

The Old Church of St. Mary's, Barnstaple

Update to the Parish

January 2021

What is happening about the old church building?

Every time you come to Mass you walk past the old church building of St Mary's, built and consecrated in 1855 and Grade II listed. As you know, the church building became redundant in the 1980s following change in the needs of the Parish. The adjacent school and Presbytery were demolished, and the new Church of the Immaculate Conception was built. Ever since, the problem of what to do with the old Church has dogged the Parish. There have been many attempts to find a solution but despite the expenditure of much time and energy by many people none has been successful.

Most recently, a detailed proposal was put forward to demolish the Church and provide a memorial garden and additional parking. That proposal met with considerable opposition both from the local community and the heritage lobby. An application for planning permission for the scheme was refused and we were advised that there was no prospect of a successful appeal against that decision.

So what now?

The Bishop of Plymouth, the Rt Rev Mark O'Toole, has appointed a Project Group to help the Parish move forward from the impasse. The group consists of Fr Peter as Parish Priest, Sophie Andreae, the Vice Chair of the Patrimony Committee of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, David Scott FRICS, a building conservationist, and Anthony Akinpelu, the Diocesan Chief Operating Officer. The group is chaired by myself, Neil Butterfield, a Diocesan Trustee.

It is early days as yet, but the general direction of travel is to aim to repair and refurbish the former Church building and thereafter create a flexible space that will be used to serve the needs both of the Parish and the local community.

Preliminary work has already begun. In April 2020 steeplejacks carried out urgent repairs to the roof and gutters of the building to prevent further water ingress. The steeplejacks returned in July when they checked the gutters and undertook a deep clean of both the area around the former Church and the inside. David Scott has completed a detailed report on the condition of the building. A structural engineer has reported on the way to deal with instability above the chancel arch. In September 2020 a very constructive meeting took place on site between the Project

Group, planning and conservation officers from the North Devon Council and representatives of Historic England. Those present at the meeting approved and endorsed the approach set out below.

The first step is to restore the damage done to the fabric of the building through the ravages of time and neglect. David Scott's report concludes that the building is entirely salvageable and repairable, but identifies considerable work required on a number of structural areas. It is intended that the programme of work will be split into phases starting with Phase I, which will focus on the repair and maintenance of the more vulnerable west end of the Church. That will be followed by Phase II consisting of further works of repair to the roof structure, ceilings, walls, windows and flooring. Finally, after the building has thoroughly dried out, the internal alterations and refurbishment will take place to create a flexible multi-purpose space. We recognise that we are facing a long-term project that is likely to extend over a number of years. Our aim, at the end, is to provide an excellent facility both for the Parish and the community whilst preserving a historic and important building.

So how will all this be funded?

The money to pay for all this will come from 3 sources: grants from external bodies, contribution from the central reserves of the Diocese and contribution from the Parish. The Bishop and the Trustees of the Diocese have asked the Diocesan Grants Officer to assist in seeking external funding for the project, and recently a Project Viability grant was obtained from the Architectural Heritage Fund to cover the cost of drawing up a viability report, which will cover the cost of the surveys, detailed costings and feasibility studies. It is also anticipated that Historic England will offer a grant towards the costs of the initial urgent building work. The latter grant will have to be match-funded by the Diocese i.e. with contributions from the Curia and the Parish combined. It is likely that successive funding for the project will follow a similar pattern.

When will we see something happening?

The roofers will be back over the winter to keep the gutters clear and prevent further damp penetration. It is hoped that building work will begin during 2021 after approval of estimates and costings by Historic England, but the Project Group is really in the hands of the grant providers, who are themselves experiencing administrative delays. The present pandemic has of course added to the delay. The Project Group will keep the Parish fully informed about future developments.

Sir Neil Butterfield

Chairman of the Project Group & Plymouth Diocesan Trustee