

St Mary's, Flowton

30 April 2014

Dear Parishioner

I am writing in response to your recent communication to the Parochial Church Council (PCC) of Flowton. It is my wish to place the current position regarding future changes to the church fabric in a proper context, address the issues raised in both correspondence and at the annual meeting of parishioners (29th April) and finally to outline some of the challenges faced by the parish.

Objections

1. *That there was no benefit to the parish in the proposed changes and no need to provide additional space for community events:*

An important component of our community life is the chance to provide opportunities to come together for reasons in addition to worship. Such events (e.g. workshops for children, fetes) also serve as an opportunity to raise supplementary income, vital to meeting the cost of keeping the church open. Bad weather can and does play havoc with outdoor events such as the summer fete; the workshop leaders have been considering ceasing them because of the lack of a suitable safe space and our last "Christmas Coffee Morning" proved to be a financial disaster due to the inability of visitors to access stalls which were blocking the nave.

2. *Removing some pews would lead to an unsightly clutter at the rear of the church:*

This was raised in the context of what has happened in a nearby parish where the space offered up following the removal of pews has now become an open storage area. The intention of the PCC (as outlined in the published plan) was to provide craftsman built cupboards at the west end of the church, entirely in keeping with the remaining pews that would provide storage for equipment (e.g. "Godly Play") but still be accessible to the children who come in at various times to use it. Similarly new shelves for prayer books and hymnals would be placed adjacent to the south entrance.

3. *There is no need to touch the pews and certainly not saw off the tops to nail up elsewhere:*

The pews in the NW corner of the church are rotting; although self-evident this is not simply the view of the PCC but that of the church architect. Every five years there is a survey of the fabric (Quinquennial) and in each subsequent report work on this area has become more urgent as they are now in a dangerous state and must not be used as any injury sustained would not be covered by our insurance; the members of the PCC would then be held personally liable for any damages. There was never any suggestion that the ornamental heads of the pews would be "*sawn off and nailed to the remaining pews*": it was questioned as to whether a carpenter might be able to incorporate them elsewhere but this was quickly rejected because of the different dimensions and wood used. There was also a possibility that the whole pew ends might be saved and used to replace the plain ones elsewhere in the church but that is an option that can only be given consideration following advice from a professional carpenter.

4. *The church is old and beautiful and we must protect our heritage:*

Absolutely, this is foremost in the minds of the PCC and any alterations that eventually take place will be done with the utmost sensitivity and have already taken into account the views of the Diocesan Advisory Committee, the church architect and The Victorian Society.

5. *The church cannot afford to buy replacement chairs:*

This has never been an issue; the PCC has an offer of chairs (at no cost) from the village hall committee in Somersham, about the only time that this might be taken up would be for the annual carol service. However, since the pews in question only seat between 32/40 our own vestry chairs would almost meet the need. These chairs were donated to the church and there is a possibility of a further donation so the question of affordability does not arise.

6. *The PCC have attempted to carry out this work behind the backs of parishioners and have failed to comply with the rules governing Faculties:*

This is completely untrue: the faculty application was displayed in both the church and the public notice board (the redundant telephone box on the Green – purchased from BT for this purpose) as were the relevant plans. Appended to this letter is a record of the PCC actions since 2006.

Background Issues

- a) The PCC is a body elected by those who are on the parish electoral register. The PCC is legally accountable to the church authorities for the maintenance of the fabric.
- b) Historically there has already been one attempt by the diocese to close this and another parish within the benefice; St Mary's has only been kept open by the diligent work of the PCC and the generous support of our benefactors.
- c) Our neighbouring parish of Little Blakenham has currently had to consider the possibility of closure as a result of falling congregations and a lack of income to support its running costs. The community have decided to carry on for a short period before a final decision is made.
- d) The Bishop is in favour of the multi-use of church buildings for wider community activities. Also the Chairman of The Council for Rural England has expressed the view that the C of E has the future of village life in its hands: churches must provide a wide range of facilities for the community where it is often the sole building of any size in the locality.
- e) The average attendance at services is around 7; our Easter congregation was just 15 including visitors from elsewhere. Annually St Mary's costs the PCC £8,000 (excluding ongoing routine maintenance) to run, a cost that continues to rise with inflation. Of this church collections provide just over £600 and current fund raising a further £1300; the remainder being gift aided to the church by a very small number of benefactors who wish to preserve an active church for future generations.
- f) Flowton is a vibrant parish blessed with many talented people and above all a large younger generation. Not all of the PCC's focus is on money but given the parlous state of church finances fund raising is now vital as none of our benefactors are getting younger, neither are they

currently being replaced by new blood. If the church is to survive and “*save our heritage*” it must become more relevant to the wider community, encourage more parishioners to take a share in the responsibility for its upkeep, otherwise it will ossify and die.

I apologise for the length of this letter but given the importance of the issue and the edited facts made available when parishioners were encouraged to oppose any change to the church fabric the PCC felt it was important to address your concerns in the proper context. Last night’s meeting covered all of the above issues, many of which were news to a number of those who attended. Clearly the work outlined has to be done but the PCC representative agreed to look again at whether some of the pews could be retained as free-standing and mobile.

If one key learning point emerged last night it was that, we must endeavour to improve our communication within the community – we had assumed, wrongly, that as attendance at previous meetings had been poor, or non-existent, there was little interest in the project. Additionally, we assumed that notices would be read not realising that many were unaware of the location of the notice boards and that in any event the substance of our meetings would be rapidly conveyed by word-of-mouth. In future we will put additional information about meetings in the “Link”, with future copies of the agenda and minutes of the Parishioners Annual meeting being available via the Flowton website www.flowton.org.uk. In addition PCC minutes may be viewed by interested parties, on request. Finally, notices will continue to be displayed in the church porch and in the old telephone box on The Green. For future reference the Annual Parish Meeting is always held in April as required by the church authorities.

Bob Skinner
Lay Chair, Flowton PCC