

Statements of Significance & Need for St Mary Magdalene Church, Crowmarsh Gifford

February 2018



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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

St Mary Magdalene, Crowmarsh Gifford (Grade 1)

Diocese: Oxford

Deanery: Wallingford

Part 1: *The church in its rural environment*

The village of Crowmarsh Gifford lies just inside South Oxfordshire on the east bank of the River Thames on the other side of the bridge from the market town of Wallingford. It is an old village, originally of linear development, with one long 'Street' off which now lie several small housing estates and builders merchants. The cottages along the Street are of significant antiquity; one used to be the home of the agricultural expert Jethro Tull.

Coming over the bridge from Wallingford, the church is on the left-hand (north) side of the Street in what was the centre of the village. It is the only Grade 1 listed building in the village and lies on the far side of its now full graveyard, which is dominated by a large yew tree. The churchyard is now closed, except for a small memorial garden at the east end. It is tidy and well maintained by South Oxfordshire District Council. The old Victorian Rectory behind the church was sold in the 1970s, together with its land rights up to the northern wall of the church.

The lych gate on The Street, leading to the main access path, was erected in honour of those parishioners who fell in the Great War: the names of those who died in the 1939 – 1945 war were added later.

The church is Norman and is of exceptional historical significance. It certainly existed by 1140, when it seems to have been used as a fortified post by King Stephen in his wars against Empress Matilda, who held Wallingford Castle. Its rectangular construction would suggest that it was built between 1100 and 1130. The church as it now stands is practically in its original form. It consists of a Norman chancel and single aisle nave, built of massive rubble walls with stone facings, and an exposed parallel rafter roof with tie beams. An Early English transept or chapel was added about 1200 on the north side, now called the Lady Chapel.

The west doorway displays the familiar Norman features of indented-chain and bordered-star mouldings. For many years, this doorway had been disused and plastered over, the south doorway then being the main entrance. In about 1840, it was reopened during restoration work commissioned by William S. Blackstone of Howbery House. The current oak doors date back to 1902. Above the doorway, the two circular lights and plain round-headed Norman window are unusual; in combination, they have been called the 'eyes, nose and mouth'. Also at the west end is a wooden bell turret containing eight small tubular bells.



In the outer eastern wall are fragments of an ancient aumbry. The entrance to the sacristy (currently a small, cramped kitchen and storage area) at the north-east corner of the church, from what was then the Rectory lawn, has a door containing bullet holes which purportedly date back to the Civil War.

Inside, the church is simple and serene in its decoration. The Norman Romanesque circular font inside the door is original, however it is now mounted at the north west end of the church on a 19th century columned base. The slab on which it is set is the probably original altar mensa.

Above the west door is a stained glass window depicting a Reaper, dated early 20^C; close by on the south wall is a narrow window dedicated to St Mary Magdalen and opposite on the north wall a narrow window dedicated to St Nicholas; both these smaller windows were installed during the mid-20th century. The choir vestry beside the entrance is a rather well-worn make-shift curtained storage area housing the electricity meters, sound system, choir robes, linens and seasonal decorations.

The nave is lit by six corresponding Norman windows placed high in the walls, their recesses showing the massive construction of the walls. There is an aumbry in the north wall of the Sanctuary; in the south Sanctuary wall the Romanesque Piscina is dated around 1120 and thought to be one of the oldest in England; on the south east corner of the crossing is a Jacobean pulpit that was acquired in 1904, mounted on a stone base. Near the Pulpit on the south side is a perpendicular window c.1400. Until some time in the mid-20th century, the church boasted wall paintings over the nave arch and on the chancel walls; unfortunately these were painted over.

On the north side of the chancel is an early English window, filled with modern glass in memory of Emily Wilder; the east window has chain moulding and a bordered star design of the Norman period. Its left hand column has a noteworthy design – acanthus leaves carved as though being blown by the wind from the right – probably unique in England. The south windows are later Norman and have been restored and a local craftsman made the choir stalls in 1899-1900.

Entry to the north transept (or Lady Chapel) is by a pointed opening of two chamfered arches. It is lighted by a quatrefoil window and two lancets filled with jumbled fragments of Belgian stained glass dating from the 15th century. The communion plate is kept in a concealed locked safe in the Lady Chapel; also the Registers, which are in a locked cabinet next to the safe. A reset 16th century brass is mounted on the transept arch.



The Lady Chapel is currently used as the vestry, coffee and catering area, crèche/play area, meeting room and storage area.

The current pews were installed in the late 1800's, according to a plan for 'new' pews from around this time.

This small church is a treasured local historical landmark that has been well-cared for over the years; the last major work being the restoration of the clay-tiled roof in 1999. The walls were partially replastered in 1990, when the old wooden wall mounted lights were removed, and modern overhead lighting was installed. The modern gas heating system was installed in 2005 and the sound system installed in 2008.

The building has been open during daylight hours since 2016 and is accessible without any steps. It is regarded as a facility for the whole village and we encourage people to visit and make use of the building as a community asset as well as a house of prayer / quiet reflection.

Part 2: The significance of the areas affected by the proposal

The area under consideration for development is the whole of the interior of the West end of the church.

West Door

In front of the West Door is an enclosed dark wooden draught lobby, which houses the bell ropes and memorial plaque for the tubular bells above. The ringing area is severely restricted by the outer door which opens inwards.



The Choir Vestry

The South/West corner used to be a Choir Vestry and is now only used for storage, concealed by a curtain. All the electrical switchgear and speaker units are housed in this area. The electric meter cupboard is 6ft up the wall. There is a vertical hot water pipe in the corner serving a wide (approx. 20cm) radiator along the south wall.



North/West Corner

The North/West Corner houses the Gas Meter (at a height of 6ft 3") and various free-standing cupboards and bookcases for hymn books and service books. There is also a vertical hot water pipe in the corner feeding a narrow (approx. 5cm) radiator along the north wall. None of this makes an attractive background for baptisms photos around the nearby font.

STATEMENT OF NEED

St Mary Magdalene, Crowmarsh Gifford (Grade 1)

Diocese: Oxford

Deanery: Wallingford

General Information

Crowmarsh has a population of roughly 1,570 and there are 58 on the church electoral roll. Our average Sunday congregation averages nearly 30 in number and is predominantly elderly although that mix varies significantly at monthly family services when there are often several families with pre-school and primary school aged children. At various times, some members of our congregation – with an age range of 2 years to 92 years – have limited mobility, e.g. needing to use a wheelchair or mobility scooter to get to church.

The local VC Primary School of c200 children uses the church to learn about our faith, marriage and baptism; attending for Easter, Harvest and Christmas services, also celebrations for School Leavers at the end of the summer term.

Currently, there is no Sunday School: until a few years ago it was held in the sports pavilion in Crowmarsh Recreation ground – a long walk back to the church to join the congregation toward the end of the service and a facility that had to be paid for. There is no church hall and the village hall is also 5 – 10 minutes walk away.

Since 2016, the church has been open during daylight hours. It had been previously closed for a number of years due to theft and vandalism, but there has been no reoccurrence since the re-opening.

Crowmarsh Gifford continues to grow in size, with new housing being added at regular intervals and several hundred more new houses being planned.

We intend to part-finance the project using a bequest, which is currently held in CCLA funds (since 2006), and raise the remainder through grants and fundraising.

The need

In order to extend worship, welcoming and outreach activities there are two key facilities required within any church: a toilet and adequate kitchen or catering facilities. Storage space and a vestry are also needed.

There is the need for space to hold a regular crèche/Sunday School within the body of the church but without compromising our ability to provide refreshments after the service: currently, they would occupy the same space. With regular visits by the school children, weddings, funerals and baptisms for which people travel long distances, hosting of events such as harvest lunch, evening “quiz’n’chips” events, our Patronal Festival lunch, our hugely popular weekend Flower Festival in June, services for the local business community and our Christmas Eve carols by

candlelight, for which there is only ever standing room remaining (c 200 attendance), these two facilities are essential.



Ideally we would be extending our offering: the parents and toddlers currently have to go to Wallingford for their weekly group and there is no Sunday School or crèche. We are very limited but creative in what we can offer from a catering perspective. Our vision for the future is a vibrant and healthy church providing a place of worship and celebration for generations to come, at the heart of village life, where people want to stay awhile, not rush away because they need the toilet, or because we are unable to provide a welcoming environment.

Difficulties in meeting the need

Currently, gentlemen requiring the toilet tend to use the churchyard, which is not at all satisfactory, while we have to rely on the good nature of two parishioners who live close by the church to offer their toilet facilities when there is a wedding, funeral or other function. We are aware that there are people who do not come to certain events and services due to the lack of facilities.

An accessible toilet with baby changing facilities and adequate kitchen facilities would enable us to offer the church as a proper venue for parent & toddler groups

and to use the church more effectively on such occasions as our various festivals and quiz nights.

Currently refreshments (tea and coffee) are served from a portable tea urn in the Lady Chapel filled by bucket carried through the church from a sink in the cramped sacristy at the north-east end.



The hot water left afterwards is then carried back in a bucket to the sacristy for washing-up and the urn emptied. The steps down into the sacristy present a hazard when carrying the hot water, also the trays of crockery.



When hosting festivals and quiz nights, the 'servery' is extremely Heath Robinson: warming plates and soup urns, trailing cables to extension leads and constant transit between the Lady Chapel and sacristy. Previously, all catering was done from the sacristy, however the PCC decided this was not suitable due to lack of space and safety concerns, plus those involved were totally removed from those whom they were serving and absent from the celebration.

All of this is a potential health and safety hazard that would be avoided by a sensible reuse of the available space.

The Lady Chapel serves as a crèche when needed, although facilities are extremely limited; a vestry, a meeting room and storage area.

The proposal

Background History...

Many years ago, the possibility of installing a toilet in the northeast vestry was explored to make use of the mains water supply, but that is no longer possible as the vestry is too small to allow a proper separation of the toilet from the kitchen area.

Twenty years ago in 1998, there was a proposal to introduce a toilet and kitchen area at the west end of the nave, on either side of the west door. The plans were turned down, as they interfered with the windows in the north and south walls.

From then, other alternatives have been explored at considerable expense:

- 1) We have considered joining up the north transept and sacristy by knocking through the east wall of the transept, to create a level and direct link between the kitchen and Lady Chapel, with a toilet adjoining the corridor: this was rejected due to the impact on the transept wall and the current rear doorway, also the fact that it extends the footprint of the church beyond its current curtilage.
- 2) By 2011, the plan had evolved to redevelop the north transept (Lady Chapel) to install a kitchenette and accessible toilet, with baby changing facilities downstairs together with an upstairs space (mezzanine floor) for a Sunday School and crèche/meeting area that is within the church. However, the need for two separate exits for fire safety meant that a gently sloping stairway would also be needed, leading up from the north side of the nave and obscuring existing memorials. As well as the impact on the nave, it was felt that the toilet was in too prominent a place within the church, such that it would be impossible to pay a 'discrete visit', e.g. for guests arriving late for a wedding or funeral.

The Current Proposal:

Having exhausted all other possibilities, the current proposal is basically to return to the original plan of 20 years ago, but with the important difference that no windows will be obscured. As advised by the DAC: *"Any WC within an historic building does not have to be fully DDA compliant, the aim should be to improve accessibility only where it is practically possible and provided it doesn't prejudice the character of the building."*

Therefore, the proposal is to replace the whole of the existing Porch with a new **entrance lobby**, with glass inner doors to prevent draughts. The lobby could provide access to a toilet on one side. Therefore, the lobby could extend further into the church than the existing depth of 0.88-0.90m (with 0.24m of this obscured when the external doors open inwards); however, the existing width of 2.42m could be considerably reduced to the same as the external opening width.

The structure with the lobby at the centre would extend across the entire width of the church (approx. 6.62m), such that it is symmetrical in appearance. However, the main restriction is that it must not extend past the lancet window openings in the north or south walls (approx. 1.05m from the west wall), but it could be angled or curved away from the centre (lobby) to the edges. Light oak would be a suitable material for the structure.

To one side of the lobby, a small room would house a single **toilet** and hand wash basin (and perhaps baby-changing facilities). Space restrictions caused by the windows prevent full wheelchair access, but hand-rails might be a suitable compromise to meet most requirements.

On the other side of the lobby a **kitchen/servery** area is proposed. This will meet typical kitchen needs, providing:

- serving counter / preparation worktops
- storage cupboards
- a wall-mounted boiler
- sink(s)
- appliances such as:
 - dishwasher
 - refrigerator
 - oven (& hob?)
 - microwave oven
 - spare power points, etc

Above the structure, a **gallery** over the whole of the renewed West End is envisaged. As only one access route is likely (e.g. on the toilet side) its use would be restricted to a storage area for large seasonal items, with only a bell ringer needing to go up there for a limited time. The chiming ropes and plaque could also be repositioned to the gallery above, so that the ringer is not disturbed by people going in and out.



Requirements:

The proposal entails the following, most of which would benefit from a feasibility study:

1. Removal of all the existing furniture from the South West and North West corners of the Church.
2. Removal of the wooden floor, infilling the underground space, and replacing it with suitable waterproof flooring.
3. Creation of a branch off the mains water pipe (which runs from the west end of the churchyard to the southeast corner of the church) to supply both sides of the new structure.
4. Installation of drainage/sewerage to go out (under the west door and exterior pathway?) to the main sewer system indicated by the presence of a drain cover in the driveway to the Rectory, assuming that the necessary fall can be achieved.
5. Relocation of all the electrical meters and Speaker Unit.
6. Accommodation of the existing gas meter within the design of the new structure, or relocation if necessary.
7. Possible relocation of the radiators which would be inefficient if enclosed in their existing positions at the west end of the side walls, if not completely in the way of any new structure.
8. Sufficient space must be maintained around the font to allow families to gather around for a baptism.

Associated Possibilities:

Sacristy/Vestry

The proposal would allow what is currently used as a kitchen back to revert to its former use as a secure area. The boiler will remain in situ, with storage for Altar Linen, and with space for the re-located safe and security box for Registers.



North transept

The north transept – or Lady Chapel – was added about 1200 on the north side of the church: entry involves going up a small step. The communion plate is currently kept in a concealed locked safe in the Lady Chapel; also the Registers, which are in a locked cabinet next to the safe.



The proposal would allow the current furniture (cupboards) to be removed, including all the kitchen equipment currently used for Tea/Coffee following meetings and Services. Also the removal of the safe and metal box housing the church registers back to the Sacristy, thus allowing the North transept to return to its former use as a Lady Chapel and Meeting Room.

Support and practicalities

The requirement for a toilet and a kitchenette has the total and ongoing support of the PCC and the congregation and has done for many years. The wider parish also recognise the need and would like to see some results of the fundraising which has been going on for many years. We have recently sought advice from the DAC about what will be possible, and appreciated the visit and subsequent advice from Christine Fenn (Historic Churches Support Officer) in late 2016.

The PCC and congregation are very aware that this will require significant fundraising efforts, and are prepared to take on the project.

Once overall ideas gain acceptance, an architect will be appointed and a full project plan, including a fund-raising project plan, will be developed, alongside open consultation with the parish and other local organisations to ensure we maximise the opportunities for the development.

Significance and impact

We are aware of the historical significance of our beautiful rural church, also the sense of peace encountered on entering the building. However this development takes shape, we aim to provide the new facilities with minimum impact on the building, without compromising these facilities.

Thought will be given to the materials used, which will be in sympathy with the fabric of the church such that the result enhances what is already present.

We believe that the developments will improve the visual aspect and usefulness of the back of the church, providing the essential facilities expected in most churches a generation ago, whilst freeing up the vestry and Lady Chapel for their original purposes.

February 2018.