



St Hilda's, on the Headland at Hartlepool, is believed to stand on the site of the monastery of which St Hilda was Abbess from 648 to 657 AD.

Though it contains some Norman features, the present building dates essentially from the 13th century - the nave of six bays is particularly impressive.

The extreme east and west ends of the building were modified considerably during an extensive programme of restoration carried out between 1924 and 1931.

Introduction

From about 1982 thoughts had been turning as to how the large space at the west end of the church might best be used. The next Rector commissioned research into an Interpretative and Visitor Scheme for the church and as the result of his vision a servery and toilet were installed.

These were all that the finances of the time permitted but were most welcome additions to the church and its life. Nevertheless, some members of our church visited a series of other churches in the region where re-ordering/re-development had taken place, in order to gain ideas as to how St Hilda's might be developed further. This helped considerably in shaping our thinking.

How did you start?

Early this millennium the Borough Council, as part of its plan for the regeneration of the Headland, began to explore the possibility of creating a Visitor Centre. Eventually it was decided that the Visitor Centre could be housed within the church itself, in a way which would not detract from its main function as a place of worship.

In May 2002 a joint Steering Group, consisting of representatives from Hartlepool Borough Council, North Hartlepool Partnership and the church and the church's architect was set up. The broad scheme that evolved was:

- The main entrance to the church to be through the north and south doors of the tower and then via the Galilee Chapel through the internal west door, where a ramp allowing disabled access would be





installed - impossible at the previously-used south porch. [There is now disabled access to the whole of the church, apart from the south porch.]

- One of the toilets in the Galilee Chapel to be specifically fitted for disabled use.
- The Rood Screen to be moved from the west end of the chancel to the west end of the nave to create a social or visitor welcome area, with enlarged servery.
- A “story box” and series of triptychs round the walls of the church - some with interactive computer displays - to provide visitors with information on the church and history of the community.

[These are closed during services and the lights switched off, leaving only the central image visible. The letters Alpha and Omega, derived from the C7th namestone, then feature on the closed doors.]

- Pews to be removed from the north and south aisles to give visitor access to these features. Folding, stackable chairs to be purchased to maintain the seating capacity of the nave, when needed.
- An audio tour to be available.
- The St Nicholas’ Chapel, on the south side of the chancel, to become a Pilgrim Chapel, for prayer and personal devotion.
- A new altar to be introduced at the west end of the chancel and the large area at the east end of the nave in front of it to be paved in stone for use with activities, presentations or concerts.
- Additional lighting to be installed to highlight architectural features of the church and to provide flexible illumination within the church.

Who were your main partners in developing and implementing this project?

Hartlepool Borough Council, North Hartlepool Partnership and the Regional Development Agency One North East

What was the total cost of the project?

Approximately £500,000

How did you raise the funds?

All but £35,000 (the church’s contribution in respect of the liturgical elements) was provided by regeneration funding from One North East, accessed through Hartlepool Borough Council and North Hartlepool Partnership.





How long did it take from start to finish - from initial proposal to the scheme being completed and opened?

Some four years - the Visitor Project, as it was known, was opened shortly after Easter in 2004. The church remained open for worship throughout this time.

Completion of and refinements to the electrical work continued after this - the result complements the scheme of work splendidly.

What lessons were learnt? What would you have done differently?

- The necessity for all parties to work really closely together. Contractors need consistent and rigorous supervision by a designated clerk of works if delays and errors are to be avoided.
- It became evident fairly soon that because the Pilgrim Chapel was part of the visitor route round the church, its envisaged use for personal devotion was difficult. Before services, however, it serves this purpose very effectively.



New entrance to Galilee Chapel

Successes :

- Visitors appear happy to come to the church and our volunteer welcomers find it a pleasure to talk with and offer refreshments to them.
- The project continues to attract much positive comment from visitors in general; more specifically, delegates attending a national DAC conference nearby in 2008 visited the church and several enquiries followed.





- The open area at the east end of the nave is proving an ideal space for choirs, instrumentalists at concerts, or small drama presentations.
- The open aisles have enabled us to accommodate twelve or more Christmas trees at what has become an annual Christmas Tree Festival at which each is sponsored and decorated by a local organisation. The Headland and Central Estate Community Carol Service, with which the event opens, is always very well attended.
- The bays between the columns in the nave were recently cleared of pews and used as activity areas during a deanery Praise Party. The space available was a revelation!
- Monthly coffee mornings both attract members of the local community (who might not otherwise come to the church) and make a welcome contribution to our income.

Has there been an increase in numbers entering the church?

Yes - visitors come to the church and Visitor Centre from a wide area of the country at advertised opening - and other - times.

We also receive frequent bookings from organisations and schools, some of whom have their own services in the church, especially at Christmas and Easter, or use it as a source of information in following their curriculum of study.

To what degree has this project contributed to the sustainability of the building itself?

- Individual visitors and visiting parties often leave generous donations which help directly towards running costs.
- Awareness and appreciation of the building among the community have been improved.
- The involvement of the Borough Council in the project has provided further opportunities for making the church known throughout the area. As part of the project they have helped us to produce and to distribute leaflets to Tourist Information Offices, museums etc. over a wider area.

Has there been an increase in income?

Yes, arising from the now regular coffee mornings, visitor donations, sale of souvenirs and refreshments.

What management structures are in place for the running of the building?

- A Visitor Organiser arranges cover by the volunteer welcomers for the regular opening times. and booked visits.
- Bookings are taken by the PCC Secretary.





- Volunteer guides often help with group visits, for which refreshments (light lunches & teas) can be provided by the Social Team.

Sustainability of the Project: how are you looking to sustain what you have achieved in the long term?

By continued publicity and looking at further ways of making use of the available space.

Any future plans for the building?

There is need for a more satisfactory area for prayer and personal devotion.

Also a larger area (than the south porch) to accommodate the Junior Church for their own activities during service time is planned.

To find out more visit the St Hilda's website at: <http://www.hartlepool-sthilda.org.uk/>

