

# Leicester Cathedral

## Furniture fit for a King



Luke Hughes

Furniture in Architecture



The reinterment of King Richard III is not just a fitting conclusion to the story of the last Plantagenet King but its legacy was also the revitalisation of one of Britain's finest examples of ecclesiastical architecture, Leicester Cathedral. Nestled within the city centre, this compact cathedral has been rebuilt, replaced, refined and reordered over its near 1000-year history but has remained a constant centre for worship since its dedication as the Norman church of St Martin.

The interior of this building is rich in detail with each wall bearing decorations from sponsors of the cathedral over the course of its life. Great periods of national upheaval can be traced through these features; for example the captivating Great East Window is a memorial to those who fell during the First World War. It depicts the patron saints of England, France, Belgium as well as Martin, patron saint of soldiers.

Having designed furniture for twenty major cathedrals in its 34-year history, Covent Garden-based specialist furniture designers Luke Hughes® was approached by Reverend Canon Dr Mandy Ford in 2013 to work with Leicester Cathedral to prepare for the reinterment of King Richard III. The cathedral wished to establish a new home for its nationally renowned choirs within the building. In addition, new furniture was commissioned to accommodate all the cathedral's clergymen and women.

Opposite: The new Leicester Cathedral interior. This page: The Leicester Cathedral concourse



Whilst each new commission is unique in its requirements and final form, the beginnings remain much the same. The vision of the architect is often the starting point for us as furniture designers; by researching archival drawings and notes, we are able to produce designs faithful to the surrounding architecture. To this end, research and investigation is the first step in any project. Having understood the architectural context, our next concerns are for the people who occupy the space: climate conditions, spatial constraints and the way the building is used.

Whilst the cathedral has seen additions to the fabric from many periods, it is the style of King Richard III's era, that of the Gothic, that speaks the loudest. Perhaps one of the best known Gothic motifs seen in surviving Middle Ages buildings across England is the arch. Not just structural, the arch allowed many spaces to interconnect without breaking up the internal dialogue of the building. The furniture during this time began to echo this new decorative form; chair backs began to feature ornately carved arches and chiseled flourishes to match the grand tracery. Drawing upon their experience designing for the grand Gothic surroundings of Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, the Luke Hughes® design team began by articulating how design from the period of King Richard III might translate for a contemporary congregation.

Bespoke Luke Hughes® solid oak, faceted benches inlaid with enamelled brass crests



Status was often conferred through furniture at court and across the great halls of England. Such communal centres and places of worship played host to all walks of life and had to span a wealth of functions. To meet this requirement, benches and chairs were designed to be portable, often pushed to the sides of the room when not in use.

It is often noted that the word 'furniture' in Italian is 'mobilia'; a legacy of the transformative nature of furniture. This lives on today, particularly as churches and cathedrals today respond to the need for their buildings to be flexible spaces for the community. Luke Hughes' response to this need was to design the stacking pew in 1996.

In Leicester Cathedral the design team presented the concept of a family of choir stalls on a raised, moveable base so that they could be repositioned in different configurations depending on the service. The pale, solid oak benches feature a delicate chamfer which gives a crisp edge to the timber. The bespoke candle choir lights feature concealed LED lights which cast the grain of the bookshelves into relief.



Bespoke Luke Hughes® solid oak, faceted benches inlaid with enamelled brass crests

In the side aisles beside the choir, a series of oak three-seater benches carry through the chamfered motif and provide seating for the clergy. The Middle Ages custom of depicting differences of status through the height of seating was re-appropriated to distinguish the choir from the clergy through two subtle variations in wood stain. Positioned in front of an ornate panel of age old tracery, each clergy bench is stained to match the panelling, settling our new designs into their ancient home.

It was the hope of the cathedral that both their visitors and worshippers would feel at home with the new furniture. Not just that, but that this cherished landmark would serve generations to come without compromising its heritage. We're certainly proud to have been involved in this project and hope that the new furniture speaks to both the history and the future of British craftsmanship.



Bespoke Luke Hughes® solid oak choir stalls with chamfer detail  
Top right: Custom choir lights with candle and LED features  
Bottom right: A craftsman planes a piece of the oak choir stall



'It is often noted that the word  
'furniture' in Italian is '*mobilia*'; a legacy of  
the transformative nature of furniture.



For more information on Luke Hughes® visit  
[lukehughes.co.uk](http://lukehughes.co.uk) or call us on +44 (0)20 7404 5995

