

## **Wisbech St Peter and St Pauls: A Church for the Future**

Wisbech is noted for its architecture and St Peter and St Paul's Church, one of the oldest surviving buildings sits proudly in the heart of the town surrounded by the Coronation Gardens and neighbouring Wisbech Museum and the notable Georgian Crescent. The church was founded in the first quarter of the twelfth century and retains a fascinating history of expansion and development that is reflected in the mixed Architectural features that make up the building.

Wisbech was once a very prosperous town and thus money was available for rebuilding and restoration through the Guilds, whose activities largely dominated the church in the Middle Ages. So now the church has examples of all periods of architecture: Norman, Early English with its Gothic arches replacing the lost Norman colonnade, Decorated (especially the main east window) and Perpendicular- including the aisles. Beautiful in its details, viewed as whole to some it is strange, even Pevsner thought it "too varied", yet it is widely considered to be in the top one hundred churches in the country. The oldest part is the spectacular colonnade of Norman arches and pillars to the north of the main nave. There are two very fine memorials in the north chancel, one to Thomas and Audrey Parke and the other to Matthias Taylor and his wife. Taylor held the office of Constable of the Castle, not very successfully, as eight Jesuit prisoners in his charge managed to escape! There is also a splendid Royal coat of arms at the west end belonging to the Restoration period.

The site of the church was once restricted to the west by the moat of the castle and to the east by the River Ouse. This forced the church to expand sideways to accommodate the ever-growing population of the 14th century. The 12th century Norman Fabric was extended to create an extremely broad building with an unusual arrangement of a second Nave between two aisles. Following the collapse of the tower in 1500 the two naves were united under one roof. It is therefore highly unusual and is the only church in the country with two naves under a single roof.

The church organ built by Harrison Harrison is recognised as one of the finest in East Anglia and the tower houses a peal of ten bells.

The church is not only an important local landmark, it is also a building cherished by the local community. Like many PCCs, we have long had a vision to build on our work with the wider community and develop the church into a welcoming space for all people. A change of Architect and a new Quinquennial Inspection in 2017 highlighted issues with the building, the urgent nature of which took us all by surprise, but it became the inspiration to realise our vision. After a visit from Historic England in June 2018, the church was added to the Heritage at Risk register. The PCC then submitted a first-round application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2018 which was successful. A development period followed in which opening-up works were completed, activities piloted, and permissions obtained.

### **A Summary of the Condition of the Building**

The roofs are no longer watertight: fixings to the lead roof coverings on the North and South Aisles have rusted and failed allowing the lead sheets to slip down the roof slope. Historic

repairs have nailed them to the batten roll in an attempt to prevent further slippage, however this has now caused numerous tears. There are large open holes in the lead rolls at the ridges of the Nave and Chancel and the lead flashings are failing throughout, with many patch repairs evident and now failing again. Subsequent leaks have caused decay of the timber roof structures below. This has already caused one structural failure in the South Aisle roof- severe degradation to one of the purlin ends required an area below to be cordoned off in 2017 for safety until an emergency repair could be undertaken. A patch repair with stainless steel strapping was installed to reduce the risk of collapse, however if left the condition will worsen and deterioration will hasten, risking loss of further historic fabric and forcing a much larger repair requirement in the future.

There are extensive deep cracks running through the masonry of the stair turret at the west end of the Nave. Numerous historic repairs are evident, however these cracks have reopened, evidencing an ongoing problem. Internally the treads of the steps are broken and detaching from the wall, leaving them unsafe to use. There are large sections of loose masonry which, if not addressed, could fall onto the public footpath below.

Rusting ferramenta in the Vestry windows has caused spalling and extensive cracking through the stonework which now requires extensive structural repair. During the investigative work in the Development Stage, the deterioration of the Vestry windows was found to be greater than anticipated after an inspection by Devlin Plummer Stained Glass.

The drainage channel does not effectively carry rainwater away from the building. The falls allow water to pool and open joints and cracks throughout the concrete channel allow water to seep through. Moisture is then trapped below the channel and a damp environment is maintained at the base of the walls which saturates the masonry, causing it to degrade with potential for structural movement of the footings.

Vegetation growth has become established at high level in the tower and failure to remove it will allow roots to develop displacing high level masonry.

## **Our Project**

A major project totalling over £500,000 has received support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, small local Trusts and organisations and even our local MP Steve Barclay who made a site visit recently.

The urgent repairs consist of: work to nave, chancel and south aisle lead roofs and gutters, including replacing lead, refixing coping stones and allowing for replacement of decayed timbers as necessary; masonry repairs to the stair turret at the west end of the nave; installing east to west and north to south tie bars and removing an existing cement fillet from below string course of the south abutment; works to the north and south clerestory, south aisle and vestry windows, including replacing lead flashings, stone repairs, repairing loose mortar and constructing a new double slate crease over the flashings; overhauling rainwater goods; strengthening the silence chamber floor; redecorating the base of the tower.

The project also includes the installation a WC and kitchenette within the north aisle, including drainage and plumbing and install a new flower arrangers' unit.

Alongside this, a dedicated team of volunteers are delivering a heritage engagement programme, soup kitchen and new fundraising activities – most of this is due to be delivered after the repairs and capital works have been completed in 2022.

St Peter and St Paul's Church is both physically and strategically placed to become a community, learning and heritage hub in a key Fenland town. Our project will restore and enhance the building so that it can meet the needs of our growing, multi-cultural community.

**Additional Documents available on request:**

- Statement of Significance
- Full costs breakdown for National Lottery Heritage Fund supported project
- Project timeline – Gantt Chart
- Project Management Structure
- Full Opening-up Report