



Aylesbury Methodist Church and Centre

by Peter Green

Built in 1893 to seat 710 souls Aylesbury Methodist Church in Buckingham Street has been described as Italianate in style with some Byzantine and Romanesque features. Dry rot in the 1950s resulted in a capacity reduction as the gallery, including choir stalls, was truncated and the organ re-sited downstairs. A 1980s project to 'make a 19th century church fit for the 21st century' provided an enlarged and glassed vestibule area giving good street visibility, renovation of the front stonework and windows, improved heating and lighting. A more flexible sanctuary area with improved seating reduced capacity further to the present 350.

When the church was built the Sunday School and mid-week activities had to be housed in their previous meeting place, incongruously sited behind a since demised pub and brewery. A separate hall at the back of the site was only added in the 1920s.

Other projects filled in the gap between church and hall so that by the 1980s these rear premises included an office, store rooms, kitchen, crèche, upstairs and downstairs toilets and three meeting rooms. With a long history of youth work, further outreach projects were undertaken so that by 2007, 30 groups were using the premises, two thirds of these being run by professional partners.

However, the buildings were looking shabby. So in 2003, the Church Council called for a 'bold and imaginative scheme' to modernise the back community centre premises. A steering group was appointed; user groups surveyed and needs identified. Concerns included people flow, access control, reception area, office and vestry location, kitchen, hall, disabled access, storage, decor, meeting room standards and building services. From this a design brief was produced. The agreed aim was 'to remodel,

refurbish, demolish and rebuild as appropriate, the rear church premises to create a modern building suitable for widespread use by the church, social bodies and charitable organisations within the Aylesbury Vale.'

The Methodist Church's Property office provided a list of eight suitable architects. Four responded and two were short-listed to give presentations to the Church Council. Site visits were arranged to inspect their work and talk to their existing clients. Church Council members then voted on their assessment of each firm against criteria. These included their experience, understanding of the needs, available resources and their ability to manage projects and contractors whilst delivering promises.

On a majority vote, the medium-sized architectural practice of Compton Lacey was selected and duly appointed. They assigned an architect to the project who conducted her own needs analysis by meeting users on site in order to validate the design brief. She then produced a scheme that sought to address the various issues. A quantity surveyor and a mechanical and electrical services (M&E) consultant were appointed to assist in the production of estimates. Other consultants

were subsequently appointed for, for instance, an asbestos survey and structural suitability. The resultant feasibility study was presented to the steering group and then to church members at a special meeting. The plans were approved in principle and afterwards, discussed with each of the user groups. This resulted in a few minor amendments and the Church Council approved the final design.

In June 2005 the architect's detailed design produced a 30% increase over initial estimates. By reworking the M & E work, forgoing some additional storage, retaining the original stairwell and making minor changes, the steering group reduced costs to the original level without compromising the design brief. This final amended scheme was discussed with and signed off by each user group and the Church Council. The quantity surveyor updated the schedule of works and along with the client-supplied furniture, fittings and audio-visual installation, confirmed the cost estimate of just over £1 million.

Meanwhile funding was being sought with a policy of two thirds from 'Methodist' money including half the total from the 240 church members. Having tried many other external sources of funding, in January 2008 a £325,000 Community Buildings grant was awarded by the Big Lottery Fund. Thus, with 95% of funding secured, Francis Construction was appointed as contractor after a similar selection process to the architects. Adhering strictly to a policy of 'no changes to final specification' and having the project secretary as the sole contact with architect and contractor, the project was completed on time and on budget in April 2009 after a July 2008 start. During the building phase, the flexible seating in the church enabled the re-housing of several mid-week activities >??





environmental savings. Including the church, minister's vestry and new foyer, the scheme now offers a suite of ten attractive town centre meeting venues for three people to 300. A policy of self-funding but not-for-profit keeps the rates at competitive but affordable levels for the charities and community groups they are aimed at.

The official opening was in July 2009 since when new bookings have enabled further outreach to people in need. These include Aylesbury's homeless, deaf and autistic people, those with learning difficulties or mental health, drug or alcohol problems. The new building is therefore helping the church to fulfil its mission and main purpose of the project, namely to serve God by serving others. ■



in the church itself, whilst other groups were helped to find alternative interim accommodation. With the building work completed, church services were held in the hall whilst the church itself was redecorated and re-carpeted.

A major benefit of the finished scheme is improved access. There is a platform lift, more disabled toilets and baby changing facilities with induction loops in the hall and main meeting rooms. Thanks to a new corridor and atrium, it is now possible to circulate around the centre without getting wet or traversing the hall. By removing corner storerooms in the hall, extending onto a flat roof and levelling an upstairs floor, there is now 30% more useable space. Moving the church office to the front provides improved visibility, safety and security. New heating, double glazing and improved insulation have also made

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