



BROOKLANDS 24 BROOKLANDS AVENUE CAMBRIDGE CB2 8BU
 Telephone 01223 582700 Facsimile 01223 582701
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In our letter of 23 April 2013 we set out the significance of the building and adumbrated the argument for allowing time for the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust to explore the possibility of securing the future of at least part of the church. While it decided in principle to proceed with the scheme for demolition, the Committee allowed the Trust time to explore that possibility. Although the Trust proved unable to devise a feasible scheme to secure the church's future, even in part, Mr and Mrs Cottee have come forward and have indicated their readiness to acquire the church and repair and convert part of it.

While we are aware of the Committee's misgivings about Mr and Mrs Cottee's proposals we are not persuaded that they would not secure the future of a significant part of the church. Although the approach made by the Cottees through or with the Trust included a request for some funding from the Diocese, our understanding is that they would be prepared to acquire the

After careful consideration, English Heritage wish to sustain our objection to the demolition of St. Peter's Church. While we understand the reasoning which lead the Committee to its decision, and are conscious both of the extended period during which the church has been unused and of its poor condition, we do not believe that the case for demolition has been substantiated.

Thank you for your letter of 13 January 2014 concerning the decision of the Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee of the Church Commissioners that the draft scheme for the demolition of St. Peter's Church at Birch should proceed. I have since been very helpfully briefed by your colleague, Jeremy Tipping, and have spoken both to the Archdeacon of Colchester and to the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust and the amenity societies.

**MISSION AND PASTORAL MEASURE 2011
 Closed Church of Birch St. Peter, Birch, Essex**

Dear Mr Lewis,

31 January 2014

Paul Lewis, BA, Dip Ed, MRTPI,
 Church Commissioners,
 Church House,
 Great Smith Street,
 London
 SW1P 3AZ

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church for a nominal sum and proceed. If they are willing to invest their capital in this project the fact that the repaired part of the church would be worth less than their investment would not invalidate their scheme. The delay caused by publishing a further scheme, securing the necessary approvals and carrying out the works may be regrettable but not to such a degree as to justify refusal of this approach.

English Heritage must consider the proposed demolition in the light of the Government's policy in respect of historic buildings, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (2012). The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, and the protection and enhancement of the historic environment is part of the environmental dimension of sustainable development (NPPF, 7). For this reason great weight should be accorded to the conservation of designated heritage assets (NPPF, 132). Strict tests are provided in respect of the demolition of listed buildings (NPPF, 133). English Heritage does not believe that these tests have been met.

While we sympathise with the difficulties with which the lengthy and problematic case of St. Peter's has confronted the Commissioners, English Heritage considers that the Committee's decision to allow the Trust time to explore means of securing the repair and reuse of at least the most significant part of the church has borne fruit, albeit not in a manner which either the Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee or the Trust anticipated. Given the willingness of Mr and Mrs Cottee to take on responsibility for the church and to invest large sums in a scheme to secure the repair of a substantial part of the church, it would be appropriate for the Committee to withdraw the present scheme and enable the Cottées to proceed. English Heritage therefore both maintain our objection to the scheme permitting the demolition of the closed church of St. Peter and enjoins the Committee to reconsider its decision.

Yours sincerely,

John Neale

John Neale

Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

01223 582719 / 07968 320996

john.neale@english-heritage.org.uk

cc Diocese of Chelmsford, Archdeacon of Colchester, Colchester Borough Council, Simon Cairns; Colchester and North-East Essex Building Preservation Trust, David Balcombe; AMS, Matthew Saunders; Victorian Society, Tom Ashley





There is no dispute that St. Peter's Church is of considerable significance for a number of reasons.

Advice

The Church of St. Peter at Birch is a fine example of the Victorian Gothic Revival. This notwithstanding, it is now nearly 23 years that the building's future has been in doubt. The present renewal of the Pastoral Scheme for the demolition of the church follows from the failure of all previous efforts to secure a viable future for the building. English Heritage must advise the Church Commissioners that the loss of the church would be a considerable one, avowedly contrary to the aspirations of Government policy. Given the recent initiative by the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust to make a final effort to save if not the church entire then at least its tower and spire, we strongly advise the Commissioners to delay this Pastoral Scheme in order to allow the Trust to establish whether its proposals for the church could succeed.

Summary

Thank you for your letter of 2 January 2013 concerning the draft Pastoral Scheme for the demolition of St. Peter's Church at Birch. Only last week I became aware that the letter I drafted in response was never sent, for which I apologise. English Heritage's response to the draft scheme is set out below, and I hope that the Commissioners' Committee will be able to take it into account at its meeting tomorrow.

THE CLOSED CHURCH BUILDING OF BIRCH ST. PETER, DIOCESE OF CHELMSFORD

Dear Mrs Griffiths,

Your ref. RC08/40CL

23 April 2013

Anne Griffiths,
Closed Churches Division,
Church Commissioners,
Church House,
Great Smith Street,
London
SW1P 3AZ

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From an architectural perspective, the church is a fine example of the Victorian Gothic Revival. Here in 1849-50, with a modest budget, patron and architect produced an accomplished manifestation of the Gothic tradition at the Decorated style, the most admired manifestation of the Gothic tradition at the time. The architect, S.S. Teulon, is best known for the eccentricity or wilfulness of many of his works, but, as St. Peter's demonstrates, he was able to work in a conventional manner, albeit one thoroughly imbued both with an understanding of the ecclesiastical architecture of the medieval period and the ability to work with it as a living style. The result is accomplished without excess or, as Pevsner described it, "ambitious but not showy".

From an historical perspective, the church embodies the 19th century revival not only of Gothic architecture but of a religious practice reformed but rooted in the traditions of the medieval church, coupled with the period's extraordinarily ambitious approach to church building and restoration. It also embodies – as the successor to the medieval church demolished in 1849 – the long Christian history of Birch.

Finally, from a topographical perspective the church occupies an important place both within the village and the wider landscape. Its site is that of the medieval church and to its south was the site of Birch castle. Placed on a rise at the centre of the long village street, it gives definition to the settlement. Its tower and spire – the latter, of course, an unusual feature in Essex – can be seen over a wide stretch of the undulating landscape of this part of the county.

St. Peter's Church is listed at grade II on account of its special architectural and historic interest. Birch itself is designated as a conservation area.

It is now the twenty-third year since St. Peter's was declared redundant. An initial draft scheme to demolish the church was brought forward in 1994, four years after redundancy. This was not pursued while a feasibility study was undertaken to assess whether the church might be reused; and subsequently at least three schemes for reuse have been investigated, those of the Spire Arts Trust, Courtland Properties and, latterly, a private scheme to repair the building as part house, part museum. Since receiving your letter English Heritage has been made aware of a further attempt to secure the future of the church – or of part of it – initiated by the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust.

The loss of so substantial and accomplished an historic building, and with it that of the physical manifestation of the Christian presence in Birch, would be a profound one. It would, unmistakably, mark a failure to meet the aspiration of the Government's planning policy to secure the conservation of buildings of





such architectural and historic importance, as expressed in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF paragraph 17). There will be, of course, circumstances in which this aspiration cannot be met, and there is no doubt that this has proved a most difficult case.

English Heritage indicated previously – following the failure of the Spire Arts Trust's scheme in 2002 – that it would not sustain its objection to demolition. Given the failure of the two subsequent attempts to secure the building's future we would be reluctant to alter that position now. Despite this, we are mindful that, given the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust's initiative, the rigorous tests contained in the National Planning Policy Framework against which to assess the proposed demolition of listed buildings have not been met; and we are also aware that two of the national amenity societies have formally objected to this draft Pastoral Scheme.

English Heritage would encourage the Church Commissioners to make a further effort to avoid the complete loss of St. Peter's Church. The failures of the past years notwithstanding, it remains possible that something positive could be achieved. In this extreme an approach that does not yet appear to have been explored fully – that of securing the tower and spire while demolishing the body of the church – could prove successful. The Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust propose something along these lines, and indeed their provisional scheme might secure a little more than the retention of the tower and spire alone. English Heritage has long maintained a pragmatic approach to proposals to repair and reuse St. Peter's Church, and we would endorse the approach now proposed by the Trust.

Recommendation

The plight of St. Peter's Church has been a matter of widespread concern for many years. English Heritage recognises that in the twenty-three years since its redundancy no viable scheme for the repair and reuse of the building has been found. Nevertheless we strongly encourage the Church Commissioners to allow some further time in the hope that the Colchester and North East Essex Building Preservation Trust may find a way of averting the demolition of the church. In particular we believe that consideration ought to be given to the possibility of securing the future of the tower and spire even if the conservation of the building as a whole remains beyond reach.





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John Neale
 Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

John Neale

Yours sincerely,

I apologise again for our failure to send the original draft of this letter.

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