

Short case study:

### St Thomas' Church, Pear Street, Derby - '*Journeying Together*'



### Background

St Thomas' is a large urban grade II parish church in a Romanesque style of rock faced masonry of c.1881 by Joseph Peacock. A major feature is a 'wheel window' depicting Christ in Majesty and other fine stained glass by Nuttgens.

The parish is highly multicultural and facing significant issues related to multiple deprivation (it lies within the top 5% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country). Once a prosperous neighbourhood, this is now an area with high socio-economic deprivation and poor levels of literacy. It experiences high incidents of anti-social behaviour. There is a Hindu temple, three Sikh Gurdwara and nine mosques within walking distance of St Thomas. Whilst there remains a strong Hindu community, many of the Sikhs and Muslims are moving out towards Littleover. There is now an influx of Slovak and Romanians which has generated a number of new tensions and problems.

I learnt about this project as part of another piece of research and interviewed the incumbent several times during 2016, 2017 and 2018. I was impressed not only by their amazing long-term vision but also by the way, they approached engagement with the local community. They have achieved so much, but it has already taken 9 years and they are still working on it.

The **vision** was to rescue St Thomas' Church and bring it back as a place of worship and a centre for community outreach. They were starting from a pretty desperate base. Once a popular and prosperous church, it had over a number of years, seen its congregation dwindle and unable to pay its parish share.

The 2010 Quinquennial Inspection Report had identified that the building had 'very serious problems associated with blocked or broken rainwater goods and the theft of some lead linings of valley gutters. Water ingress had led to the growth of vegetation outside and discolouration and salt efflorescence inside and had begun to trigger incidences of rot in the floor boards and vestry roof. In October 2013, it was added to

Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-register/>

The building could have been lost but for the efforts of a core of dedicated people. During the on-going discussions about closing the church, they had been holding occasional services – five a year – which enabled it to remain open. It was in fact closed (but was not de-consecrated) for a short time in 2011 and services moved to the nearby St James Church Centre.

*'When I first arrived in 2011, St Thomas' was boarded up and water was pouring in and there was water all over the floor and undergrowth growing out of the stonework. Having the got the roof and rainwater goods repaired and created a new garden, the perception of the people in the local community is that this is now a happening place and a place where things are going on. It did look like it had died. (Revd Simon Cartwright, March 2017)*

They started by developing a new Mission Action Plan and looking at how local community and social issues could be met and a Fareshare <https://fareshare.org.uk/> project was opened in the church. The Revd Simon Cartwright was appointed as the new Team Community Minister and Chair of the "Growing Communities Together" (GTC) group. This group started to use the church as a base. From these two actions, a vision of a future for St Thomas began to emerge as a place of worship and a venue for community activities.

*'We decided to reopen it because if we had closed the church and boarded up the windows, you're basically saying the Church of England isn't interested in this community. In fact, it is also in an ideal location being right next to the health centre, the police station and the library on the main shopping street. Opposite is the only piece of communal green space on the road. We can put a temporary canopy over it every now and then and have activities, almost like a village green as it's where people can start a community'. (Revd Simon Cartwright)*

The project was led by the Revd Simon Cartwright who had worked as a Regeneration Manager in London and Liverpool and had previously overseen another National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) funded project at a previous church. He was joined by a curate who had experience in community engagement. Together they created a very strong project team.

*'I have ten years' experience in working with partners and making connections. I've done exactly the same in Derby. I know about funding bids and project management – it's what I did for a living. That's why I am so grateful to combine my skills and calling to the Ministry'. Revd Simon Cartwright, 2020*

It was a very clearly envisioned project made up of three definite and connected phases:

- Phase 1, funded by a £184k NLHF grant (2015) enabled urgent high-level repairs and activities that focused on the church building and using the heritage to start engagement with the community around it
- Phase 2 completed in 2018, funded by a second NLHF grant (£225k), enabled repairs to the east end, the Rose window and south transept window and installation of toilets and kitchens. They built on the previous community activities to develop a second set which worked towards identifying sustainable uses.
- Phase 3 which is on-going, is about creating permanent separate spaces within the church and bringing people into the church and meeting their needs. Importantly this will also provide an income to sustain the building into the future.

The project team found volunteers prepared to lead on different parts of the projects eg: heritage and community engagement. A fourth volunteer took ownership of finance and procurement. The project leaders also recognised that the development and delivery of NLHF activities could be used to train and support volunteers building their skills, confidence and capacity. In 2015, a small group of 12 champions was created to carry through this phase of the project and they have now *'become the owners of the activities as time as gone along and also the champions of the whole project and have been part of making phases 2 and 3 happen'*.

They had applied for and got the full delivery costs for the activities which enabled the team to create a very strong set of activities held together under an overall theme which they called *Journeying Together*.

*'...because we want to encourage people to learn about St Thomas in the past, to be part of its story in the present and join us in the future both through worship and through our potential future use by the community'. (Revd Simon Cartwright, 2017)*

## **Art hoardings project**

For me, the most effective and impressive activity, was the **art hoardings** project which was undertaken as part of Phase 1. This told the story of the church and the local community in artwork, featuring architectural details and community stories painted on arch-shaped hoardings which were placed around the scaffolding during the repair work.

The idea was to give, from the beginning, *'a sense that the church wasn't just boarded up, but that it was exciting and to get a sense of the inside onto the outside so that people would be intrigued'* They managed to work with all age groups and the different cultures, *'encouraging a sense of local ownership of the building while also enhancing security while the scaffolding is in place'*.

They had applied for the costs of partnering with a local community arts group charity Art Core <https://www.artcoreuk.com/2015/06/25/st-thomas-church-2/> who would produce the art work in order to ensure the quality of the finished work which was going to remain up for the entirety of the repairs.

Art Core initially took key community people into the church to interest them in the building and the project. They then went into the local school, youth club, local West Indian Club, local Hindu temple where they ran about 10 workshops during the summer of 2015 where adults and children designed postcards showing the history of the church and the vision for the building and their thoughts on it.

About 350 postcards were produced and Art Core were asked to design hoardings based on those pictures. The hoardings were attached to the scaffold and this requirement was incorporated in the construction tender to ensure health and safety measures are adhered to.

It was very clear that the heritage and the activities created around that in Phase I really helped with community engagement and building a relationship with local people. *'The art pieces very definitely got people through the door, and it has by doing that opened the door to having the conversation pieces that we wanted to have with the community. They created a lot of attention and not one of the boards was damaged or graffitied'*.

They also reported that the activities enabled the congregation:

*'to understand the building a lot more and help us appreciate the heritage we have got. The beauty we always saw, but now we understand it and what is significant'*. (Revd Simon Cartwright, 2017)

While, the two NLHF grants have fully repaired the building so that it can be used, it was the success of using their heritage-based activities that have enabled them to re-engage with the wider community and to re-build a congregation and also to invite community groups to talk about how they might want to make use of the space. It is this which will provide a sustainable future for the building.

The good news was that even though in due course, the scaffolding came down, this was not the end of life for the hoardings. Such was their acknowledged quality, when they were taken down they were moved inside the church. Initially, they were used to 'hoard off' three sides of the inside of the church so that the transept where the Phase 2 works were taking place was behind boards. They were able to use the church for services and events throughout the works.

For Phase 3, the boards are being used to create separate spaces to test the future use of the building and see what might be done to provide different spaces for a range of community uses.

Phase 2 completed in 2018, and Phase 3 continues. Ideas are being developed around planning to screen more permanently off the aisles to create the separate spaces eg:

pods for offices, a counselling room, a training room, possibly a cafe. There is interest in setting up a mental health project. At the moment, it is being done temporarily to test out ideas before they start applying for the necessary permissions.

In 2017, they appointed a business planning consultant who helped them develop a business plan funded by a viability grant from NCT. They are now looking to apply for funding to enable their plans for wider community use.

They realised from the beginning the importance of reaching out to the wider community. As soon as they were able to use the building, they made sure that they opened once a week on Tuesday evening and once a month on Saturday afternoons when they put out a huge banner saying 'church open'.

They have continued using heritage to reach out the wider community. They now participate in Heritage Open Days, and on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2018, they organised a one-day Symposium at the church with a range of expert talks about its architecture and history of the church, ending with a talk about the continuing restoration and future plans.

One of the keys to the sustainability of this church is to bring it back into use as a place of worship and this is gradually succeeding. The Community Champions Group is continuing to develop and remains the core of a congregation of about 22 adults and 7 children. For the incumbent, this group of Champions is the most important outcome as they are key to making the next phases of this project happen.

You can find out more about St Thomas by going to:

<https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/13352/service-and-events/events-regular/>

There is also a very active Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/StThomasDerby>

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**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.

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