

**From:** Carr at Nelmes <carr.nelmes@tiscali.co.uk>  
**Sent:** 17 April 2013 17:19  
**To:** Harvey Howlett  
**Cc:** Annette Cooper; Kevin Quinlan  
**Subject:** Closed Church of Birch St Peter

FAO Mr Harvey Howlett, Casework Support Manager, Closed Churches Division, Church Commissioners.

Your Ref: RCRC08/40CL

Dear Mr Howlett,

**Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011**  
**Closed Church of Birch St Peter**

Thank you for your letter of 8th April and the documents which were enclosed.

I am unable to attend the meeting of the Church Buildings Committee planned for 24th April but would like to offer the following comments for the committee's consideration:

I believe the Archdeacon of Colchester's letter of 8th April is an admirable and accurate summary of the hard facts relating to the history of events since the closure of Birch church and to the proposed scheme for demolition. In my view it accurately reflects the realities of the local situation, unlike some of the comments made by those opposing the scheme for demolition.

Item 4 of the Archdeacon's letter makes for sobering reading. It is disturbing to realise just how much has been spent on repairs to the building and its insurance since closure. Also the costs, and amount, of church staff time spent on care of the building and seeking a suitable alternative use for it. When church finances and manpower resources are so stretched, can it really be sensible or responsible to continue spending substantial sums of money and amounts of staff time on a long-redundant and much decayed building? The money and time would be much more profitably spent on the ongoing mission and ministry of the church.

I note with interest that none of the individuals or bodies who have made representations opposing the proposed demolition, actually live in, or are based in, Birch or its locality. In contrast, each of the representations in support of the scheme for demolition has been made by an individual who does actually reside in the locality and has done so for a number of years.

Reading the representations of the AMS and the Victorian Society, I do wonder what grounds these bodies have for believing that, after all the failed attempts over the last 23 years, there is any realistic prospect of an 'eleventh hour' scheme to save the building.

Colchester Borough Council's letter of 24th January states "The Church of St Peter is a nationally important building by (an) important architect and is listed grade II for its special architectural or historic interest. The church forms both a significant local landmark and the centre piece of the Birch Conservation Area." I would strongly question the assertions that the church is "a nationally important building", and that Teulon was an 'important' architect, and that the church has "special architectural or historic interest". One might also question the extent to which the church is in any real, practical sense the centrepiece of the Birch Conservation Area.

When Courtland Properties made public their development proposals in 2006, I did some research and found the following on the website of The Archaeology Data Service: "BIRCH, GREAT, St Peter (and St Paul) - A large, solid Victorian church erected on the site of the medieval one, which was demolished in

1849. . . . Birch is a monument to senseless Victorian ecclesiastical vandalism, the replacement church is of little merit in its own class." That assessment of the present church being 'of little merit in its own class' seems to me realistic and fair. I am encouraged to know that members of your committee have recently visited Birch to see the state of the church for themselves and am confident they will be able to make their own judgments as to the validity of Colchester Borough Council's assertions about the architectural or historic importance of the building.

Taking as a whole, the representations opposing the proposed demolition, I sense a general recognition that there is little prospect of saving the main part of the church building. They do, however, urge that the tower and spire be preserved in some form. I do not deny for one moment that the spire is an attractive landmark. Nevertheless, one needs to be realistic about the practicalities of preserving the tower and spire. A few years ago I was in discussion with someone who, I believe, had some personal involvement in a structural survey of the spire. His very clear opinion was that any proper restoration would necessitate a complete dismantling and rebuilding of the spire. A very expensive exercise.

Any scheme to restore the spire must include proper financial provision for its future care and maintenance. This issue arose when Courtland Properties came to speak to Birch Parish Council about its proposals in June 2006. The village hall was packed with local residents. It became clear that Courtland itself did not intend to accept the long-term responsibility for the tower and spire. The developer talked about setting up an endowment trust for the purpose, into which it would inject some funds, but indicated it would not be fully funding the trust. We were left with the impression that Courtland expected the village and its residents to contribute to the endowment. The response of those attending the meeting was unambiguous. I do not think the local community's appetite to shoulder such a responsibility, or its ability to do so, has changed since that meeting. I believe the Archdeacon of Colchester has correctly understood local feeling when she writes in item 7 of her letter "we would think that the possibility of a local group/trust taking ownership of the tower and spire highly unlikely".

I hope the above additional comments are of some assistance to your committee as it considers the various representations which have been made.

Yours sincerely

(Revd) Richard Carr

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