



13. Why Do We Have Pews In Church Instead Of Comfortable Chairs?

For many centuries, there were no seats of any kind in churches; the congregations stood or knelt. Sometimes a ledge was provided around the walls for the sick or infirm - hence the saying: 'Let the weakest go to the wall.' There was some sense in the lack of seating, since the church building was often used for secular activities during the week, or even as a warehouse in wool producing districts! Further, the congregation was not necessarily expected to stay for the whole service. In collegiate or monastic churches, where the services were particularly lengthy, the choir-monks were provided with stalls, often with tip-up seats called 'misericords'.

From the thirteenth century onwards, seating in the form of simple benches began to be provided. As skill in woodcarving progressed, pews were made more elaborate, since Protestant worship placed more emphasis on the need to listen attentively to the minister's words. Pews were made high and box-like to give a measure of privacy and to ward off draughts. Rents were often charged to reserve particular pews, and the 'squire's pew' might have its own separate entrance and even a little stove for warmth, as well as other comforts against lengthy sermons.

It has been suggested that it was the provision of pews in churches that worked against the wish of Thomas Cranmer and other Reformers to encourage frequent Communion among worshippers; people were simply reluctant to budge from their usual seats at the bidding of the parson.

In the case of St Mary's, funds for the nineteenth-century rebuilding of the church were provided by the Incorporated Church Building Society on condition that all 'sittings' should be free. The pews are built into the fabric and it would be a major undertaking to remove them all. In practice, movable chairs are not always satisfactory either and there is also the problem of where to store those not in use.