they have some significance. The lack of original drawings and addition of doors introduces some doubt as to the extent of Street's and Steele's authorship. It is interesting that Street copied the rather unconventional construction and built the new seats with upright backs, narrow seat boards and a deeply projecting seat back rail - all of which would have made sitting in them uncomfortable. The dedicated children's seats are a rare survival. All in all, one cannot rate the significance of the aisle seats as more than low to medium.

## Appendix I: G E Street and H G W Drinkwater

Street was a prominent and prolific architect who played a leading role in the shift away from the pure Gothic revival of his early career towards the development of the High Victorian Style. He was a pupil of Owen Carter of Winchester, moving to London to work in the office of George Gilbert Scott in 1844:

In 1849 Street established his own practice, first in London and then in Wallingford Street, Wantage, Berkshire, as his early Cornish connections were supplanted by more important ties to the diocese of Oxford. He served as Oxford diocesan architect from 1850 until his death, enjoying the patronage and friendship of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. (Oxford DNB)

Street returned to London in 1856 but continued as Oxford diocesan architect until his death in 1881 (Oxford DNB). Research undertaken for Historic England in 2014-5 suggests that the patronage of Oxford colleges and Street's personal influence had a significant impact on the development of church buildings in the diocese in the period 1840-60 (ATA 2015, Appendix V). Street was a practised user of the ICBS grant system, through which he promoted ecclesiological ideals such as the removal of galleries (ATA 2015, Appendix V). The Lambeth Palace Library catalogue records more than 180 ICBS files associated with him from 1847, although his role in these applications has not been investigated.

Drinkwater was a pupil of G E Street and following his early death in 1895, the *Oxford Journal* reported that he

... was the son of the late Mr. George Drinkwater, of this city, and was born about 1843, and was articled to Mr. Street, the well-known architect, and distinguished himself by winning the travelling prize of the Royal Society of Architects. Many buildings in Oxford and the neighbourhood were designed by the deceased, including St. Margaret's Church, the New Theatre, the Birmingham Bank in Corn Market-street, Messrs. Lucas' factory in George-street, and Messrs. Elliston and Cavell's business premises in Magdalen-street. During the illness of Mr Bruton the diocesan work was entrusted to Mr Drinkwater. He was one of the founders with Councillor T. Lucas of the New Theatre, of which company he was secretary. The deceased belonged to the Alfred Lodge ... of Freemasons, of which he was an active member ... was churchwarden of Ss. Philip and James', and held other offices of an honorary nature. (*Oxford Journal* 19 October 1895 p8 col 2)

From January 1892 until his death Drinkwater was treasurer of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (<https://oahs.org.uk/pdf/OAHS%20Officers.pdf>). Lambeth Palace Library holds records for four churches where schemes designed by Drinkwater were grant aided by the ICBS in the 1880s and 1890s (LPL ICBS 8688, 8772, 8819, 9616). These were the new churches of St Augustine of Hippo, Dudley (1881-85) and St Margaret, Oxford (1882-93), and reseating and repairs at St Nicholas, Marston (1883-4) and St Leonard, Eynsham (1892). Only his work at Marston has been investigated for this report.

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British Newspaper Archive: [Home](#) | [Search the archive](#) | [British Newspaper Archive](#)

England's Places: [England's Places - Archive photos of the architecture of England's cities and towns](#) | [Historic England](#)

Historic England Archive: [Find Photos in the Historic England Archive](#) | [Historic England](#)

National Archives Discovery Catalogue: [Discovery](#) | [The National Archives](#)



National Heritage List for England (NHLE): [Search the List - Find listed buildings, monuments, battlefields and more | Historic England](#)

Oxford City Council, Old Marston Conservation Area: [Conservation Areas - Old Marston | Oxford City Council](#)

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB): [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography \(oxforddnb.com\)](#)

Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society: [OAHS - Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society](#)

Picture Oxon image library: [Oxfordshire County Council - Picture Oxon - Home](#)