



T H E P A R I S H O F
S T W I L F R I D
H A R R O G A T E

From the Team Rector

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Weddings at St Wilfrid Harrogate: Coronavirus Update

Where are we at now?

I'm writing to all of you to update you on where we currently are in the Coronavirus Pandemic. May I re-iterate my thanks for your patience and understanding during this incredibly difficult time.

Public worship remains suspended in the Church of England (and across all churches and faith communities). The Government roadmap for ending the lockdown suggests that the earliest date for opening church again will be 4th July 2020.

What isn't clear is whether this is simply opening up of the buildings or the restoration of public worship. It's possible the Government may allow very small, socially distanced weddings to take place sooner, but no date has been set at this time.

What happens next?

We first of all have to await the go-ahead for either public worship, or marriage services to resume (whichever is earlier). **It is unlikely at this stage, that either will be before 4th July.**

The parish is now planning how we can operate within the limits of social distancing – something likely to remain in place for some significant time. That will inevitably change much of the way we have to operate. It will impact how a Marriage Service takes place – so it is really important to start to think through the impacts this might have. I realise this will sound like yet another headache to deal with – but it is important we start to think about what might and might not be possible, now.

You are all aware that there is no straightforward 'exit strategy' from coronavirus. We hope and pray that the measures in place continue to reduce the number of infections and deaths. But it is possible that similar 'lock-down' measures could be re-imposed in the future. We are all having to live with a level of uncertainty in which this could all change rapidly.

We will of course, work with you to guide you through the process as best we can. We do recognise this situation has added significant additional stress. What we've learned is that the more planned now, the quicker we can respond as the situation requires. I'm sorry in that regard that I cannot be the bearer of more optimistic or certain news.



Is there anything we can do now?

There are some things you can start to think about now.

If your Marriage Service should have taken place already or before 4th July, and you haven't re-scheduled, as soon as we know what is possible (i.e. firm dates are announced), we will contact you. We'll then need to look at:

- A date for your Marriage Service to take place
- The legal preliminaries will be required
- The social distancing arrangements or regulations are in place which will need to be followed.

If your original or rescheduled date is in September, October or November, we'll contact you when the picture is clearer with regard to dates to:

- Confirm the date for your Marriage Service
- Sort out what legal preliminaries will be required
- Confirm what social distancing arrangements are in place – and are likely to be in place at the time of your Marriage Service – and how those arrangements will then need to be followed.

Legal preliminaries

There are two preliminaries to be legally married in the Church of England: Banns and Licences.

Which route depends on the date on which your Marriage Service takes place and on when public worship is restored. Banns can only be read at a public service –live-streamed services don't count for this purpose. Banns also expire three months after their last reading.

For Banns to be read, there must be *at least* three separate Sundays between the date public worship is restored and the date of your wedding. Those banns must be read here, **and** in the parish(es) where you live.

For weddings in September, October or November, it may be possible for banns to be read and completed in July and August (or later) – this will depend on the date when public worship is restored. Should that not happen with enough time, or if a lockdown were re-imposed and public worship suspended again, then you'll need to follow the licence route below.

For all other weddings, you will need to obtain a licence. This involves the team at the Diocesan Registry (the Church's legal department in the Diocese of Leeds). This isn't a difficult procedure – and the staff there will guide you through what is required. As soon as any confirmation of dates is announced, we will contact you to let you know what you need to do.

My advice is, at this point for everyone is: be prepared to have to apply for a licence.



What impact will social distancing have?

Firstly, we've already prepared the church for this in terms of its physical layout, so we can respond quickly when the regulations change. This significantly reduces the number of people who we can accommodate at the moment. There are three 'scenarios' – and which one will apply to you is again dependent on dates yet to be announced, and on the general pandemic scenario at the time. These fall into the category of reasonable cases.

Scenario A: “Minimal Attendance”

As was briefly in place before lockdown. Only the legal minimum number of people can be present: A priest; Bride and Groom; two witnesses. The Government, or the Church of England *may* legislate or advise for more – but it is unlikely to be more than 10 – 20. This may be a 'first step' phase – or might not happen at all. But it is best to be aware that this might be in place, either because it is mandatory, or as an option instead of Scenario B below.

Scenario B: “Full Social distancing”

This is the most likely scenario to be in place from July through to at least the end of October. The 2m distance will be required to be maintained between people from different household groups, just as is the case elsewhere. Chairs have been spaced in church for this already. We can accommodate safely, a congregation of no more than 50 people: including bride, groom, bridesmaids, best man etc.

We would need to think through: how many bridesmaids there could be; how the bride walks in; how people arrive beforehand; how to manage any attendees who may be medically vulnerable – if they can come at all; how we deal with the exchange of rings; whether or not a rehearsal is possible etc. There are questions whether or not singing will be allowed. We'd also need to establish clear instructions for photographers. This might well be less than ideal – but to comply with whatever regulation and advice is in place, its important to think this through sooner, rather than later. It may have a significant impact on your guestlist.

Scenario C: “Reduced Social distancing”

This scenario could be in effect if the risk is significantly lowered by the government, and the 2m relaxed. We think this is unlikely before November and might be well into 2021. There would be less restriction on seating, and we're likely to be able to accommodate up to 100 people in the congregation. Again, there may well be similar questions about how we physically deal with the service.

In all these cases, we appreciate you will also need to balance similar considerations that weddings involve: cars, venues, caterers, flowers and so on. We will try our best to accommodate any changes to dates and times you might need to make – but we do please ask you to keep us in the loop at an early stage in this case. We're obviously having to juggle a huge amount of information – and people. All this advice clearly also applies to use of the hall here – including those who may be planning a reception there.



Early to mid-term in the recovery from lockdown, there will be additional measures in place for all services, not just weddings. The building will be regularly cleaned between services. We will require people arriving in church to use hand sanitiser. We may, potentially, require the use of face masks by guests. We will ask people to queue appropriately to enter, and to leave the building. We're sure that your guests will understand that these measures are important – and we'll keep them in place for as long as we have to. We do ask though, that you communicate these with your guests when you can. If they refuse to follow them, we need to be clear now that we reserve the right to refuse entry to the building. An 'in house' team will now be present at all weddings – and their instructions **must** be followed. I know that may sound blunt – but we don't want to get to a situation where people argue on the day.

Equally, and again I'm sorry if this sounds blunt, we beg you not to plead 'exceptionalism'. If the law and advice says five people, that means five, not six, seven or ten. If we're operating a system where fifty people can be in the building, then no, we can't 'just have another ten people'. We will genuinely try our best to help you – but what we can do is limited. The guidelines and regulations apply to you, as well as us, and we need your help to keep people safe.

If you want to see how complex this is, our full initial 26 page planning document, is available here: <http://www.stwilfrid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SWH-Coronavirus-SD-Plan-1.1-1.pdf>

I'm sorry that this may all sound very complex, hesitant, uncertain or even undiplomatic. It is. We're as much at sea as many of you will be. We're having to think now of how this may affect couples in 2021. So, your help and feedback is also really important – even if you might well feel like very unfortunate guinea-pigs in this regard.

As soon as there is any movement on dates, we'll be in contact again. Either I, one of the parish clergy or office staff will be in touch. We will do our very best to not only accommodate your marriage service as best we can, but we will need to work together to also keep you and your guests safe.

Please be assured of my continuing prayers for you all – and indeed, the prayers of all the parish at this continuingly difficult period.

Yours faithfully,



Fr Gary Waddington
Team Rector

