

A note of a public consultation on the future of St Mary's chapel, Droitwich Spa. Wednesday 13th January 2010, in the Community Hall, stating at 7.30pm.

The Archdeacon of Dudley, in the chair, opened the meeting by welcoming people, and outlining the pattern the meeting would follow.

Canon Sheila Banyard briefly summarised the history of St Mary's, noting that there had been a separate parish until it was amalgamated with St Andrew's in 1662. The current mid-Victorian chapel had had some limited use for small funerals until the 1970s, and a subsequent brief period as a chapel of rest for a local funeral director. The last quinquennial (regular architectural) inspection had revealed that work needed to be done, and subsequent rapid deterioration lent urgency to the need to make a decision on its future. The PCC could see no obvious use for the building, and was taking advice from the insurance company about any necessary work to make the building and area safe.

Following this Fr Doug Chaplin noted that informal conversations with councillors and with the Droitwich Preservation Trust had neither produced any ideas for the future use of the building, nor any likelihood of funding and work on it. The Preservation Trust had suggested that either degrading it to a graceful ruin, or possibly demolition, as serious options.

The Archdeacon then outlined the key question and the process. The question to be asked was whether the building should be formally closed for public worship. Only after that could alternative uses be sought. In asking the question the key consideration was whether there was a continuing pastoral need for the building?

The Church of England's legal framework provided for

- a) local discussion and a decision by the Parochial Church Council (PCC)
 - b) discussion and a recommendation by the Diocesan Pastoral Committee (DPC) to the Bishop
 - c) if the Bishop agrees with the recommendation, he forwards it to the Church Commissioners.
- The early stages of the process should include public consultation (i.e. this meeting). At the same time as these stages are happening there is a submission of information to the Church's Building Council which will then carry out their own independent inspection of the building.

Following this, the Church Commissioners make the proposals public and invite submissions from local people, the community generally and interested parties, and only then reach their decision after appropriate consideration of these representations.

If the building is formally closed, the parish ceases to be responsible for it, and the diocese becomes responsible for implementing the directions of the Church Commissioners, which might be either to find an alternate use (normally starting with use by another Christian denomination), or to proceed with either demolition, or making it a graceful ruin.

Following this outline of the process, the Archdeacon opened the meeting to questions, comments and opinions from the floor. Some of these were about clarifying the process as set out above, but in the course of the discussion the following points were made by those present.

- It would be appropriate, if the building is demolished, to place some kind of memorial marker (stone, plaque or noticeboard) recording its history and existence.
- Some people wanted to note the ongoing problem of anti-social behaviour and the detritus of drink-cans and sharps creating an unpleasant atmosphere. (They were referred to the ongoing PACT process.)
- An officer from the County Council noted that the building needed to be considered not just on its own merits but as integrated with its environment. He was sure that both the County and District Councils were interested in the discussion, and whether they might be able to help, but also noted that the financial situation was unfavourable.

- The problem of access to the building and churchyard was noted
- The available space for graves was not huge, but was still significant.
- Was there an option for a one person crematorium?
- There were significant issues about the lack of facilities: electricity, water and so on.
- Would there be a use for the building if it was in perfect condition?
- There were issues about whether use of the footpath was going to be possible
- The building was really quite small
- Should a detailed structural survey be undertaken, or was the combination of quinquennial inspection, and the inspection by the Church Buildings Council sufficient?
- Is there a pastoral use for the building when there are four other Anglican buildings as well as several other denominations in the area?
- We should take account of the possibility that the building may have become a habitat for bats, and the implications of that on demolition or other uses.
- The 14th century coffin lid would need to be rescued and preserved in the event of any development or demolition as a valuable piece of local history.

The Archdeacon thanked everyone for their attendance, especially in the inclement weather, and for their helpful contributions. It was agreed that an informal account (these notes) of the meeting would be placed on the parish web site. The meeting closed at 8.40pm