

St Mary's Church Ashendon – The 2018/2022 refurbishment project.

In January 2018 the Churchwardens wrote around to all the villagers in Ashendon with the news that a large legacy had been received and that we could at long last plan for repairs and improvements to the Church building.

The text of the letter is shown below.

Dear

We are writing as we have very exciting news we would like to share with you.

For many years the finances of St Mary's operated on a knife-edge with income generally matching expenses but with little spare to invest in the Church services or the Church building. Even so with village fundraising and grants we have managed some significant projects over the last 20 years which have cost £75,000.

The finances started to change a few years ago when two legacies totalling £15,000 were received. Last year with the benefit of these legacies, careful management of the Church finances, the generosity of villagers who committed their time and their own money to maintain St Mary's, plus the annual contribution from the Red Lion Social Club, we ended up with over £40,000 in the accounts. This however is still not enough to carry out the essential repairs.

We have now received an unexpected legacy of £175,000 which means that at the year-end we have just under £217,000 in the accounts! This should be enough to carry out the works needed to the Church building and leave some over for modernisation.

The PCC are to request the Church Architect to provide a list of the works needed to the Church building. Once this has been drawn up we will do a flyer around the village saying what is planned to happen. We are also looking to improve the environment of the Church for the various services and at the same time will let you know of our ideas in that connection.

A quinquennial survey was then carried out and this, plus ideas from the PCC formed the basis of the current refurbishment project. The list was

exhaustive and formed the basis of another letter around the village to let everyone know what was intended.

The first thing to happen was to upgrade the electrical supply to accommodate the wall mounted heaters all being turned on at the same time and to have more electrical heaters in the Chancel. This involved bringing in a 3 phase supply. Trees needed to be pruned, which involved a planning application and a tree surgeon. The cable was linked to a new supply board, so the electrician had to be in attendance as well as UK Network Powers and he then had to carry out extending the electrical circuits.

Then we turned to the need for a roof alarm. This involved the Church insurers who gave us a number of companies they had approved. We went with Marriott Security and the whole roof is covered by CCTV cameras, with motion sensors linked to a control centre.

Once the alarms were installed stone repairs were carried out by Bowden and Ward. Scaffolding both inside and outside the Church meant that it was closed and we used to the village hall instead for services.

Whilst the internal scaffolding was in place a structural engineer checked the roof timbers. The wooden pegs that could be reached from the scaffolding were replaced. The high level Clerestory window to the North elevation was also mostly renewed and with new glazing installed. As well as filling in various cracks internally, the stairs to the Bell Tower Chamber were repaired with new stone treads.

The stonework repairs were completed in May 2019.

The main works contract was granted to J G Restorations Ltd. These works involved removing all the pews, removing all the suspended flooring to the Nave, replacing some of the flooring removed with a new stone floor so we could have an area around the centre of the Nave for chairs and space at the front of the Nave for a performance space; replacing all rotten and worm-eaten parquet flooring to the Nave and South Aisle and replacing the suspended flooring with new suspended oak floors.

In addition the drainage channel around the Church was to be re-leveled so that the rainwater would travel the length of the Church to both the North and South elevations and the drainage channel lined with concrete

canvas. The bell tower ceiling was also to be renewed. In addition the porch roof was recovered with lead.

The pulpit, the font cover and the wooden flower stands were taken away by Bates and Lambourne to be refurbished, and the pulpit modified.

All these works started in August 2019.

During the excavation for the new floor foundations a few bones were recovered which were re-interred in the Church in a service led by the Vicar.

When the drains were being re-laid with the new concrete canvas (which is an initially flexible impermeable lining to the base of the drainage channel) it was found that all the land drains were totally blocked so for at least the last 60 years the water coming from the roof had just permeated into the ground.

When the bell tower ceiling was being renewed it was found that hidden out of sight was a hatch through which the bells could be lowered for repair.

After the main works were complete we set about finishing the project, bringing most of the pews back, selling the old redundant pipe organ on E-bay, installing two additional powered speakers, fixing the infrared heaters to the South Chancel wall, putting up a fire proofed curtain at the South door, fixing the leaking West door and installing guttering to the Chancel roof. Additionally the bells were scheduled to be taken down, cleaned, the treble welded as it was cracked, and then rehung with an electronic striking mechanism.

Covid struck and the Church was closed, so everything slowed up.

Whites of Appleton, who were to take the bells down, effectively closed and furloughed their staff. After they returned to work one of their staff tested positive for Covid so the date in January/ February 2020 for the removal of the bells had to be extended to the same period in 2021.

The gutters and door repairs were carried out during the time the Church was closed, and has made a huge difference. Instead of water pouring down the Chancel walls it is captured in the gutters and discharges via downpipes into the drainage gully. The gutters also have "hedgehogs"

in them to prevent them being blocked by leaves. This has worked successfully for the South Aisle gutters.

The infrared heaters were installed, and this has been the least successful part of the project. We were only given permission for those that don't glow red when turned on so instead of small heaters the heaters in the Chancel are visually intrusive. They were also expensive so we will have to live with these for some years to come.

In connection with the bells we knew the treble, cast in 1633, was cracked and part of the estimate Whites of Appleton were to send this to a specialist for welding. This was duly done and the bell returned to Whites.

A few days before they were to be returned to St Mary's, when the new headstock was being bolted to the treble, it cracked again. This time the crack was about 10 inches long and around the shoulder of the bell. This meant that the bell couldn't even be hung for striking, as there was a distinct possibility the main part of the bell would part company with that part secured to the headstock.

In August two bells were returned and hoisted into the bell tower. The cracked treble stayed with Whites. They were hanging a peal of ten in St Michael's Alnwick and one of the bells they removed was of a size, after being re-tuned, to fit through the hatch in St Mary's Ashendon. They agreed to let us have the bell at scrap value and also to tune it and hang the bell free of charge, as they had never before had a situation when having removed three bells they were only going to return two.

All three ringable bells are in place and for the first time in very many years sound out over Ashendon. They are not hung so that they can be rung full circle, but instead hung dead with electro magnet hammers used, operated from the Vestry.

So that is the very brief history of the refurbishment project. It cost £208,782. We recovered £31,158 - through grants from the Listed Places of Worship scheme, (over £30,000), Bucks Historic Churches Trust (£500) and the Church Authorities (£500) and was only possible thanks to a generous legacy from the estate of Margaret Elizabeth Hales (nee Bunyan) who was baptised in the Church on 19th May 1929 and who lived on the South Coast. She was distantly related to the Ewers family, although we do not know which branch and also the Cherry family, where we have a similar problem. She also donated part of her

estate to another Church. She had no other connection with St Mary's so her generosity has meant that long overdue repairs have been carried out, improvements made to the layout of the Nave, with the bells ringing out for the first time in about 50 years.

To recap,

3 phase electricity installed, significant electrical wiring carried out, repointing of some stonework internally and externally, replacement of the North central clerestory window, new stonework cut in to the Nave North lower window, around the South Chancel window, the North Clerestory window and the Chancel East wall, stabilisation of the South Clerestory windows, new gutters to the Chancel roof, repairs to the Nave roof, a new roof to the porch, re-ordering of the interior, new flooring to most of the Nave, refacing the stairs to the bell chamber, replacement of the bell tower ceiling, refurbishment and re-hanging of the bells, new external drainage, a roof alarm, improved heating, improved sound system, removal of the organ, and works to some of the pews, the pulpit, font cover, flower stands, and porch seat. All starting in 2018 and completed in 2021.

Photographs of the various stages are being displayed in the Church.

Peter Smettem