

From: Paul Lewis
Sent: 11 November 2013 20:58
To: Jeremy Tipping
Subject: Fwd: St Peter's Birch

Sent from my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

From: Geoff Russell Grant <geoff@bretonheath.me.uk>
Date: 11 November 2013 18:06:27 GMT
To: Paul Lewis <paul.lewis@churchofengland.org>
Cc: Annette Cooper <a.colchester@chelmsford.anglican.org>, "kevin@birchandwintree.com" <kevin@birchandwintree.com>, "nwhitehead@chelmsford.anglican.org" <nwhitehead@chelmsford.anglican.org>, "davidbalcombe@email.com" <davidbalcombe@email.com>
Subject: St Peter's Birch

Dear Mr Lewis

Anne Griffiths tells me you are the person to contact on this.

I have been reading the Colchester & North East Essex Buildings Preservation Trust report on the church, on their website. I was on the working party when the BPT put forward a heritage lottery bid around year 2000, so I am broadly familiar with what needs to be done to develop a case that will stand up to scrutiny.

I am not at all convinced by the information available to me. Such information as is accessible appears to me to be incomplete and inconsistent as itemised below.

Detailed Comments on the BPT Project Viability Study

1. No appendices on the website.
2. £180,000 from the Diocese seems a lot; not sure whence that figure came, but one would hope the Diocese has provided it or agreed it. It is a lot more than the £35 - 44,000 demolition costs they instance in section 4.
3. On page 22 'there appear to have been approximately 20 burials over the past 20 years'. I have the Burials Register in front of me. Entry 588 - December 1993 to Entry 647 - the last entry = 59 entries. I counted about 40 burials and 19 interments of ashes.
4. On the dimensions shown for floor areas and thus costs per sq.m there are significant discrepancies.
I have taken the cost figures from the individual estimates; however, the Summary (4.3) reduces the fees slightly. I have not recalculated them based on the lower figures, as the differences will not be great.
Option 1 - Per Drawings = 313sqm.
Per text - Spire 232, link 55, Chancel 110 = 397sq.m

Cost £1,677,000 (summary £1,567,500)

Cost/sq.m = £4224 based on text figures, or £5358 based on drawings.

Option 2A - per Drawings $175 + 184 = 359$ sq.m

per text $232 + 150 = 382$ sq.m

Cost £1,854,451 (Summary £1,735,500)

Cost/sq.m = £4855 based on text figures, or £5166 based on drawings.

Option 3 - per Drawings 175 sq.m. No figures in text.

Cost £1,226,571 (Summary £1,180,400)

Cost /sq.m = £7009 (high, but this is for two separate houses so some increase might be expected)

Option 4 (Cottee)

The area is shown on drawings as 529 sq.m with costs of £1,209,564. That gives a figure of £2286/sq.m. The text says £2200 which is fair enough. Fees are shown as "18% £40,000". 18% of the stated construction works (£1,040,917) is £187,365. If the full cost of fees, plus the VAT on it, were used for comparative purposes, the total cost would be:
 $£1,209,164 - £40,000 + £187,365 + 20\% \times £147,365 = £1,386,002$. Cost/sq.m = £2620.

So the total cost, even after increasing the fees (assuming the reduction in fees is explained by Mr Cottee not charging himself) is considerably less than the cost per sq.m of any of the previous options.

I would like to see an explanation as to how the cost figures differ so significantly.

Particularly in view of the difficulty in reconciling some of the figures in the Report. I am sure this was prepared under great time pressure, but that gives even greater concern for consistency, completeness and accuracy, not just in the basic arithmetic, but in other aspects which are less easy to assess, especially in the absence of the appendices.

There is a mention of the need to refine the Option 4 plans to accommodate Listed Building Consent, but this is brushed aside on the basis that it will not affect the cost. There is no evidence shown to support that assumption.

5. On p42, 4.5 Option 4, I read

"Extent of fabric retention.

Most of the church fabric is kept and restored, retaining the appearance of the church largely intact when viewed from the North, East and West."

This is surely misleading, as the proposal clearly shows that both the gable end walls to the south aisle will be demolished.

In the preceding paragraph it says "It is possible that the gable end walls of the South aisle could also be retained, subject to structural assessment" but there is no stated intent to do that, and the plans and cost estimates exclude this.

6. You will be aware that the property actually lies within the parish of Layer Breton with Birch. The parish church is in Layer Breton. There are two villages with an interest in this, not just Birch.

The Study (page 13) refers to Birch and Birch Green, but in church and secular terms they are simply the village of Birch. The conservation area round St Peter's is a very small part of the village. The 'Almshouses' were actually the workhouse. Birch has no shop, no pub and no post office. The pub in Layer Breton hosts the post office and stocks a few items of food etc. In claiming to seek representative local opinion, it is important to grasp a few basic facts. The shop closed recently, so that is an understandable error.

Summary

Whilst I recognise the need to preserve heritage assets, this is Church property. The Spire is

fast becoming an idol, and I sense that those feeding the furnace are already feeling the heat. The Church will, I am sure, think this one through carefully, without bowing down. It is very difficult to see what enforceable guarantees can be given as regards the future. In the long term, this may be the thin end of the wedge. Without a high degree of certainty, we simply have four unviable options. That is a pity, but it is consistent with all the efforts since closure in 1986. The Lottery bid came close to preserving the whole building, providing a centre for creative arts and learning, and keeping it open to the public. This is a far cry from that.

Kind regards

Geoff Russell Grant