

Harvey Howlett

From: NEALE, John <John.Neale@english-heritage.org.uk>
Sent: 08 February 2013 14:18
To: Anne Griffiths
Subject: RE: Birch St Peter

VF-ITEM-ID: 2456333:2448117:1675:

Dear Anne,

Below please find our response to the draft Pastoral Scheme for the demolition of St. Peter's, Birch. I apologise for the delay due to my illness this week. I also apologise for the fact that it is not yet properly set out - & will remedy this next week.

John

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Summary

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 our efforts to date 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. While, in the circumstances, we maintain the position we established several years ago, of not formally opposing the measure, we strongly advise the Commissioners to make further efforts to save if not the church then its tower and spire.

Advice

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

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 essay in the "Middle Pointed" (or 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. If the last of these has now come to nothing then there is no present prospect of securing the church's future and it is presumably for that reason that the current scheme has been proposed.

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, although the prospects for securing the future of the church appear slight or non-existent, it could be argued that 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.

While English Heritage would not formally object to the draft Pastoral Scheme, we would nevertheless 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. The constructive suggestion has been made that a meeting of all potential interested parties be held, perhaps in the village. While it is improbable that this itself would result in the creation of a viable scheme for the future of the building as a whole, it is possible that 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 find support.

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. We do not, therefore, formally oppose this draft Pastoral Scheme for the demolition of the church. We do, however, strongly encourage the Church Commissioners to allow some further time in the hope that the loss of the church can be averted. 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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