

**N.B.** This case study considers only one possible approach, which will not be suitable for every church. Always seek professional advice.

## Key Points

- St Aidan’s church in Carlisle was heavily flooded during the Storm Desmond related floods of 2015.
- Like much of the surrounding community it was significantly damaged and underwent a significant restoration process before reopening exactly a year later in December 2016 becoming a symbol for a community still rebuilding after such a significant climate disaster.
- Changes were made to the interior of the building that allow for future flooding to be more effectively managed, including changes to seating, flooring and decoration.



**1** The exterior of St Aidan’s, a Victorian church on the eastern edge of the city.

**2** Flooded residents are helped out of the floods by emergency services.

**3** The interior of St Aidan’s after reopening a year after the flood.

### The context

In 2005 Carlisle was the site of a significant flood that led to widescale investment by the Environment Agency, building extensive flood defences throughout areas of the city and the three watercourse present. However, in 2015 Carlisle was hit by the worst flood to affect that area in 600 years as a result of record breaking rainfall brought about by Storm Desmond. Approximately 7,500 homes were flooded affecting 15,000 people. This kind of flooding, as a result of high density rainfall is likely to become more common throughout the next 30 years, with urban areas being the most vulnerable due to limited drainage capabilities. Among this destruction St Aidan’s church was also affected, with widespread destruction and damage to the interior of the church building.

For more information, visit the [church’s website](#) or its entry on the [Church Heritage Record](#).

### Previous Level of Preparation

- Following the flood in 2005 that impacted St Aidan’s for a relatively short time only, the church was not well equipped to face another flood. Fixed pews and minimal storage options above ground level meant that most items and paperwork were vulnerable to water damage.
- Since 2005 was a flood that began from the river, it was thought by the community that future flood risk would be largely mitigated by the additional flood defences built by the Environment Agency, however these did little to protect the area from the consequences of intense rainfall.
- The church sits lower than much of it’s surrounding environment, increasing its exposure to flood risk.

### **What was the role of the church during and following the event?**

The church and entire local community, including many congregation members were all flooded for a significant amount of time as the water was held in by the flood barriers designed to keep it out. That meant that all the items including pews, paperwork, books, and fabrics were left in the water for a number of days and completely destroyed. The only thing that survived was the nativity scene, which was reinstated the next year.

The church became a centre point for the community following the storm as a point for people to rally around. Large numbers of volunteers from the local community and further abroad came to help with the clear up, helping to lift pews and sweep water out of the building. The local Churches Together group and Salvation Army used the car park and area around the building as a hub, placing a caravan where they provided food and drinks to the community and distributed aid.

The reopening of the church was hugely significant for the community, the Archbishop of Canterbury attended to bless the church and the area. It became a focal point of celebration and resulted in many reconnecting with the church and still now continuing using it as a place of memorial for all that was lost in the flood.

### **How has the church become more resilient for the future?**

In restoring the church, the PCC and church wardens at St Aidan's made the decision to change tack from the 2005 response, where the church was restored like for like, and make significant changes to increase both the usability for the community and resilience of the building to future flood events:

- The most significant major change was the removal of the pews in exchange for stackable and movable modern chairs. This not only provided a more flexible environment that has opened the space up for community groups but chairs are easily moved and raised out of potential floodwater
- The moved files and paperwork to digital, massively reducing the potential impact of flooding to the churches record keeping, as well as limited space requirements giving more available room to store valuable fabrics in the event of a future flood.

### **How was the recovery funded?**

As with many other churches impacted by large, damaging one off events insurance was able to cover the cost of the renovation. This covered the significant cost of draining and drying out the church before also:

- Removing water damaged items and replacing them.
- Replastering, plumbing, and rewiring.
- Restoring the organ blower (approximately £60,000).

### **What could others learn from this case study?**

1. Be reassured that if an unexpected, extreme weather event heavily impacts an insured church building, the restoration costs will be covered.
2. When building back consider the possibility of repeat events and potential ways of mitigating that danger, including stackable chairs and digital paperwork.
3. Be aware of the role of the church within the wider community, even among those who do not regularly (or ever) attend as an important symbol of normality and resistance against the disaster.

*“Make a plan. Because I've been through it twice in my head. I know what we'll do. If you've never been through it, you maybe need to talk to somebody that has”*

PCC Member, St Aidan's