



Arts at St Mary's was a major cultural project for Ashford, to both refurbish one of the town's best loved historic landmarks and to boost the borough's arts offer.

Vision

For many years, St Mary the Virgin Church - mentioned in the Domesday book - has functioned as both a place of worship in the town centre and a community arts venue, hosting performances each year from local and international artists.

The church recently carried out substantial refurbishment work to the building's ancient fabric, to sympathetically expand its use as an arts venue, while maintaining its function as a place of worship.

How did you start?

Taking inspiration from Union Chapel in Islington and St George's Church in Brighton, the church was 'reordered' to create a more flexible space for religious sermons and ceremonies, as well as music, drama, and arts events.

What was the total cost of the project and how did you raise the funds?

The total project cost was £1.7m. The project was awarded European Union funding, through the Green Renovation Cluster programme (Greenov), to install a rainwater harvesting system and a ground source heat pump which will substantially reduce the building's energy consumption and carbon emissions. The £1.7m project was awarded £1.2m of Growth Area Funding by the Ashford's Future.





Who were the project partners?

Arts at St Mary's is promoted and supported by the church congregation, Ashford Borough Council, the Parochial Church Council, The Bishop of Dover, Town Centre Partnership and statutory agencies such as the DAC, English Heritage, Arts Council England, and Historic Churches Trust.



What were the outcomes?

The capital works, commissioned by the PCC and project managed by Ashford Borough Council, has created an upgraded, well-appointed, flexible multi-use space that includes the following features:

- A flexible auditorium space in the nave of the church, with □ improved sightlines, increased seating capacity and with the capability of being reconfigured to host small and large-scale events for up to 350 people.
- Improved dias and staging facilities, including provision of suitable, high quality lighting, sound and projection systems.
- A space for arrival and circulation of audiences and the church congregation through reconfiguring the present foyer.
- Additional toilets, kitchen and bar facilities proportionate with the new capacity and functions of the venue, and with the expectations of paying audiences.
- 'Backstage' washing and dressing room facilities suitable for professional performers and clergy alike.
- Flexible office and meeting room spaces.
- Upgraded heating and lighting systems creating a comfortable and quality showing space.

Successes:

On the morning of 7th October 2010, the Bishop of Dover, the Rt Rev'd Trevor Willmott, convened a Blessing of The Works Ceremony at the Church. The occasion was the launch of the reordering works.





It was an event that culminated five years of development work to provide an upgraded, well-appointed, flexible multi-use space and shared space in the body of the nave, suitable for hosting a wide range of religious, arts and community programming.

The Blessing of the Works demonstrated the seriousness, with which the arts are now taken, in Ashford, as a vital element to transform its 'image' and cultural life, at a crucial and appropriate moment in the town's growth.

It took for granted an all-embracing concept that the church has served as a hub for religious, communal and cultural life in Ashford for many centuries.

Any future plans for the building?

The St Mary's Arts Trust was formed to develop a quality artistic programme and manage arts use of the town's newest and most exciting community space.

Ashford is now enjoying the third season of the 'Revelation' arts programming, with more to be announced shortly. 'Revelation' is a series of quality events to boost the borough's arts offer and celebrate the completed refurbishment of the church – one of Ashford's best loved historical landmarks.

Full details of the restoration work and future performances at St Mary's Church can be found at <http://www.revelationstmarys.co.uk/>

