

Pews back in pride of place after plastic seat 'horror'

By John Bingham
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AFTER years of being ripped out of churches in favour of more manoeuvrable plastic seats, traditional pews are set to make a comeback.

Officials at English Heritage, a guardian of the country's historic buildings, have given their blessing to a new design of lightweight "stackable" pews which traditionalists hope will finally drive "doctor's waiting room" chairs out of historic naves.

Hundreds of parishes have opted to sell off Victorian wooden seating in recent years to open up churches for new uses.

Faced with dwindling attendances on Sundays and a desire to attract new worshippers, the Church of England is in the midst of a drive to open up historic buildings for new uses such as concerts, plays or children's playgroups.

But the plans have divided parishes, with many worshippers infuriated at attempts to take out traditional pews to make room for seating that can be more easily moved around.

Last year parishioners in one 12th century church began a campaign to oust their vicar because of plans to remove pews, which they said would be its "ruination".

Supporters of controversial "reordering" schemes point out that medieval churches did not originally have fixed seating.

But opponents say some of the modern chairs which have often taken their place destroy the historic atmosphere.

English Heritage has stepped in with a solution which could unite warring parishes.

In guidelines published last month, the agency has given its backing to the introduction of portable pews.

Church of England guidance now also encourages the use of portable pews where

possible. Luke Hughes, a furniture designer who came up with the idea of a stacking pew 12 years ago, said the official approval represented a breakthrough.

Mr Hughes, a cabinet maker who has refitted a string of cathedrals and historic churches in recent years, describes the result of some reordering schemes as "horrors".

He singles out for particular criticism the fashion for "electric blue tweed coverings".

"The truth of the matter is that church chairs are diminishing some of the greatest architectural designs of all time," he said.

"I studied architectural history and I couldn't bear what was happening to a lot of those church interiors."

In just over a decade he has installed his stackable pews in approximately 90 churches – almost half of them within the past three or four years.

He jokingly estimates that this has saved the Church from 2,000 plastic chairs in that time.

A number of other companies also design and sell traditional style pews which can be removed for modern purposes.

"It gives churches a flexible approach which doesn't interfere with the architecture but allows the community use which they have always longed for, and enables them to reintegrate the church as part of the community whether or not they worship there," he said.

Local church authorities have recently got behind the shift, encouraging parishes to consider pews rather than chairs.

"We are getting a lot of referrals from the dioceses saying you don't have to just rip out the pews and put in horrible chairs, there is an alternative," said Mr Hughes.

"They want to make the place feel like a church, not like a motorway service café," he added.