

## Diocese of Oxford Statement of Significance Guidance

### Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is intended for any PCC or project group considering development works to their church building. Examples of such projects include:

- installation of WC and/or kitchen facilities
- creation of meeting space
- changes to seating and/or internal layouts
- liturgical reordering
- provision of community services and/or space shared with other organisations eg village hall, foodbank, children's services, partnering with another denomination etc, where this will require changes to the church building.
- National Lottery Heritage Fund supported schemes, or projects seeking grant support from similar bodies
- applicants to the Diocesan Development Fund

### Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to help you research and write a well-researched, objective Statement of Significance to inform and guide your building project.

### When is a Statement of Significance necessary?

You must produce a Statement of Significance for any project that includes changes to a historic church building that may potentially affect its character.

### What is the purpose of the Statement of Significance?

The Statement of Significance is a record and evaluation of your church building that seeks to identify the relative importance of its architecture, features, fixtures, and fittings. It should be produced early on in the project, as the information it contains is vital for architects and other professionals drafting building options. As part of your faculty submission the Statement of Significance will help the DAC and other statutory consultees understand your building, and any constraints it places on your project. Properly written, you will be able to use the same Statement of Significance for multiple faculty applications, simply updating the relevant parts of the document as the building or fittings change.

## How detailed should my Statement of Significance be?

Generally speaking, the larger and/or more complex your historic church building is, the more detailed your Statement of Significance should be. As part of the project planning and faculty process it will be used by lots of people who do not necessarily know anything about your church, so be as clear and comprehensive as possible.

For simpler projects only affecting small areas of your church building you can follow the Churchcare [template](#) - this is also provided within the [online faculty system](#). For larger projects and more complex buildings this template will not be adequate; you should refer instead to the Historic England guidance [Conservation Principles](#). Pages 27-31 explain the different elements of significance or value; pages 35-40 how to assess heritage significance.

## Who can help me?

The diocesan **Church Buildings Team** can help you explore the specific requirements of the statement for your case. Professional **heritage consultants** can review and edit a statement you have written, or draft one for you from scratch. Local **historians** or **your local history/architectural society** may be able to provide volunteer time for recording the building or conducting documentary research.

## Part one: Researching your church building

### Purpose

The purpose of this documentary research is to establish a rough timeline for the evolution of your church building, to identify (where possible) architects and craftspeople of note who have worked on the building, and to help inform you which elements of the church other writers consider important, and why.

### Sources

The easiest place to begin your documentary research on the church is by reading what historians call **secondary sources** - chiefly scholarly books and articles produced by other researchers. Here are some key secondary sources:

- The **Victoria County History** for your civil parish (available [online](#) - use the search function to find your parish). Sometimes these include plans of the church, but note that many entries were written prior to WW2 and your church may have changed considerably since then.
- **Pevsner Architectural Guides** are available from any good bookshop; make sure you use the latest edition as these are generally more reliable than the originals.
- **Historic England listing text** available [online](#). These can contain errors but are a good starting point and often refer to other sources.
- [Heritage Gateway](#) searches several Historic England and county level databases to provide records of archaeological investigations, historic images, and listing texts.

Once you have put together a basic picture of the evolution of the building from the secondary sources, it is helpful to refer back to **primary sources** produced at the time - for example plans and correspondence produced by architects, photographs, and historic mapping. Here are some key things to look for:

- Historic maps can show you roughly when extensions were added to the church and churchyard, or even in some cases when it was built. The [National Library of Scotland](#) has searchable online Ordnance Survey mapping.
- Some subscription services, such as [ancestry.co.uk](#), have digitised tithe maps available. Hard copies can be inspected without charge at your county archive.
- Historic images are very helpful to show how your church has changed over time. Try the [Historic England Archive](#), and look in the church (particularly the vestry) for old paintings and photographs.
- [Lambeth Palace Library](#) has the original plans for many 19th century church buildings and church restorations, including seating plans.
- The [Oxfordshire county archive](#) holds the diocesan archive, which will include parish correspondence and surviving faculty documents for work to the building. In some cases these date back to the 18th century. Any similar documentation archived by your parish will be in your [county archive](#).
- The [British Newspaper Archive](#) is an excellent source for accounts of 19th century church openings and restorations, with journalists often listing minute details of the works including contractors, donors, and build costs. Access is pay to view or subscription based; alternatively you can find copies of historic newspapers at your local archives.

## Principles

- 1. Follow the footnotes** - look up references given in secondary sources to lead you back to original documents. Not only will this make your research easier, but it will also allow you to fact check the conclusions those secondary sources come to.
- 2. Be critical** - do not assume that what you are reading in your sources is true. Unintended errors are fairly common, and writers are sometimes biased. Cross reference against other sources - the more the better. Keep in mind the purpose for which the source was originally produced, and the limitations it has.
- 3. Provide references** for the sources you use, so that the reader can follow them up if they wish. Include a URL (web link) for any sources published or catalogued online.

## Part two: Recording your church building

### Purpose

To describe the layout, key features, and character of your historic church building. This will be the bulk of your Statement of Significance.

### Resources

NADFAS, also known as [The Arts Society](#), may have already produced a detailed record of your church building. If so, you can refer to this and reuse its content in your description of the building. Your contents register and terrier should also contain descriptions of fixtures and fittings that you can use.

If you are unfamiliar with architectural terminology you'll find it helpful to have a guide to refer to. There are many guides to architecture available online, or as books to purchase. Here are a few suggestions:

- The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture (3rd edition, 2016) ISBN 9780199674992
- How to Read a Church by Dr Richard Taylor (2003) ISBN 9781844130535
- A Visual Dictionary of Architecture by Francis D.K. Ching (2nd edition, 2011) ISBN 9780470648858
- Historic English Churches by Geoffrey R Sharpe (2020) ISBN 9781350216303

## Method

When describing the building or its parts, be as brief as you can whilst conveying the necessary information. Knowing where to start with this description can be difficult, especially with large and complex buildings. It is simplest to break it down into four key elements:

- **Overview:** what are the main parts of the structure?
- **Materials:** what is it built from?
- **Evolution:** how has it changed over time?
- **Features:** what are its most important elements?

What this means is that we start with a broad description to set the scene and orient the reader, before gradually adding more detail. Photographs are very helpful - use as many as you need to, and make sure they either have captions or references in the text so that the reader can understand what they are seeing. When giving dates try to be as precise as possible; where dates have come from documentary evidence include a footnote, so that the reader can see which one. If any features or structures are associated with a known architect, builder, or other artisan, remember to name them.

## Sections

### 1. The setting of the building

Start by describing the setting of the building. For most churches, this will be the churchyard. Following the overview-materials-evolution-features framework, consider these questions:

- what character does the setting have? Is it rural or urban? Managed for wildlife? Open, with long views to a village or other properties, or private and secluded?
- are there any separately listed structures or tombs? Check the [listing database](#) if you are unsure.
- how long have burials taken place on the site?
- how large is the churchyard?
- has it ever been extended? If so, when?
- what kind of planting or tree cover does it have?
- what are the boundary walls or fences, and how old are they?
- are there any distinct areas - for example areas with groups of older headstones, or areas for cremated remains?
- are there any war graves? Check the [CWGC database](#) if you are unsure.

## 2. External elevations of the building

Now move on to a description of the exterior of the building, broken down into its four elevations (for almost all churches these will face the chief points of the compass: north, south, east, and west), again following the overview-materials-evolution-features framework. Consider these questions:

- what parts of the structure are visible?
- do these visible parts have any defining characteristics, such as being of a particular architectural style, or of particularly unusual proportions?
- what are their materials? Start with the roofs and work your way down.
- how has this part of the building changed over time? Are there any visible scars or changes in the masonry indicating where structures have been lost or altered - for example blocked doors or windows? Is it an evolved part of the building, or was it erected all at once in a single building phase?
- what are the stand-out features of the elevation - for example window tracery, decorative carvings, masonry styles?

For example:

### *South elevation*

*The south elevation of the church is the most public, facing the main road through the village. The tower, south aisle, south porch, and chancel are visible, as are glimpses of the nave rising beyond the aisle. Roofs are of handmade clay tiles, and masonry is of wide-jointed flintwork with limestone dressings around windows and the south door. The appearance of this elevation has remained basically unchanged since the 14th century when the south porch and south aisle were added; the only substantial work since that date was the reroofing of the nave and aisle during refurbishment works in 1887. To the west end of the elevation is the tower, of four stages, also 14th century. At the east end is the chancel, which was rebuilt in the 13th century; its south wall is pierced by three paired lancet windows. Between the westernmost and central pair is a priest's door - the opening was rebuilt like-for-like in the 1887 refurbishment and a new door inserted at that time.*

It is very important to note how publicly visible each of the elevations is, particularly if you think you may wish to extend the building or conduct any other external changes. Most church buildings will have what can be considered to be a "principal elevation"; one that has been designed to show the best of what the parish and donors could afford. This is often the south side as the north was regarded less favourably by medieval people, but it can depend on the layout of the site, and where important features like main roads, settlements, and manor houses are relative to the building.

### 3. Interior of the building

Break the building down into its primary areas: chancel, nave, tower, aisles, vestries, and porches. For each, give a general description of the building envelope, again following the overview-materials-evolution-features framework.

Let's look at how we would do this for the nave of our template church. First, the **overview**:

*Nave of five bays, with 14th century arcade to the south aisle.*

Then, **materials**:

*Roof of oak king post trusses with a pine roof deck. Walls of squared limestone blocks, with white painted lime plaster to the interior. Floor of clay quarry tiles with pine boarding beneath pews.*

Then **evolution** - note how some features are referenced too, as these are evidence of the dates given:

*The oldest standing part of the nave is the north wall, which dates to the 12th century. This wall has five narrow lancet windows, with their sills set c. 2 metres above floor level - these are also 12th century. To the south side of the nave the 14th century arcade is borne on octagonal columns with foliate capitals.*

Finally any other notable **features**:

*The columns are in the soft local limestone and have a range of medieval graffiti including incised crosses, daisy wheels, and initials.*

Describe fixtures and fittings (such as pews, altars, war memorials), monuments, glass, bells, and organs in their own separate sections, so that the reader can find them easily.

### 4. Fixtures and fittings

Having described the setting of the building, its exterior, and the interior of the building envelope, you can now move on to what it houses. Continue to follow the overview-material-evolution-features framework, use photos to illustrate, and break the fixtures and fittings down into subcategories by type depending on what you have in your church.

#### 4.1 Pews/Seating

This is often a critical part of the document as many church development projects involve changes to seating. If yours does, you will need to be fairly detailed in this section so that the reader has the information they need to inform their decision making. Make sure you explain:

- how the seats are constructed, as far as you can tell without destructive investigation
- whether they are set on a platform, and whether the platform is raised above the main floor level
- the style of the seats - including the shape of any bench or pew ends (a useful identifying feature)
- their materials
- when the seating was first installed
- when and where seating has been removed or altered
- any unusual or rare features: examples might for instance include hat shelves, name plates, doors, or reused earlier woodwork.

You should also give the names of any known designers and/or craftspeople who worked on the seating - for 19th century seats these are often given in newspaper reports as described in "Sources", above. It is also very helpful to the DAC if you can give a count of the seats, for instance:

Area	Length	Number (count)
Nave	9ft	24
South aisle	4ft	7
	5ft	3
Chancel	Individual chairs	8

#### 4.2 Altars and associated fittings

In this section cover not just altars, but also altar rails and (if you have them) associated fittings such as reredoses, baldachinos etc. Don't neglect side or chapel altars - in many cases these are historic high altars that were adapted and/or relocated in the 19th century. As you did with the seating, make sure you describe the construction of these pieces, and this can give experts important dating information.



#### 4.3 Pulpits and fonts

These furnishings have often been relocated within the building. Look for signs of this on the base - is the base later than the top; are there toolmarks where the top has been deliberately cut away?

#### 4.4 Memorials and monuments

In most cases it will not be necessary to give a detailed description of every single monument in the church, and you can simply summarise what you have in a table:

Area	Date	Deceased	Description
Nave	1730-84	HOGGS family	Limestone ledger marking family vault; family arms followed by list of names
	1878	Revd Adam CLEARY	Limestone tablet to former incumbent, erected by parishioners.
	1901	Captain John BINNS, Scots Guards	Brass on black marble surround with badge of Scots Guards, to officer killed in Boer War.

In other cases, where the monuments are affected by potential proposals, or are of greater importance, you should give more detailed descriptions including photographs. Refer to or reuse content from conservators' reports, your quinquennial, or your NADFAS record as necessary.

#### 4.5 Other fixtures and fittings

You should also include sections on your glass, your bells, and your organ; these can be brief (or even in tabular form, as with monuments, above) if they are unaffected by your proposals. Where your proposals do affect them you should try to include more information, including photographs and information from other sources. Information on historic bells can be found in the "core details" section of your church entry in the [Church Heritage Record](#). Information on organs can be found in the British Institute of Organ Studies' [National Pipe Organ Register](#)

## Part three: Assessing your church building

### Purpose

To understand and express the heritage value of your church building.

### Resources

Your key reference for assessment of significance is the Historic England guidance document [Conservation Principles](#). Pages 27-31 explain the different elements of significance or value; pages 35-40 how to assess heritage significance. There is very little written guidance specifically for people assessing church buildings, so you may wish to draw on help from local experts, the diocesan Church Buildings Team, your architect, or from professional consultants.

### Method

Now you have completed both your documentary research and your record of the physical characteristics of the site, you have all the information you need to assess how important your church is as a heritage asset.

#### 1. What is "significance"?

In essence significance can be summarised as that which makes your building valuable to its various different users - both locals and specialists. In short, significance is value. Because this can be so hard to define, this value is often broken down into sub-categories. Here they are as defined by Historic England:

Type of value	Historic England definition	Examples
Evidential value	The potential of the building, its features or furnishings to yield evidence about past human activity, in particular to provide exemplars of particular styles, techniques or craftsmen.	<p>A window that is an example of the work of a known mason in a unusual local style: <b>evidence of craftsmen and techniques</b></p> <p>A clock that shows late 16th century metal jointing techniques in its frame: <b>evidence of local metal working industry, and of techniques</b></p>



		Boarding from a medieval Doom painting reused to make 18th century box pews: <b>evidence of changing ways of worshipping, of how materials were used, and of painting and woodworking techniques</b>
Historical value	The ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through the building to the present. It tends to be illustrative of particular historical trends or associative with particular people or events.	A group of brass tablets to soldiers killed in the Crimean war  The hatchment carried at the funeral of the last lord of the manor  The first church by architect Augustus Pugin  Graffiti on a font carved by soldiers during the Civil War
Aesthetic and architectural value	The potential for people to draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a place.	A reredos carved by a local sculptor, described in Pevsner as "the best in the county"  A tower adorned with a lively collection of medieval gargoyles  A single-phase church built in 1708, deliberately designed as a focal point in a busy town centre
Communal value	The meaning of the building, its contents or furnishings for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory.	Note that every living church building will have communal value, but that sometimes that value can be concentrate on particular objects of areas, for example:  A village war memorial  The south porch, where wedding photographs are always taken  A tapestry made by a group of local women to commemorate the coronation

Liturgical value	The importance of particular features or furnishings within the liturgical traditions of the Church of England.	Fonts, altars or communion tables. Stations of the cross.
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Remember that any one object or area may have multiple different types of value - for instance a 12th century font with generations of graffiti on it might have every single type of value defined in the table.

## 2. Level of significance/value

Now we know what type of value/significance an object or area has, we need to evaluate just how high that value is. Ask yourself these questions about the building element you are assessing:

- is it rare?
- is it a particularly early or late example?
- is it good quality?
- is it damaged, or have parts been lost?
- what do your secondary sources say about it?
- does it form an important part of an ensemble - for instance a group of furnishings, or part of a complete structure all of a single date?

Use the following scale to express what you consider the value of the object/area/structure to be:

Significance/value	Definition
None	This has no value; its loss would have no effect on the importance of the whole building and site.  Note that building elements only rarely fall into this category - when they do it will generally be because they are very recent, poorly executed, and damaging to the historic building.
Low	This has a small amount of value. There may be many of its type, or it may be heavily damaged, or poorly executed.
Moderate	This is of middling value; it may be of good quality or by a well known craftsman but is unlikely to be the only or best feature of this type.
High	This is very important, perhaps even on a national level. It may be specifically mentioned in secondary sources.

It is vital that your assessment here is as objective as possible, and is guided by your research. If you are unsure what level of significance to give something, ask for advice - from your architect, from the Church Buildings Team, or from a professional consultant.

### 3. Putting your assessments into your Statement of Significance

Insert your assessments at the end of each of your sections in the building record from part 2. For example:

#### *South elevation*

*The south elevation of the church is the most public, facing the main road through the village. The tower, south aisle, south porch, and chancel are visible, as are glimpses of the nave rising beyond the aisle. Roofs are of handmade clay tiles, and masonry is of wide-jointed flintwork with limestone dressings around windows and the south door. The appearance of this elevation has remained basically unchanged since the 14th century when the south porch and south aisle were added; the only substantial work since that date was the reroofing of the nave and aisle during refurbishment works in 1887. To the west end of the elevation is the tower, of four stages, also 14th century. At the east end is the chancel, which was rebuilt in the 13th century; its south wall is pierced by three paired lancet windows. Between the westernmost and central pair is a priest's door - the opening was rebuilt like-for-like in the 1887 refurbishment and a new door inserted at that time.*

***As a whole the south elevation is of moderate-high significance for its architectural and evidential value, both as an example of 13th-14th century gothic architecture, and as a focal point in the conservation area.***

Alternately, where you have used a table to write up your record, add a column at the end for your assessment, for example here with a list of monuments:

Area	Date	Deceased	Description	Significance
Nave	1730-84	HOGGS family	Limestone ledger marking family vault; family arms followed by list of names	Moderate (historical value)



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*A Christ-like Church for the sake of God's world*

	1878	Revd Adam CLEARY	Limestone tablet to former incumbent, erected by parishioners.	Moderate (historical and evidential value)
	1901	Captain John BINNS, Scots Guards	Brass on black marble surround with badge of Scots Guards, to officer killed in Boer War.	Low (historical value)