

## **Resilient adaptation of churches: St John's, Fernham, Vale of the White Horse, South Oxfordshire**

*"Imagine a Victorian chapel built of local Cotswold stone, with lovely stained glass windows, an oak floor with hand-carved detail, a mezzanine level with a glass-fronted rail above cleverly concealed facilities fronted also in oak - and you begin to imagine the simple appeal of this multi-purpose building"*

St John the Evangelist, the grade II listed parish church of Fernham was built in 1861 in C13th style by the Gothic Revival architect, J.W.Hugall. It is on an elevated site overlooking the village, with its population of about 250.

### **Context for Change**

Two factors came together. After the village hall burnt down, the village had used a large barn attached to the village pub. When this was subsequently converted into a restaurant, the villagers lost their only community space. Regular church services were attracting a congregation of about half a dozen and the Parochial Church Council (PCC) was increasingly concerned about rising maintenance costs and future usage. The heating system was effectively two one-bar electric fires dangling from the roof, which was itself beginning to leak.

### **Key Decisions**

In 2002, the church warden circulated a survey saying that the current congregation was going to be unable to sustain the church in its current form. People were asked what they would like to do with the space and whether there would be objections to adapting it to meet modern needs. This met with a positive response. In Fernham the Parish Meeting acknowledged that if they didn't look after the church, it would probably be lost. The decision was therefore made to preserve the building.

### **Implementation**

In November 2004, Neil Sutherland, Treasurer of St John's and a chartered civil engineer, was asked to chair an organising group. He gathered together a group of people with the necessary skills including skills in finance and business, fund-raising, and running village events. While some group members were churchgoers, people were invited to join for their skills rather than their links to the church. The Church Warden and the Incumbent were included in an 'ex officio' capacity and provided positive and practical support. To manage the conversion, *Project Inspire* was set up as a charitable trust to meet funding criteria and as a company limited by guarantee to limit the liability of the trustees. Five members of the team went to look at five separate church conversions to see how they had been managed and what they had achieved.

### **Fund-raising**

The costs were £220,000 for the roof repairs, including re-instating Cotswold stone tiles and £184,000 for the conversion, a large amount of money for a small village to find. The Parish Meeting granted £20,000 of Schedule 106 money, received from a developer who was developing a disused farm on the edge of the village, to the project.

The church warden took charge of raising funds for the roof repairs, the majority of which came from English Heritage and other church supporting charities including the Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust, Garfield Weston Trust, All Churches Trust, Ammco Trust, as well as the Vale of White Horse District Council, and the then Regional Development Agency SEEDA. In November 2007, the Project won a grant of £94,000 through The Big Lottery Fund and ITV's public voting competition, *The People's Millions*.

Additional funds came from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, the Rural Access to Services Programme, Oxfordshire County Council's Youth Opportunity Fund, Oxford County Council Chill-Out Fund, RWE Npower, Rotary Club of Farringdon, and Midlands Counties Co-op. Money also came from local benefactors and local fund-raising. The latter included film nights and talks, which were a good way of keeping people engaged with the project

The Oxford Community Volunteers Association (OCVA) gave advice on project management as well as where to apply for funds for the conversion and community benefit works. Other advice came from the South Vale Leadership Programme and the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

### **Current arrangements**

After careful negotiations with the Diocese, changes have been introduced to manage the building post conversion. *Project Inspire* has a 30 year repairing lease from the Diocese and responsibility for the routine maintenance of the church building with an expectation, written into the lease, that if there are major works, *Project Inspire* will pay 60%, while the church community and PCC will contribute 40%, a ratio of 60:40 reflecting the split between chancel and nave areas.

*Project Inspire* manages the use of the St. John's and Fernham Village Hall whether by the community or the church and covers running costs. The PCC pays to hire the building for services, and weddings and funerals. It also raises funds for its annual parish share.

The aim is to keep the hall hire as cheap as is cost effective. Currently it can be hired for £5 an hour with a minimum charge of £10 which covers the cost of heating it prior to an event.



St John's getting ready for the last night of the Proms © Neil Sutherland

### **Achievements**

The building opened in May 2010 and offers an attractive and adaptable space with a refreshment area, comfortable and flexible seating, fully accessible toilets, under floor heating, and a state-of-the-art audio-visual and sound experience. It is widely used for classes and individual parties as well as community events. It is still very much a place of worship, but it is now also the focus of community life.

*"We are getting used to the building being both a community space and a place of worship". Our Burn's Night took place on a Saturday night and yet by 9am next morning, everything was 'facing front' ready for Morning Worship".*

### **Outlook and Future Plans**

The Project Team are currently looking at options to ensure the future viability of the building. Glebe land has been granted to the Vicar, with permission for it to be used as a car park as it is not consecrated ground. This will enable the space to be used for seminars and business meetings.

Website: <http://www.fernham.info/village-hall.html>



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