Seating
Stacking pews
In 1996, after over 2000 years of evolution in church architecture, Luke Hughes designed the very first stacking pew in response to the changing needs of today's places of worship.

Early churches were left empty. Floors were often decorative and designed to be seen. The only furniture was the altar, ambo (or lectern) and font. Occasionally there were stone benches along the walls. Only on very special occasions were backless benches brought into the churches. One of the reasons for the absence of furniture was simply economic. The introduction of timber was an expensive process, both in terms of labour and material. Medieval furniture was generally constructed of massive timbers, sometimes elaborately carved to emphasise status.

After the Reformation, the emphasis on preaching led to the pulpit becoming the principal focus of the liturgy. In the 1630s, the rite of Communion regained pre-eminence; altars were again placed at the East end of the chancel. Many churches were furnished with Box pews facing the chancel so as to encourage this arrangement and make it permanent. In the early 18th century, after the Restoration and under the Hanoverians, the seating became integral to the design of the building, formalising a social pecking order - the more you paid in pew-rent, the closer your pew was to the front of the nave.

During the Industrial Revolution Box pews became increasingly sophisticated. With comfort more of a priority, many benches had backs and kneelers added. In the 1830s, not only the Oxford Movement but also the architecturally-focused Ecclesiological Society set out to return the architecture of the churches of England to the religious splendour they perceived as being medieval in origin. These two groups influenced virtually every aspect of the architectural design of the Anglican parish church. Their activities coincided with a time of huge technological and commercial advances, so that not only mass production but also the effects of international trade dramatically reduced the cost of timber. Machined products overshadowed the fruits of hand-skills and, with some notable exceptions, 19th century pews were generally produced from catalogue church furnishers. They were rarely comfortable, too heavy to move, fixed in position, and showed scant regard for the splendour of their architectural setting. Similarly, it was only in the late 19th century that chairs began to be commercially available in large quantities - but they rarely stacked.

In the latter half of the 20th century, ‘re-configurability’ became the desire. The use of churches for community meetings, for plays and concerts, and for different levels of worship can be better accommodated if the furniture can be moved. Chairs have seemed the immediate solution and parishes have rushed to strip out pews and replace them with the cheapest option - products that were principally designed for the post-war educational or health-care markets. These have generally been manufactured in light-coloured timber, pressed metal, plywood and tubular steel, or even polypropylene, some with highly coloured fabrics - hardly conducive to the interior of a fine medieval church.

In the 1990s, Luke Hughes invented the concept of stacking pews. Pews look far better than chairs in most church interiors, whatever their age or style. They enable congregations to bunch up, are easy to move, lighter and more versatile than conventional pews and less obtrusive than chairs. It is a concept that, with changes to sizes, colours, mouldings, can accommodate a huge variety of layouts and be adapted to suit the architectural style of each building.

It is clear to us that every parish church is unique so there is rarely such a thing as a standard solution. The examples in this booklet show how we have adapted the general concept to fit a range of outstanding architectural spaces.

So when it comes to seating for churches, it is no longer a matter of buying new chairs. It is about running a major community building, albeit one steeped in history, sentiment and splendour.
Lady Chapel
Chichester Cathedral

Chichester Cathedral is almost 1,000 years old and is the mother church of the Diocese of Chichester which covers East and West Sussex. Luke Hughes were asked to provide 80 seats for the Lady Chapel.

We recommended stacking pew benches in European oak - they are easy to reconfigure, deploy and stack away and their timeless quality and fine craftsmanship were in sympathy with this most sensitive of settings.

Stacking pews with underseat shelving for kneelers and prayer books.
Reordering
Sheffield Cathedral

Clues to the breadth of Sheffield Cathedral’s historic and religious significance can be found across the thousand year old site; dog-tooth patterned stones from a Norman church can be found in the eastern wall and the Medieval spire can be traced back to the early 15th century.

At the end of the first World War, what was a Medieval parish church became Sheffield Cathedral and was significantly enlarged. As part of its centenary celebrations in 2014, in which the interior of the building underwent a sizeable refurbishment from new floors to internal wheelchair access, Luke Hughes was commissioned to provide new seating. Stacking pews were crafted in oak to complement the warmth and light provided by the ceiling’s stained-glass ‘Lantern Tower’. With seating for over 500 congregants, the space can be cleared within 20 minutes, allowing the room to be utilised for a variety of functions.
The stacking pew design, pioneered by Luke Hughes in 1995, will allow two people to clear the nave of Sheffield Cathedral in under twenty minutes, allowing the space to be used for a host of ecclesiastical and civic purposes.
Parish church
St Andrew's, Feniton

On the 29th October 2008, severe floods caused great damage to the Devonshire town of Feniton. St. Andrew’s Church, a Grade II listed building, was inundated with two and a half feet of water. As part of an extensive restoration scheme, Luke Hughes was commissioned to refurbish the space with stacking Charterhouse pews that sat sensitively within the historic building.

The Charterhouse pews are designed to be rearranged around the needs of the community, easily carried by two people and are capable of being stacked discreetly. After the restoration process, the whole town has a renewed community hub.
Thank you for all your help and advice over the last few hectic months, it has been a pleasure working with you all.

English Heritage

‘Members of the congregation were full of delight. I myself was thrilled by the quality of your workmanship…’

Canon Precentor
Rochester Cathedral
Watch a film on this project
visit http://bit.ly/1r1fD02

St George’s, Bloomsbury
As part of the refurbishment of the Venerable Chapel at Winchester Cathedral, Luke Hughes designed new seating, frontals and collaborated with artist Rachel Schwalm to create a new altar. Elements of the final altar design, which features a glazed, blue-pigmented window, were incorporated into new benches and desks in the Chapel in the form of a blue sycamore inlay.

Left: Sycamore inlay
Bottom: Pews and choir frontals
Pew design
Bespoke solutions

We approach each project with an open mind and a fresh perspective, taking inspiration from the user and their space. We are excited by working with a place of worship to incorporate individual details that reflect their buildings and style.

‘I am writing to say ... how delighted we are with the final design and especially the proportions and detailing and how marvellous is the craftsmanship of its execution.’

Benefactors of St Barnabas, Dulwich

Various pew designs
Upholstery
Kneelers and runners

Most places of worship have an enviable history from which to draw inspiration and pride. Furniture, such as leaders boards, noticeboards and displays, can help convey important facets of a church’s history.

Lecterns and credence tables offer added facilities for services and events and can be produced with integrated cable management to house audio visual equipment and lighting.

Left page - Top left: Kneeler. Top right: Memorial runner. Bottom: Kneelers at All Saints’ Church, Carshalton

Details
Commemorative discs and carvings

Carvings, gilding, commemorative discs and bespoke art installations are more than simply decoration, they reveal and illustrate the character and history of the space.

Luke Hughes works with some of the UK’s finest master craftsmen and women from wood carvers, gilders, carpenters and artists to create pieces to complement your space and our furniture.

This page; Top left and right: commemorative discs. Bottom left: St Michael and All Saint’s Church. Bottom right: St Andrew’s Church, Holborn
Spatial engineering
Achieving adaptability

The design and placing of furniture, if done well, can transform the use of a building.

We believe in making spaces work harder and achieving more. The furniture can play an important role in doing this. Places of worship today strive to be more than simply a space to worship; they hope to be community buildings housing musical, theatrical and conference events. We design our furniture to be arranged in multiple configurations to enable the building to tap into as many uses as possible.

Various layouts of stacking pews at Sheffield Cathedral

Various layouts of stacking pews at St George's Bloomsbury
Luke Hughes is an award-winning specialist furniture design company to Britain's best-loved buildings and some of the world's most powerful brands - including 5 Royal palaces, 21 international cathedrals, 54 Oxbridge colleges & 900 boardrooms. A central design principle is that in any quality building, the connection between architecture and furniture should be seamless.

Since 1990, Luke Hughes has focused on design for public spaces, particularly in the academic, institutional, ecclesiastical, corporate and leisure sectors - principally for buildings with significant architectural interiors.

Company founder Luke Hughes was educated at Cambridge University before setting up a small craft workshop in the backyard of a house in Bloomsbury in 1978, and then moving to Covent Garden in 1981. The business was incorporated in 1986, and has been growing ever since.