Nicholas Jacob

1954

My name is Nicholas Jacob and I was born in 1954.

I am an architect and I have been for getting on for 40 years, and my involvement at St Margaret’s started maybe 30 years ago when we had decided to move house and we moved to Gainsborough Road, and thereby we were moving into the parish.

Your first impressions of St Margeret’s?

I suppose I knew the church, in terms of the building anyway, because it is one of the most prominent, one of the finest medieval churches in Ipswich and so was very pleased to be involved in it.

I wasn’t involved as the church architect straightaway but after a year or so there was a new vicar, John Mockford came in and he was a great person for drawing people in and getting you, well, forcing you to do things in the nicest possible way. I think the previous architect had retired or was retiring and he said would you like to be the church architect, and of course! It made perfect sense. Obviously that was very, very nice to be asked to look after such a prominent building.

I have a handful of larger churches that I look after. It’s not the only thing I do, it’s a small part, a minority of what I do but St Margaret’s is one of perhaps half a dozen that I look after, larger churches with relatively large congregations and there’s always lots to do. It’s extraordinary how many projects we’ve managed to achieve in those 30 years.

Do you have specialisms in your work?

Yes, my specialism has always been working on historic buildings of all sorts and all ages. We have diversified a lot; we do a lot of other things as well. But the core of our work is based on conversation and historic buildings but my own particular interest has not only been doing the repairs but also reordering and extending churches as well. It is usually very complex work and it is very challenging, particularly at St Margaret’s where you have a grade one listed building, so making any changes always tends to be slightly controversial.

Can you elaborate - we want to preserve but also fit for purpose?

You do a quinquennial inspection, which is a statutory duty, and we do that and we carry out repairs but it isn’t just about keeping it in good repair. The way churches have been used and the way people have worshipped in them has changed over the years.

St Margaret’s was built more or less in a single phase, about 1300. So it has been there about 700 years and when it was first built there wouldn’t have been any seats. Then there was a period in the 17th century when box pews appeared, and then they all got ripped out in the 19th century and pews got put in, but it reflected a style of worship. And the way the church is used now is very different to the way it was in the 19th century Of course then there is the whole question of disabled access which has only come to bear on these sorts of buildings in the last, 30 years or so.

What is involved in being the church architect?

You get to know the building, that’s the main thing, and you describe the building in great detail, say what condition it’s in and make recommendations for repairs which are costed and then prioritized. That forms the basis of the repair project and so on.

If it is somewhere like St Margaret’s, obviously, I worship there as well, and sing in the choir so I know lots of people and it becomes very personal. Not all the churches I look after obviously are anything like quite as special as St Margaret’s. In that sense, it’s quite unique. I’m in there every week, twice every week at least…

How is the approach that you take informed by your involvement in St Margaret’s compared to others?

I like to think I’ve been a bit of a catalyst trying to make these things work. And one of the things that I do particularly like doing is bringing an enthusiasm and positivity, which I suppose is in my character anyway.

There have definitely been certain decisions and changes which have been controversial, not everybody has really appreciated them but on the whole these things have been talked through and discussed.

What are some of the projects you’ve been involved in?

The first major project we did was the restoration project involving the ceiling paintings in the Nave which are quite remarkable and it all came about because the absolutely magnificent double hammer beam roof structure which is late 15th century has some sort of structural problems.

It is a type of construction which is inherently rather weak and tends to spread and push the walls over. So in roundabout 1802, , enormous twisted metal tie rods were threaded through from one side of the church to the other. They are full width, probably two inch square and then they are heated up and twisted. Then they must have drilled an enormous long hole maybe five foot long through the lower hammer beams on both sides and then lifted these things up and threaded them through, through the external masonry wall, through one side and through one hammer beam, right the way across the church and through the other hammer beam at the other end and then put tie plates on them and wound them up to hold the walls together.

Now the tie plates were built into the stone and flint walling and they started causing quite a lot of damage, because they were rusting and so on, and likely to fall apart and it was really that concern about the stability of the clerestory walls, the parapets and so on, and the masonry that I made the case that we really do need to go in there and intervene and actually remove all these rusting tie plates and repair it.

And while we’re at it we really ought to check the double hammer beam roof structure, so while we’re at it why don’t we restore the much later, late 17th century ceiling paintings, the baroque ceiling paintings which celebrate the restoration of the monarchy. They were executed in 1695, possibly drifting into 1696. So we applied to English Heritage and various other grant bodies and there was this combination of masonry repairs, making sure the structure was all in good order, we rebuilt most of the side parapets and inserted all sorts of additional ties but at the same time all the ceiling paintings were taken down and shipped over to, transported over to Bristol where the specialist conservators worked on them for months and months. Then we had new lighting which was designed to up light them so we could see them and it was tremendous.

It won me something called the King of Prussia’s Gold Medal, which is a national award for church conservation work. It is the national award for Church conservation work. We won that and we won a Museums and Gallery award for the painting conservation.

There have been lots of other minor repairs and the other big change was the extension which probably turned out to be the most expensive lavatory in Ipswich. It took 14 years from the first discussion and concept sketch to completion.

The problem of not having any loos in the church didn’t go away. The attitude towards disability and access to buildings were really becoming a major issue and I also had a personal experience of that with my father who later on in life had various minor strokes and he used to like coming to St Margaret’s to services and other events. He lived in Woodbridge and eventually because of his disabilities he couldn’t come any more because there wasn’t a loo.

We had admittedly had to do an extremely expensive archaeological excavation because the ground is rather higher on the north side of the church and there are a lot of burials there, so the whole thing had to be excavated out and all the burials recorded – there were burials going back to 1300 . All the full skeletons were taken away and stored somewhere, and eventually a specialist went and had a look at them and made some analysis about diseases and injuries.

At the time the archaeology cost over £20,000 and if you think that was 15 years ago – and we’re talking approximately 10% of the project was spent on archaeology.

But that was also a huge challenge coming up with the design and it always is with a small extension onto a large church.The design of the extension more or less imitates in scale and size the south porch which is really quite a lofty structure.Within the context of the church it is quite small, it’s one of the smaller elements, but nevertheless it’s two and a half storeys tall, it’s huge and got parapets and so on.

I took the perpendicular theme and simplified and slightly abstracted it into something of the same sort of idiom with a mixture of limestone and flint which you get all round the church, but a simplified modern version of it. For me it’s a building, I would say I’m proud of, and it’s an answer to a very complicated and difficult brief.

I have been on the DAC the Diocesan Advisory Committee for quite a few years so they’re the body that advises on repairs and alterations to all churches in Suffolk, through that I get to see dozens and dozens of these projects all going on. The DAC is one of the bodies that tries to help make that balance and try to prevent – on the one hand trying to encourage people to adapt and make good changes, positive changes, but not so much that we actually lose the character and essence of the buildings.

What was your involvement with this particular Heritage project?

There were concerns about the effect of the ringing of the bells and the the swaying of the tower. I stood on the tower roof while they were ringing the bells and it is quite a terrifying experience because the whole church tower, everything is waggling about underneath you and because you are standing up there and comparing the church which is moving to all the buildings around you, it’s the most extraordinary effect, you really do think the tower is moving backwards and forwards two or three inches. In reality the movement is very small, maybe half an inch.

So the thought was if we are going to put a new bell frame in, that means we can take the ringing floor down onto a gallery so that is visible in the church

What does the architecture mean when you worship?

They are buildings that are quite remarkable and if you pause for a moment and think about the effort it took to build them. You didn’t have scaffoldingonly wooden scaffolding, plus ropes and pulleys. The whole physical effort of building a church must have been enormous. You were building for the glory of God.

And being an architect I understand all that – you look at something and it means something to you – you know how it was put there, why it was put there, what they were trying to do, when they put the whole hammerbeam roof on there – they were showing off, their wealth

Being a churchgoer does help. There’s no question about it. So you understand the dynamics, you understand the balance, the tensions involved in it and so on. One understands why the churches need to adapt and how they need to adapt.

I hope that what we’ve done in my time at St Margaret’s over 30 years, will have prepared and adapted it, and made it more beautiful. I’ve been very lucky to have had the opportunity to be church architect.

1-07 end

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