

Short case study:

Ss. Peter, Paul & Philomena, New Brighton, Merseyside - *'A landmark on the Wirral'*



Background

This church is known as the 'Dome of Home' because its striking copper dome can be seen from the Mersey and was so nicknamed by merchant seamen returning to Liverpool during the Second World War.

An architecturally ambitious basilica, Ss Peter, Paul and St Philomena dominates Wirral's skyline. It was built as the Catholic parish church in 1935 to serve the Catholic population of the towns of Wallasey and the seaside resort of New Brighton. It is a cathedral sized basilica, originally with a seating capacity of 700, catering for the large influx of holiday makers during the summer season.

This grade II church was controversially closed as a place of worship in 2008 and fell into severe disrepair, with long term water ingress through the dome and asphalt roofs, failing rainwater goods, brickwork decay and corroded steel window frames. During its closure, the space was turned into a store.

A lifeline to restoration of the building and its reopening as a place of worship began when the Roman Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury set up a full repair lease with The Institute of Christ the King in 2011, to reopen the church as a Roman Catholic Shrine.

Founded in 1990, The Institute of Christ the King is a traditional, international order of priests, based in Florence, Italy. The priests are called 'Canons' because they sing prayers of the church in Gregorian chant and services are said in Latin, the traditional language of the church. The Institute has a proven track record of restoring churches in Europe, Africa and the United States.

I learnt about this project as part of another research project, I was involved with. The key impetus to this project was the vision to restore this building as a place of worship. This is a traditional order and people travel long distances to come to visit and attend services

because it was the first church of its kind in the country in 2011. During the restoration project, the church has come to realise the value of using the church's heritage to engage with their community and people from further afield. Learning about this project, I was particularly impressed by the leadership shown by their project leader who developed and managed four Activity Programmes through four phases of National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) funding.

'We haven't changed the purpose of the building – the purpose is a Place of Worship. We've kind of used the heritage and the heritage activities that we've been able to develop, to welcome all people. That's the whole point – to welcome all people who've forgotten the place of the church, what it used to be and what it was for their families. That has meant a lot to local people as well as the people who come from all over to come to our church.' (Project Leader, July 2018)

Reflecting the priority, this project gave to re-opening the church as a place of worship, the church began by holding some fundraising events, which raised £20,000. This was put towards getting the electrics, heating and sound system operating and some general repairs so that the church could be reopened by March 2012.

Restoring the building was a much bigger undertaking. A multi-phased approach was agreed and three programmes of work have now been completed each as a separate project and a fourth phase is currently underway.

Phase 1 which commenced in 2013 undertook priority repairs to the main roof and urgent repointing, concrete repairs and high-level window repairs.

Phase 2, conducted between July 2015 and March 2016 included urgent concrete and brickwork repairs, more roof repairs and some leaded window repairs. They also created a Visitor Information Centre, shop and community space in the narthex at the rear of the church, as well as updated electrics, heating and lighting in the narthex.

Phase 3, conducted between June 2017 and February 2018, included reroofing and insulating the barrel-vaulted roofs over the side chapels, redesigned and improved access to the parapet gutters, replacement of rainwater and refurbishment of eleven metal windows. They also installed a kitchenette and a toilet.

The 4th phase, currently underway and due to complete in February 2021, is to undertake repairs to the Dome and the Sanctuary barrel roof by covering it with a membrane, repointing of brickwork, restoration of steel windows and cast-iron rainwater goods and treating the structural concrete problems to make the whole church safe and watertight.

All four phases have been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund who have contributed over £600k to a project with total costs of over £1m. This has meant the requirement to develop an Activity Programme for each phase with the aim of finding ways of engaging their community with the building's heritage.

Canon Amaury Montjean, Rector of the Church understands the opportunity this brings and says:

'the NLHF encourage Activities to welcome more people to this church through heritage. It is open all day, every day, for everyone and the Activities help more people understand the church and enjoy the sanctuary provided here'. (Canon Amaury Montjean, 2018)

That said, developing and managing the delivery of four Activity Programmes is a huge task and much of that achievement is down to the Project Leader, a highly motivated and energetic person. When I interviewed her in February 2020, it was clear, she still has the same enthusiasm and drive as at the beginning of the first phase and is currently undertaking leadership of the fourth phase of work. (However, she is clear that she is hoping to retire after this phase and is setting up volunteers to take over).

A Restoration Committee was set up by volunteers in 2012 with the Rector as the Chair. It was actively run by the Project Leader who worked closely with the Project Architect to understand the building and new capital works and built up a large crowd of volunteers to support all the activities. She has managed to retain a group of volunteers throughout the project which is no small achievement. She has been very productive in bringing in 'experts' and partners such as universities, dementia specialists to help with some of the more specialist activities. In the last year, they have been able to recruit and pay for a engagement officer and a volunteer manager.

She says that the key to this project was that *'theirs is a traditional order and the congregation are very loyal and travel long distances to come to church because it was the first church of its kind in the country in 2011'*.

The second key is giving people specific roles and responsibility as *'it is not a one-person job'*.

'We have split up the activities so that I oversee it all and am involved in all of the activities, but we have particular people who are in charge of the different activities and aspects. It also means that if something happens to one of us, the others will be able to take over.' (Project Leader)

She described how the group of volunteers have changed over time as *'some have left for personal reasons such as illness or getting a job, while others have latched on and we have picked up new people as we have gone along. Important to realise what people's particular skills are. People have very clearly fallen into niches where they work best'*. When asked about her continuing enthusiasm, she (humbly) agrees that *'enthusiasm kind of rubs off and now the volunteers are more enthusiastic than me. It's brilliant. And they are getting very impatient to complete the project'*.

She works to ensure that each person feels part of the team:

'It is about sharing information and not keeping it all to yourself. It is about responding straight away. It is really important that when one of the key people asks

something that I do my best to get them an answer. It is about making sure we make decisions so that things can move forward'.

'It is making everyone feel welcome. O yes, they do enjoy themselves. We organise regular volunteer activity events which are always fun'. (Project Leader)

The range of activities and outputs is evidence of her achievements. Over the last 6 years, they have produced leaflets and a guide book, improved their website and provided guided tours for visitors and school groups. They also started participating in Heritage Open Days.

Contacts were established with the School of Architecture at Liverpool University and the University of Central Lancashire and students came on organised tours of the church to see the conservation work in progress

In Phase 1, the church conducted four training sessions and trained a total of 40 people to be church guides.

'The heritage tours have been more successful than I could ever have imagined them to be. The volunteers really love it too – they love engaging the vast majority of people and the social side.' (Project Leader, November 2015)

In Phase 2, a webcam was installed on the dome of the church, from which can be seen the River Mersey, Liverpool Bay and the Docks. <http://www.wirralcam.org/>

'On a day in May 2015, when there were three Cunard cruise liners entering Liverpool, there were two million people visiting Merseyside and over 18,000 clicks on the webcam from nearly 7,000 different people'.

They also launched a film called *'Dome of Home: Restoring the past and building the future'*, which is an oral history recorded by locals. They also made the most of the opportunity to take part in a BBC2 Documentary called *'The Hairy Builder'*, which followed the work on the main contractor.

Phase 3 focused on how the church helped the local community during World War 2 including how it earned its nickname. The aim was to find imaginative ways of telling this story for visiting schools. There was a team of eight volunteers which put together an Audio Tour, with anecdotes from events during World War Two and some recorded oral histories. The local secondary school drama students also auditioned for 12 children's parts. They also recorded their own hymns and music from the war era to accompany the Audio Tour, with the help of a local sound engineer and conducted a large choral event of 70 adults and eight children singers. They introduced an interactive 'hats, evacuee and 1940s display', where they made 1940s-style hats for children to use for dressing up. The church also produced an Education Pack for school visits.

The audio tour won the Marsh Innovative Church Project Award in 2018

<https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/marsh-innovative-church-projects-award-2018-winners>

For Phase 4, the proposed Activity Programme includes a dementia-friendly oral history project, musical activities to bring the community together, a Secondary School Education Pack and Continued Professional Development for heritage professionals. There are also plans for a **Reformation Workshop** for university students to give them an idea of pre-Reformation Europe. They are working with both Liverpool and Wrexham Universities and hope to approach other universities to see if more are interested.

Before closure of the Parish church in 2008, there was a sustained congregation, but after closure, they went to the partner church at Holy Apostles and Martyrs. After reopening the church in 2012, some of the congregation returned and since the first phase of work, more people attend the church on a regular basis than before. They find many people travel from around the Wirral and beyond to attend Sunday mass. There are never less than 100 people in a service on a Sunday now (50 at the start of the project). They also conduct daily services during the week, getting 20-30 locals a day. The introduction of an accessible toilet has boosted numbers of young families. The building (pre-Covid-19) was open from 8:00 AM until 8:00 PM daily, with opportunities for quiet prayer and reflection in the church always available.

For more information about Ss Peter, Paul and St Philomena's Church, New Brighton go to <https://icksp.org.uk/> and <https://icksp.org.uk/newbrighton/restoration/>
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/domeofhome/>

Becky Payne

October 2020

This case study was produced as part of Empowering Design Practices. Empowering Design Practices is a research project exploring how community-led design can help empower those who look after historic places of worship to create more open, vibrant and sustainable places that respect and enhance their heritage. Working within this context, the project aims to develop insights and mechanisms (approaches, resources, training) to support community-led design and the development of places that connect and serve their communities.

Empowering Design Practices (2014-2020) is a collaboration between The Open University, The Glass-House Community Led Design, Historic England, National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance, working with consultants Stephen Smith (Wright & Wright Architects), Leo Care (Live Works) and Becky Payne.

The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, under the Connected Communities and Design highlight notice.

www.empoweringdesign.net