

## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance



St Nicholas Church, Stevenage (SG1 4DA, National Grid Reference: TL 24074 26207) is Grade 1 listed (since 1948). It forms a group with 'Moonhill' and 'Dominic Cottage'; adjacent buildings on the south side, that are both Grade II listed. St Nicholas' Church is located in the St Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area, which was first designated in July 1982. The boundary was amended in 1984. A St Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document was adopted in July 2012.

An independent, detailed review of the heritage of St Nicholas, has been commissioned (O'Callaghan and Coulter, Artemis Heritage Partnership, March 2018, ref 1) to help assess the significance of the building. A copy is appended to this document.

The church is in a beautiful location, surrounded by a glorious wooded graveyard (now closed) with footpaths leading through the graveyard to open countryside beyond.



It is thought that a Saxon church was built on the hilltop site around 1066, next to the Manor House, this was replaced by a **12<sup>th</sup> Century** Norman church around 1100 A.D. The only remaining part of the Norman church is the thick-walled 52ft Romanesque flint tower which supports a lead-covered spire, which rises a further 50 feet into the air; the spire was added around 1500.

Over the centuries the church has changed greatly as each generation has left its mark on the building, they have adapted and developed it to serve the purposes of worshipping God and preaching the Gospel in their own day.

In the **13<sup>th</sup> Century** the church consisted of an aisled nave and chancel. There may have been a chapel on the south side of the chancel, but not on the north.

In the third quarter of the **14<sup>th</sup> Century** the church underwent a substantial rebuilding programme. This included the wooden tower stairs and the building of the chapels flanking the chancel and the sanctuary. This work probably included the first set of screens comprising the main chancel screen, the western parclose screens and the screen now in the Stevenage Museum.

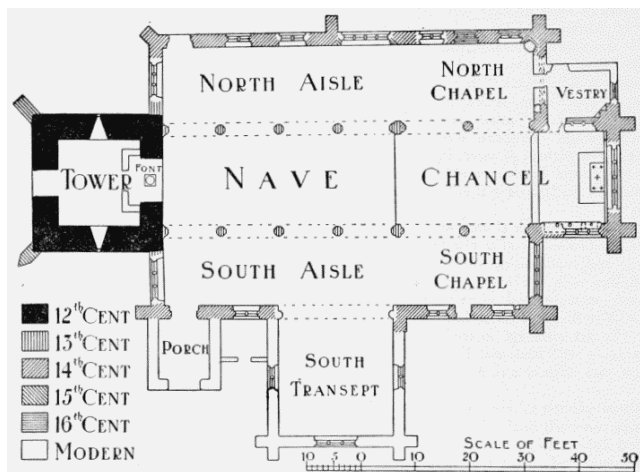
## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance

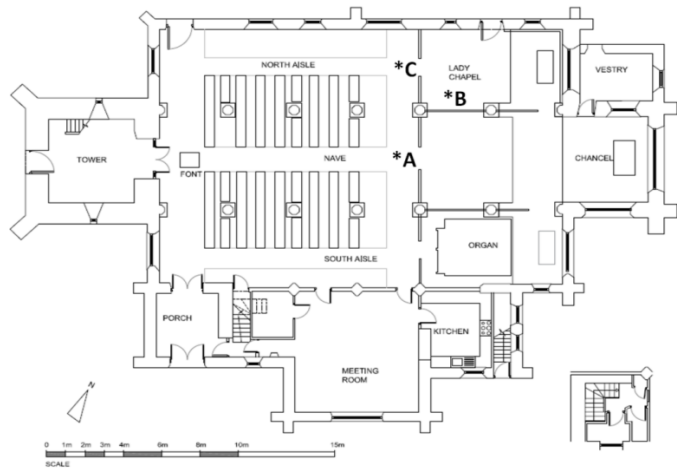
The choir stalls with misericord seats probably date to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, though it is not certain whether they were created for the church or imported into St Nicholas at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In the middle of the **15<sup>th</sup> Century** the church underwent a scheme of very extensive modifications. This included; the arches of the nave arcade, the clerestory, the insertion of large windows (e.g. those immediately west of the screens), the roof, font cover, and the second set of screens (the present south chapel screen and two eastern parclose screens) and the tracery preserved in the choir desk frontals.

In the **16<sup>th</sup> Century** the choir stalls were modified (Green Man misericord, and top rail added) and the tracery now forming part of the priest's chair was carved. This may have been carried out following the acquisition of the stalls in an imperfect state following the Dissolution.



Layout in 1912<sup>2</sup>



Layout in 2017

The building was extensively re-developed in the **19<sup>th</sup> Century** (1841-2), again in the early **20<sup>th</sup> Century** (1913-15) and to a lesser extent in 1960-65 and 1977, with other changes occurring as necessary in between. A detailed timeline of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century changes is shown in the table at the end of this statement.

In the **21<sup>st</sup> Century** the church has been redecorated and some items of furniture, such as the pulpit and choir pews, removed to provide a more flexible space in front of the wooden screens. A large roll-away projection screen sits above the centre of the chancel which is practically invisible when stowed away and drops down at the touch of a button; its use is now integral to worship services. The church has carefully sought to retain the historical feel of the building for more traditional worship, whilst introducing new technology to help teach the Gospel and lead worship in a more modern format. These contemporary methods for conducting services and communicating with the congregation are appreciated by all ages and by newcomers in the growing congregation.

The church is full of history and historical artefacts. These include the bowl of the ancient font (13<sup>th</sup> C), the grave slab of one of the early rectors (early 14<sup>th</sup> C), which lies in front of the mediaeval wooden screen and which, with the six carved misericords in the choir area, dates from the late 14<sup>th</sup>/early 15<sup>th</sup> century. One particular highlight is the collection of mediaeval graffiti carved onto a number of pillars around the church.

Other notable parts of the church include one of the oldest staircases in Hertfordshire in the tower (dendro-dated to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century), some beautiful examples of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century stained glass windows and a recently renovated and restored Forster and Andrews organ, built in 1884. The reredos designed by Sir Charles Nicholson and installed in 1915 is appreciated by many members of the church. Nicholson also designed an altar frontal which is still in regular use.

## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance

A full Record of the Church Furnishings was created by the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies<sup>3</sup> in 2009 and in February 2013 Dr Charles Tracy FSA reviewed the age and likely provenance of the wooden screens, and choir stalls with misericords<sup>4</sup>.

The main body of the church has three aisles and is divided into an east and west section by wooden screens, which Charles Tracey describes as a *'distinguished and medieval arrangement, dividing off the former Lady Chapel to the north and the Holy Trinity Chapel to the south.'* This arrangement was put in place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1913), using screens that originate from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The main central chancel screen was re-discovered in a tithe barn *circa*1840 and returned to the church for use as a reredos, before being moved to its current, probably original position in 1913. It has undergone significant repair and may have been adapted to fit. As part of the developments started in 1841 the chancel floor was lowered by 2ft and then again by 1ft as part of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century developments. The height of the screens has been adjusted to enable them to fit their current positions. The lower dado section of the main chancel screen is entirely 20<sup>th</sup> Century in origin. Each of the screens have moved around the church and served different roles within it over the last five centuries, including the main chancel screen which was outside of the church for possibly 200 years.

The nave is fitted with Robert Thompson oak pews dating from 1964. To the south of the Choir the renovated organ is now located in what used to be the Trinity Chapel, and to the north is the Lady Chapel. The chancel lies beyond the choir and contains the main communion table, flanked by a small vestry on the north side and on the south side by a double Piscina and 3 Sedilia re-discovered and restored in 1841.



### **Assessment of Significance.**

Using guidance suggested by Historic England, O'Callaghan and Coulter (Artemis Heritage Partnership, March 2018<sup>1</sup>) have systematically evaluated the significance of the heritage within St Nicholas church:

### **St Nicholas is a Grade 1 listed building.**

Taken as a whole this is recognition that the heritage of St Nicholas church building is of **national significance**.

## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance

#### **The medieval building**

The church is substantially a medieval building, with fabric dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. All of this is of **high significance**.

#### **The wooden screens**

The surviving medieval screens at the entrance to the chancel, the Trinity chapel and parclose screens between the chancel and the two flanking chapels are important survivors from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century and thus of **high significance**. There is ample evidence, both documentary and physical, that they have all been moved at different periods and to varying degrees. This is part of their history and does not diminish their significance.

#### **Other furniture and fittings**

The church possesses a number of significant medieval furniture and fittings, sometimes incorporated into later features. All of these are of either **high** or **moderate-high significance** (see main text of reference 1 for detail). The choir stalls can be associated with the church at least as far back as the sixteenth century. Nicholson's desks incorporate material that is contemporary with some of the parclose screens, and a Victorian chair incorporates late medieval carving that can be linked to one of the misericords.

#### **Monuments and floor**

The church has a modest collection of monuments of varying significance. Few if any seem to be in their original location as we know that the floor has been re-laid and most of the floor slabs align with the, now removed, nineteenth-century pew platforms.

#### **Nineteenth-century restorations**

Although there were substantial interventions in the fabric of the building in the nineteenth century, little, of any heritage significance survives, beyond some stained-glass windows and the stump of the south transept.

#### **Nicholson's restoration**

Nicholson's early twentieth-century restoration of the church had a major impact on the spaces within the building. Anson (1960) describes him as *"... the really representative Anglican architect of the present century. He designed furnishings that were both traditional and refined."* *"A typical Charles Nicholson interior reflects the spirit of the Caroline Divines. Both Archbishop Laud and Bishop Andrews would feel quite at home in them."* At Stevenage he created a new south aisle, incorporating the Victorian transept and replacing the south aisle wall with a new arcade. He restored the chancel screen and returned it to its original location. However, budgetary constraints and the outbreak of war meant that his scheme was not fully implemented. Subsequent incremental changes have diminished the significance of Nicholson's legacy: the filling in of his arcade; removal of much of his chancel furniture; and the re-location of the organ. On balance his contribution here is of **moderate significance**.

#### **Conclusion**

St Nicholas has undergone a lot of change since the Norman church was built nearly 1000 years ago. It has a long history of change; each generation has kept it in good repair and developed the building to meet the needs of the worshipping community, radical redevelopments have often occurred at intervals of 75 to 100yrs. As a consequence, the building is a rich heritage of artefacts ranging from the 12th century tower, 14th and 15th century screens and stairs through to the 20th century reredos and pews. The history of St Nicholas church building is one of adaptation and development over many centuries, to meet the needs of Christians worshipping God in Stevenage.

Revd. David Brown, Mr Nigel Brown and Mr Stephen Bamford  
Rector and Churchwardens, St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance

#### References:

1. *"St Nicholas Church, Stevenage. Assessment of Heritage Significance"*  
Brian O'Callaghan PhD and Diana Coulter MA, Artemis Heritage Partnership, March 2018
2. *"Parishes: Stevenage', A History of the County of Hertford:"*  
Volume 3, ed. William Page VCH (London, 1912), pp. 139-148.  
British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol3/pp139-148> [accessed 25 September 2017].
3. *"Record of Church Furnishings, St Nicholas, Stevenage, Hertfordshire."* 2009  
The National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts
4. *"St Nicholas, Stevenage, Hertfordshire. A significance assessment of the historic timber furnishings."*  
1<sup>st</sup> February 2013. Charles Tracy B.A. Ph.D. FSA
5. *"The Restorations of the Parish Church (St. Nicholas) Stevenage."* April 1933  
Author un-known, copy attached

#### Timeline of changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries:

Constructed using the NADFAS, an article written in 1933<sup>5</sup> and a description in the Victoria Country History<sup>2</sup> published in 1912. The VCH includes a plan of the church, which predates extensive changes initiated in 1913.

Date	Description
1824	Stone effigy: found upside down being used as a step in S Aisle
1836	Barrel and finger organ installed on <i>Quire</i> gallery at W end of the Nave
1841	Oak panelling, plaster and brick removed from chancel/sanctuary, revealing windows on N & S side; a door on the N side and Piscina & Sedilia on South.
	Floor of Chancel (up to Communion precincts) lowered nearly 1 foot.
	Piscina (alcoves in Sanctuary) plaster stripped and restored
	Sedilia (alcove seats in Sanctuary) plaster stripped and restored
	Old and dilapidated Communion rails replaced with Gothic ones, which were in turn replaced in 1939.
	<b>Parclose screens:</b> Trinity chapel. Mid/late 15C. In 1841 the old screens lowered two feet to 'the present and apparently original position'.
	<b>Parclose screens:</b> Lady Chapel, Mid/late 15C. Installation 1841 by analogy with Parclose screens around Trinity chapel.
	<b>Chancel screen:</b> 15C Canon Bloomfield (1834-74) discovered the screen in a tithe barn about 1840. He carefully pieced it together and placed it as a reredos.
	Old pews removed, new ones erected on uniform plan
	South Transept built
	Baptistery altered; font relocated to beneath the Western arch of the Nave.
	Plain Grecian east window removed, replaced by Tudor Gothic one
1842	Stained glass put in to east window
1871	<i>Quire</i> gallery at W end of Nave demolished, organ moved to N Chancel
1884	New Forster & Andrews organ installed facing N in the most eastern bay of the North/Trinity chapel

## St Nicholas Church, Stevenage

### Statement of Significance

Date	Description
1913	Church is damp, especially N Aisle. Wood floors under pews are rotten.
	Extension to South transept built, including boiler house.
1914	Chancel Floor lowered
	Deal pews removed, chairs provided
	New Floor, wooden blocks on concrete
	New Heating Apparatus in boiler house
	Chancel screen (*A) placed in its current position. After restoration the screen was put back in its original position as a memorial to Revd Bloomfield. Part of it is in Stevenage Museum
	Tower arch opened
	Three blocked windows opened
1915	Oak Doors in place of deal.
	Reredos designed by Sir Charles Nicholson installed
	Organ moved into S transept extension.
1939	Current altar rails, replaced 1841 Gothic ones.
1960	Formation of a Lady Chapel on the N side of the main chancel, including pews instead of the existing chairs; altar rails, altar cross and candlesticks, statue of the Lady of the Isles in an existing niche in the NE corner.
1961	Parclose screen: Lady Chapel, west side. 1961 as part of the refurbishment of the Lady Chapel in 1960
1964	Oak Pews installed in nave, designed and made by Robert Thompson
1979	Parish room formed by enclosing the arcade between the S aisle and S transept. Including a servery between S transept and S porch. Provision of toilets at 1st floor level
1984	New heating system
1996-2002	Main outer doors added, original doors re-located to base of the tower, inner glass doors added to south porch
2002-2016	Removal of choir pews, pulpit, reading desk. Relocation of organ, building of new kitchen and accessible ground floor toilet and installation of new sound system.