

# Annex F

Representations  
Closed Churches Division  
Church Commissioners  
Church House  
Great Smith Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 3AZ

28 November 2017

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Draft Pastoral (Church Buildings Disposal) Scheme for the Closed Church of St Peter, Astwood, Buckinghamshire (Diocese of Oxford)  
Representation against the Draft Pastoral (Church Buildings Disposal) Scheme**

I am writing to you in connection with the draft scheme (the “**Scheme**”) pursuant to which the Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee (the “**Committee**”) will decide whether or not the proposed conversion of the closed church of St Peter Astwood (the “**Astwood Church**”) to residential use should proceed. I am not a ‘connected person’, but a private individual with no position in the Church of England. Nor do I have any local associations with Astwood or the ‘SCAN’ benefice (the “**Benefice**”). I have, however, attended church services at almost every parish in Buckinghamshire (including the Benefice), and across much the greater part of the Diocese of Oxford (the “**Diocese**”) as part of a wider, if frenetic (and perhaps bizarre or Quixotic), tour/pilgrimage of England and Wales that I have been undertaking over the past decade. In addition to attending services at most of the churches in the Diocese, I have also visited every parish within Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire – many of them a number of times. I have also worshipped across almost all of the neighbouring dioceses of London, St Albans and Winchester, large sections of the dioceses of Bristol, Gloucester and Peterborough, and parts of the dioceses of Coventry and Worcester (whilst I have also worshipped extensively in nearly thirty other dioceses). Whilst I appreciate that my lack of any connection with Astwood Church will inevitably discount the value of this representation, I am writing in because of the perspective I have derived from the touring I have undertaken over a relatively extensive area.

In view of this I have taken an intermittent interest in the fate of Astwood Church since 2011. It was not especially surprising that Astwood Church was ‘closed for regular

worship' (that disingenuous and misleading phrase), since I was informed that the electoral roll had fallen to a single person and it had become impossible to recruit parish officers. I was also told that, insofar as there were any churchgoers in Astwood, they might tend to gravitate towards Bedford or Milton Keynes which, if true, augurs badly for the twenty or so parishes between those two towns. The Scheme states that Astwood Church no longer filled 'any pastoral need'. This begs the question: is a lack of attendance an indicator of 'pastoral need' (whatever that means)? If so, the authorities should perhaps close and sell vast numbers of churches because there is no pastoral 'need' in many thousands of places (that is, collapsing attendance suggests a want of 'need' and is therefore an indicator of success!).

That attendance and commitment at Astwood Church had fallen to such levels was unfortunate, but tends to indicate a record of pastoral failure – one not wholly surprising, as Astwood is in the far east of the Benefice, and the main focus for the energy and resources of the Benefice has had to be on Sherington, which is at risk of being progressively enveloped within the growing sprawl of Milton Keynes. However, it should also be noted that the population of Astwood (365 in 2011) is somewhat larger than that of Chicheley (134) – where I am not aware of there being any question of closure.

In addition, spiritual life was not always dead in this relatively remote part of the county: the church offered a total number of 142 sittings and, on 30 March 1851 (the famous census) the morning service had 92 attendees, whilst the evening service on the same day had 77: a total of 121 from a population of 268, although many may have attended both services (*Buckinghamshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, ed. Edward Legg, Buckinghamshire Record Society (1991) v. 27, 6-7). Incidentally, there was no meaningful 'old dissent' in the parish: Francis Kins (possibly the Francis Kinnes who was vicar of Tilsworth, Bedfordshire – another parish which now has extremely low attendance), acting on behalf of William Wake, bishop of Lincoln (in turn acting at the prompting of archbishop Gilbert Sheldon's national survey of dissenting congregations in 1669) noted that '*there are noe conventicles, nor straglers or haunters of conventicles within the parish of Astwood, howsoever happily some of them may be decoyed...I will say with Bishopp Ridley, hee that will not bee ruled by the gosepell must be tamed by the law, our paper pellets shott through the gun of an earthen vessel will not penetrate. I am afraid that these sectarists are growne to that height of impudence and stubbornesse of heart, that as they will not be ruled by the one, soe neither tamed by the other, however fiat justicia.*' By the time the vicar Robert Woodward reported to the archdeacon in 1706 there were two Anabaptists and no other dissenters; in 1709 '*The number of dissenters is lessened, many of them coming frequently, and some constantly to church*', but there were 20 communicants. In 1712 worship was held once every Sunday, and also on holy days, Wednesdays and Fridays, the only complaint being that '*some adults come to church un-baptized; too many not confirmed*' but the vicar was resident; catechizing occurred on alternate Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, with communion being held thrice yearly (with 60 attendees) (*Buckinghamshire Dissent and Parish Life, 1669-1712*, ed. John Broad, Buckinghamshire Record Society 1993), v. 28, 57 and 155-56). Competition from 'new dissent' was a later phenomenon: in the 1851 census another 116 people attended the independent chapel in the village, the strength of which

congregation may have been attributable to the local preaching tours of the famous independent minister of Newport Pagnell, William Bull, dating from 1780. Aggregate attendance at both denominations was therefore very high relative to the size of the local population, but Astwood Church was performing creditably, even when it was facing strong competition. So the complete collapse of Christianity in Astwood is a relatively recent phenomenon and points to pastoral failure as much as social and economic change. Although an annual carol service is held in the village pub, the Old Swan, I am not aware of any Remembrance or other service; nor have I found any evidence of the well-appointed village hall being used for services (the existence of the hall obviating any meaningful possibility of turning Astwood Church to community use in the manner of, say, Benington in Lincolnshire, Chislet in Kent, Combe Keynes in Dorset [where there have been services, though not currently, though the incumbent at Wool is interested], Kneesall in Nottinghamshire, Sibton in Suffolk, Wentworth in Cambridgeshire, Wicken Bonhunt in Essex, Yarpole in Herefordshire, etc.).

I have also attended services at most parishes within Bedfordshire at many of the contiguous parishes in Northamptonshire (Astwood is part of a large and hitherto deeply rural salient projecting between Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire), and I can attest that attendance patterns within the region are frequently alarmingly weak. Indeed, I would suggest that attendance in north Bedfordshire is as weak as I have found it to be in easternmost Sussex, the Thames estuary, north-west Suffolk, north-east Leicestershire, south Herefordshire, etc. – all areas where the pulse of the Church is beating with decreasing rapidity. Indeed, I could name a score of churches within a fifteen mile radius of Astwood where I constituted a significant addition to congregations that were almost uniformly elderly. Short of a miracle, a good majority of the rural churches in the region will go the same way as Astwood within the next few years. Of course, people have been predicting total collapse for some time, and most rural parishes have stumbled on somehow, but attendance/commitment is now so attenuated in so many places that it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain how things can continue, no matter what Fresh Expressions or other like initiatives may be implemented (and, in many places, I am getting the distinct impression that such initiatives are either still-born or have failed outright, or there are insufficient people of the right age who are able to deliver upon them). It seems that the authorities have accepted that Astwood will now be completely unchurched; this should be contrasted with the approach taken at nearby Lidlington (Bedfordshire) where the church has been converted to flats, but the Anglican community worships in partnership with other Christians in a small chapel opposite the old church.

Despite this generally bleak and depressing pattern, there are some causes for hope. I have been very forcibly struck by the immense movement of people from Greater London into any county that is vaguely commutable within a certain radius of the metropolis (I have noticed that church attendance in much of Middlesex and eastern boroughs like Newham has spiralled downwards due to radical demographic changes as much of the likely churchgoing population cashes in and moves out: in a couple of places I was told that churches remain open in almost completely de-Christianised areas only for the purpose of 'keeping the flag flying' as a 'national' church). The social reasons for this movement are obvious, but the economic reasons are still more significant: for a large and growing section of the population that is self-employed or dependent upon

uncertain defined contribution pension schemes house price equity has become the pension; it is therefore essential to release liquidity by moving a certain distance from London if some sort of security in old age is to be assured. There is therefore an immense pressure for development in Wiltshire, Berkshire, Kent, Surrey, Sussex, north-east Hampshire, north Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire (specifically the Soke), Cambridgeshire, north Essex and much of Suffolk. It is striking how Milton Keynes and Bedford are marching towards each other. It will not surprise me if communities like Astwood grow significantly in the short to medium term, much as towns like Leighton Buzzard/Linsdale have been growing or nearby villages like Cardington, Elstow, Kempston or Wootton. Development within the borough and putative 'city' of Milton Keynes (the "**Borough**") has also been accelerating, with Calverton currently in the process of being built out, and the first breaches having been made to the north-east of the M1. On this basis I would predict that there will be a renewed focus on development within the more rural districts of the Borough within the near future, which might portend an increase – perhaps a significant increase – in the population of Astwood and other neighbouring villages. It is therefore highly regrettable that the Diocese appears to have gone along with the unfortunate suggestion of the Borough that Astwood Church be marketed for residential as well as other uses. I have encountered a number of places (such as Eastwick and Gilston in Hertfordshire or Sevington in Kent) vulnerable to closure owing to small populations and thin congregations where I understand the authorities have – for the time being – decided not to apply schemes because of a likely increase in local populations. I have also noticed other places where closures went ahead, the population subsequently increasing significantly and the area remaining unchurched because of the lack of obvious provision on account of such premature closures (St Mary's Lambeth is a notorious instance of this in view of recent developments along the Victoria Embankment, but other instances might include St Mary at Quay in Ipswich – now adjacent to large new blocks of flats, Stansted Mountfitchet and Berechurch in Essex or Hartley Wintney in Hampshire, etc. – formerly isolated and now adjacent to substantial actual or projected developments, as well as Broughton and Upton referred to below). Please note that in 2016 two 'garden communities', amounting to 10,000 residential units and a hospital, were being projected east of the M1 by elements in the planning and development communities; mention was made of increasing the size of Cranfield, but it is difficult to envisage how Astwood would not be affected by such a radical increase in the local population were such developments to proceed. Other projections were that the village communities east of the M1 be increased by approximately 10%, although there is some opposition to this. Like an increasing number of 'rural' communities in the east midlands, Astwood is already a de facto suburb (or exurb), albeit one surrounded by fields.

I have strong views about the privatisation of public spaces. The Scheme proposes that Astwood Church be converted to residential use. This presumably means that public access will cease for all time, even if the building is maintained very well by the prospective owners (as will no doubt be the case). What has hitherto been a public trust – one in which the better part of forty (or more) generations have devoted considerable care and attention – will be alienated to one or two individuals and their successors in perpetuity. Even where a church building is let by the authorities for commercial

purposes there remains the possibility that if there is to be a change in the local population, there might be a renewed use of the relevant building following the expiry of the relevant lease (although as the recent case of another ancient foundation – Ibsley in Hampshire – has illustrated, there will always be a temptation for the authorities to allow a commercial lease to metamorphose into an outright disposal for residential use). This slight chance for recovery is rendered absolutely impossible where there is conversion to residential use. If there is to be any further public witness to Christianity in Astwood, it would require the construction of a new church. Indeed, although it pains me to write this, I think it would even be preferable if the roof were taken off again so that open air worship could take place, rather than have the building privatised (you will note the likes of old Alresford in Essex, Denton in Huntingdonshire, Lancut in Gloucestershire, Mongewell in Oxfordshire, old Reculver in Kent, old Sutton Veny in Wiltshire, or West Raynham in Norfolk, etc., where occasional worship is still held within or alongside unroofed/ruined buildings or, by way of an extreme and long-running comparison, the proposals within the Layer Benefice in Essex for the demolition of St Peter, Great Birch so that allowance be made for a 'church without walls'; that is, that services continue to be held on the site of the church following demolition, with the Secretary of State currently having various representations received in October under consideration). The Committee has reviewed several schemes for conversion to residential use this year, and there is one pending where I have taken a keen interest: West Lavington in West Sussex (which I had hoped would be taken on by a Syrian congregation who, unfortunately, did not follow up on their initial overtures to the Chichester diocese), yet I do not feel nearly as strongly about a church of relatively recent provenance, such as West Lavington, as I do about Astwood Church, which is of far greater antiquity.

Astwood Church is not without interest:

- It is an ancient foundation, dating at least to the time of Henry I, when Fulk Paynel of Newport Pagnell granted the advowson to Tickford Priory. The village is mentioned in Domesday Book as having a taxable value of £4 in 1066 and £2 in 1086; Astwood Church is not mentioned, but then Domesday Book makes no mention of the existence of churches in many places where we know there were in fact churches that had been established long before 1086 (the primary object of Domesday Book being an assessment of taxable [secular] wealth).
- The font, royal arms, stalls and eighteenth century pulpit are interesting, although I appreciate that they can be moved.
- The alleged adverse aesthetic impact of the concrete reconstruction of the roof (described to me by the previous incumbent as 'ugly') – its sixteenth century predecessor having been destroyed by enemy action – is, in my view, quite exaggerated, especially because it is partially concealed by the embattled parapets. The building, and its ensemble are, in my estimation attractive.

- It contains monuments to the Cranmer family (descendants of the archbishop); Samuel Cranmer and Sir Caesar Cranmer who held Astwood Bury manor were related to the archbishop: the monument to Samuel states that he was '*descended in a direct line from Richard Cranmer, second son of John Cranmer, elder brother to Thomas Arch Bishop of Canterbury*'. I would hope that an association with the Cranmer family will carry some weight with the Committee.
- It also contains several monuments to the Lowndes family – the same family, also resident at Astwood Bury (a mansion now lost), which produced William Lowndes of Winslow Hall ('Ways and Means Lowndes'), arguably the most important public financier and financial policymaker of the first half of the eighteenth century – see, for instance, the extensive treatment of Lowndes in P. G. M. [Peter] Dickson's masterful *The Financial Revolution in England: a Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688-1956* (1967) (Lowndes was to public credit what Sir Robert Clayton, of Marden Park [Woldingham/Godstone] and Bletchingley, Surrey – the effective founder of deposit banking – was to private credit in the same epoch); his namesake, William Lowndes, auditor of the land revenue when the land tax was the most important impost after the excise duties, was resident in the parish, and it is his monument, of 1773 that is visible on the north wall of the chancel. Two successive members of the family, Thomas and Robert, were vicars between 1752 and 1798. There are also associations with the Thurloe family – John, the eldest son and namesake of the famous secretary of state during the protectorate (1652-58), held the manor, 1674-82.
- It also has a brass of 1534 to Thomas Chibnale (or Chivnale), of the Chibnall family – forbears of the outstanding Cambridge plant biochemist, A. C. [Charles] Chibnall (very unusually FSA as well as FRS, owing to his classic *Sherington: Fiefs and Fields of a Buckinghamshire Village* (1965); also *Beyond Sherington* (1979)), and the husband of the late Marjorie Chibnall, FBA, the distinguished editor of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Orderic Vitalis (1969-80, and *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (1984)) and the author/editor of many distinguished works of Anglo-Norman history.
- The Cranmer and Lowndes monuments are praised for their 'vitality' by Maxwell Fraser (*Companion into Buckinghamshire* (1950), 209), and for their attractiveness in Pevsner, the stall ends also being praised (*Buckinghamshire*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (1994), 147).
- The most complete architectural description of Astwood Church is in *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments of Buckinghamshire*, v. 2 (North), Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 57-58.
- Although now somewhat unkempt (at least when I last looked), the churchyard was described in the *Victoria County History of Buckinghamshire* (pp. 270-74 of v. 4, 1927) as being especially picturesque.

I appreciate that these historical points are relatively unlikely to make much of an impression upon the Committee (as I understand that somewhat limited aesthetic criteria are generally the leading, if not sole, determinant of whether or not a church is to be vested in a trust or consigned to some other use), but I consider them worth stating for the record. The rather dated *VCH* entry is the only meaningful historical survey of the parish; it is regrettable that the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Association and the Buckinghamshire Historical Association do not appear to have a run of journals equivalent to, say, *Oxoniensia* or *Archaeologia Cantiana*, so useful references to many Buckinghamshire parishes are fairly scarce.

When I met the previous bishop of Oxford at Westminster Abbey shortly before his retirement I asked him about Astwood Church. He did not seem to have heard of it, but he told me that he and his colleagues were strongly opposed to the closure of churches (and especially their absolute loss to the Church), since they shrink the footprint, and he mentioned that this was the policy which he and his colleagues had endeavoured to adopt during his tenure of that see (although I also asked him about Ufton Nervet and St Cross in Oxford). Evidently, this policy has changed under the new administration, although I note the recent and imaginative vesting of Besselsleigh in a local trust, which I hoped would be a model for other churches that the Churches Conservation Trust ("**CCT**") and the Friends of Friendless Churches ("**FFC**") could not, or would not, take on.

It should be noted that the record of the Diocese with respect to closures of ancient (i.e., pre-1830) foundations is actually a relatively good one. Whilst the Diocese has suffered a significant number of closures, this is in some respects a function of its large area and uneven population distribution. Even where such closures have occurred, arrangements have frequently been made to secure vesting in the CCT or other public or private trusts and, what is better, worship continues at many of them on an occasional basis (often annually or twice yearly): Avington (twice), Basildon (six times, at least until recently), Besselsleigh (possibly three times), Boveney (once or twice), Catmore (once), Chislehampton (once), East or Little Shefford (once), Edlesborough (once), Emmington (once, but via ticket only), Hardmead (fifth Sundays), the largely ruined Mongewell (at least once), Newnham Murren (at least once, with use by the Romanian congregation), Nuneham Courtenay (the 'old' church only, once), Pitstone (twice), Shirburn (very rare, the last service being on the retirement of the previous incumbent last year), Thornton (though not recently, it seems), St Peter Wallingford (once) and Walton (Open University chapel). In any event, Christian witness continues in these places, albeit often in a highly attenuated form. Relatively few ancient churches in the Diocese have been turned to residential/private use: none in Berkshire (absent the eccentric and long-distant loss of Sandleford [school library]); in Buckinghamshire, Foxcott, Grove and Pitchcott, with Great Woolstone as a store or music rehearsal room; and in Oxfordshire I can think only of Crawley (I omit the special cases of All Saints, St Cross and St Peter in the East in Oxford [college libraries or overspill library for Balliol College in the case of St Cross with a residual right to use for worship], Cokethorpe/Hardwick [school chapel] and Sarsden [private chapel, last used regularly during works at Churchill]). Even where a church has been demolished a congregation sometimes continues (such as at Akeley, although very small in number) or at Hartwell, where the building – a CCT vesting – is

sadly unsafe and yet an annual act of worship occurs outside (it also remains to be seen what will happen at Daylesford once repairs have been completed). This is a very creditable record for so large a diocese, and compares well with, say, the likes of Chelmsford, Hereford, Lincoln or York where relatively more historic churches seem to have been converted to residential use or storage units (as 'monuments').

There are also a number of churches within the Diocese where worship now occurs on a festival, seasonal or fifth Sunday basis, but the notion of closure would be resisted, perhaps even strongly, in some instances: Barford St John (now fallen to once a year), Biddlesden, Easington, Garford, Godington, Hampton Gay, Newington (near Dorchester), Pusey, Shifford, Stratfield Mortimer (now functioning as a de facto chapel to the local primary school), Wheatfield, Widford, etc. (also old Linslade, now in St Albans), whilst a good many – too many to mention here – have one service per month: again, this is all to the credit of the Diocese. The fact that relatively few ancient churches have been converted to residential use makes any possible recent change in policy all the more ominous, in view of the diminution (sometimes the extreme diminution) of so many congregations. That several churches are effectively mothballed does make me wonder why this could not have happened at Astwood: evidently, it was not paying its way, and it is not of the character of Chicheley (with its fine features and distinguished historic associations with the Chester family: see R. E. Chester Waters' *Genealogical Memoirs of the Extinct Family of Chester of Chicheley* (1878)), although perhaps on the same level as North Crawley, but I have encountered interventions where a church has been wrested from seemingly certain death by vigorous leadership (see, for instance, the example of Water Newton in Huntingdonshire (formerly in Ely), where a superb and highly successful local incumbent in Peterborough (now retired to Shaftesbury and assisting locally) – aghast at the prospect of closure and mindful of the recent fate of nearby Ufford (the closure of which he told me would never have occurred had that church been under his supervision) – stepped in, formed a trust from the local (and largely non-believing) community where the congregation had died out completely, and has ensured the future of the church and continuing worship, the parish being lately transferred from Ely into Peterborough).

I note that the Diocese has gone to considerable trouble to find an alternative use that would not have involved the privatisation of the building and that would have allowed for some form of worship to continue: the Diocese certainly deserves credit for this. However, my view is that a simpler solution might have been found by re-arranging the vestings of the CCT in Buckinghamshire. Shortly before it was announced that she would become bishop of Sherborne I had the pleasure of meeting the then archdeacon of Buckingham, Karen Gorham, after a thanksgiving service for the re-opening of St Mary's Ludgershall (near Bicester) following the completion of extensive works (in 2015). I asked what the plans were for Astwood Church, and was told about the possibility of it being used as some sort of Christian centre (which, naturally, I was greatly relieved to hear since it seemed a solution reminiscent of Kilton in Somerset, Mickfield in Suffolk, Pilsdon in Dorset, etc., which have generally worked well). She went on to say that she was very much hoping that the CCT church of St Mary, Fleet Marston, could be put back into commission as a working church in the event that the large projected development



north of Aylesbury was to proceed (St Mary's stands in the middle of a large ploughed field and access, which is possible only on foot, is difficult and not obvious).

This led me to ask her whether there was any possibility of Astwood Church being swapped for St Lawrence Broughton, which is only a few miles away from Astwood: the reason being that when Broughton was closed (I believe in 1986) the then civil parish of Broughton had a population of a couple of hundred people, but the more recent expansion of Milton Keynes had swelled that number to approximately 2,500 by the time of the 2011 census (and has increased significantly since then as the remaining gaps up to the M1 have been filled in with new developments). St Lawrence was then, in any event, being used periodically by the local 'Church Without Walls' initiative and is largely surrounded by recent housing, whilst the service I went to there on 5 October 2014 was very well attended by the local community (three services will be held there in December). On this basis, to justify the continuing status of Broughton as a closed church on any pastoral grounds when so many other churches in the county with much smaller populations remain open, seemed (and seems) bizarre and implausible, just as it would be implausible for Fleet Marston to remain closed if it were to be surrounded by a large housing development. The archdeacon seemed amenable to the idea of swapping one church for another (indeed, this is effectively what has just happened with Hardmead). As it happened, the proposed development at Fleet Marston was vetoed by Aylesbury District Council, and one of the reasons given by the planning authority was that the developers had failed to take adequate account of the church in their plans (though the materials they had produced in support of their proposals did appear to treat the church as one of the focal points of the development, and I believe that the historic parish of Fleet Marston is still scheduled for development under the local plan).

It has been my understanding that all Grade I and Grade II\* buildings should be assessed for vesting by the CCT. When I spoke to the previous incumbent of the Benefice at North Crawley who oversaw the closure of Astwood Church (who has since moved to the Peterborough diocese), she did not seem certain that it had been so assessed and thought it only had a Grade II listing (it is actually Grade II\*, from 1966). So, please could the Diocese clarify whether any attempt was made to consult with the CCT? Could Astwood Church not be swapped out with Broughton? If Broughton must remain a closed church, what is the pastoral justification for it remaining closed when it is now in the heart of a large and thickly populated development? If Broughton must remain closed for 'pastoral' reasons, then arguably no church anywhere can be safe (as the recent controversies at Bacup have perhaps illustrated).

I have mentioned the church of the Assumption, Hardmead: the closure of that church in 1982, in one of the most lightly populated parishes in the county (immediately to the north of Astwood), was not especially surprising: but it was rescued by the FFC in response to fears about its likely conversion to a house. As I understand, title to it has now been transferred to a private trust pursuant to a recent scheme which the members of the Committee will recall have approved, and services will continue to be held there on the fifth Sundays (when I attended there was a congregation of about twelve). The adoption of Hardmead by a private trust is akin to the arrangements established at Besselsleigh, Plumpton (Northamptonshire), Southolt (Suffolk), Toller Fratrum

(Dorset), etc., which seem to have worked fairly well. It appears that this transfer may have made possible the recent acquisition by the FFC of the old Downing College church of East Hatley in Cambridgeshire (which has been slowly and painstakingly restored from a point of near-collapse, and where services are projected – a service of compline having been held there several years ago) and, possibly, Llanifiganhel juxta Rogiet in Monmouthshire (where services are to be held at least twice a year; the one I attended earlier this year was packed). If the FFC – a much smaller and poorer charity – can swap out one church for another, then I am a loss to understand why the CCT cannot do likewise in respect of Astwood Church/Broughton. Moreover, if a much smaller community like Hardmead can respond in this way by supporting a private trust, it is difficult to understand why Astwood could not have responded in kind. Certainly, the lack of response from the local community to the Diocese's recent entreaties is very disappointing (especially since Astwood Church, like Heydon and Little Horkesley in Essex or, differently, Little Chart in Kent, was resurrected in 1963 following war damage in 1940: a considerable undertaking on the part of the parish in more difficult post-war conditions). [As an aside, it should be noted that I have encountered several incumbents who, fearing that they are unlikely to be saved by the CCT, are hoping that the FFC will come to the rescue of their churches: an unlikely outcome unless the resources of the FFC increase markedly.]

Whilst I appreciate that Astwood Church does not have the 'unique selling point' of Broughton's frescoes, it is nonetheless an attractive Grade II\* building, with the monuments and associations that I have described; having visited practically the entire national stock of CCT churches, I would rate it as being no less good than at least 150 of them. The reasons for vesting buildings in the CCT sometimes seem capricious. Astwood Church is no less interesting or characterful than such recent CCT vestings as Gamston in Nottinghamshire, Merston in West Sussex and Wardley in Rutland, etc.: none of which have any particular points of interest but are nonetheless intriguing (indeed, the pews at Merston were the sole clincher for its vesting, as the building itself is markedly less distinguished architecturally than Astwood Church – though I was greatly relieved that Merston was saved). It would be difficult, if not impossible, to assert that Astwood Church is aesthetically inferior to, or less interesting than, nearby Farndish, Fleet Marston, Furtho, Knotting, Pitstone, Pottsgrove, Preston Deanery, Thornton or Upton (as mentioned, Upton is another case for reversing closure for pastoral reasons now that it has been swallowed up by Northampton). To swap Astwood Church for Broughton would presumably be nearly cost neutral for the CCT (there have been long periods when no events of any kind have been advertised at Broughton on the CCT website, although there have been some recently); indeed, I am not aware that works of any meaningful significance would be required at Astwood Church, so a 'conservation deficit' would be unlikely (certainly, when compared with the recent experiences of the CCT in Bolton and Sunderland). Of course, there would be a cost to the Diocese in bringing Broughton back into commission – just as there would be if Fleet Marston were to be brought back to life, as Bishop Karen envisaged. I believe there has been at least one instance in the last few years where a church (in Middlesex) vested with the CCT was de-vested and put back into commission. However, as I have noted, the pastoral rationale for the continued closure of Broughton strikes me as being practically non-existent. This then brings us

back to the what 'pastoral' means, and I am increasingly coming to the conclusion that a 'pastoral' justification for closing a church is actually all about money: the word 'pastoral' being an Orwellian synonym for 'financial'.

If the Diocese (and its estate agents, Smith Gore) have found a buyer for Astwood Church (as I believe they have, since the particulars were marked 'sold'), it will presumably mean that there will be an immediate cash payment. What diocese, in current conditions, would wish to forego cash now even if a village at one extreme end of the Diocese loses its church? Why should the Diocese have moved out of its purpose-built offices in North Hinksey if not for economic reasons? Why should it have been projecting the disposal of Bradfield for residential use if not because the money will be useful? [The particulars advertising Bradfield have been withdrawn for reasons disclosed to me locally, but I understand that the preparation of the draft scheme for that church – possibly the oldest, or nearly the oldest, site of Christian worship within the limits of the pre-1974 Berkshire – is well advanced.] Moreover, why should the disposal of Astwood Church have been for residential purposes? Nearby Horton – with its exceptional Parr monument – is on sale, but (as I understand) for D1 use, which will at least – I hope – allow for public access [incidentally, I do not see why a solution akin to that at Berechurch in Essex or Little Stanmore in Middlesex should not be applied at Horton]. The adjacent churches of Dunham-on-Trent and Darlton in Nottinghamshire have been on the market for at least three years, again for D1 use (certainly the particulars for Dunham refer to D1), although I appreciate that Grinsdale in Cumberland is currently advertised for residential use. The same is true for certain medieval churches currently being advertised in Wales, such as Ambleston (Pembrokeshire) and Llanfaglan (Caernarvonshire). That the Borough has sanctioned residential use for the only public building of any historical interest in the parish – absent the pub – is, to say the least, unfortunate. I would query why a form of commercial use could not have been proposed, with some residual right of worship: for instance, the pending draft scheme for Trimley St Mary (Suffolk) will vest that long-disused church in a commercial/cultural undertaking, but (as I was informed there recently) includes a specific right to use the building for prayers on Remembrance Sunday.

I have every confidence that the Diocese has obtained, or will try to obtain, a reasonable price for Astwood Church. I also have every confidence that the purchasers, and their successors in title, will obtain a far better price for it upon its disposal. Look, for instance, at the fate of the nearby St Michael, Grove: a single cell church, the smallest medieval church in the county, was sold as a three bedroom unit in 2015 for £800,000, almost certainly a vast mark-up on the price the Church received for it after 1971. This sort of outcome keeps happening almost everywhere disposals for residential use occur, and the Church must have lost a considerable capital as a result. Even if the Scheme is sealed, I hope (if the prospective purchaser(s) will forgive me) that the Diocese does not sell, or has not sold, its birthright in Astwood for a mere mess of pottage.

A more serious difficulty that I have with the whole process of determining future use is that I understand that the Diocese has found a buyer for Astwood Church before the Committee has had the chance to determine the nature of its fate (i.e., whether or not it be converted to residential use), and it may be possible that the purchaser(s) have

incurred considerable costs in the meantime. A regrettable expectation may therefore been created on the part of the prospective purchaser(s) that the decision of the Committee is a mere formality and that the business of converting Astwood Church into a house is already irreversible. Why not determine the future use *before* a purchaser is found? If the Diocese – or any other diocese – considers that it can complete (or virtually complete) a transaction before processing a scheme, then what does it say to the public about the ‘quasi-judicial’ process that the Committee is supposed to follow? Does it not create a presumption that the Committee is merely a rubber stamp that can generally/uniformly be depended upon to confirm the *fait accompli* arranged by the Diocese, everyone knowing that the cost of appeal to the Privy Council is so prohibitive and the likely response of that board so predictable as to make the Diocesan proposals effective and final? The seemingly pre-emptive actions of the Diocese may also place an element of undesirable moral suasion upon the Committee that might compromise its efficacy as a quasi-judicial body: in practice what Committee member would really wish to oppose a scheme knowing that a purchaser has not only expended a considerable amount of energy in preparatory work but may also have made legally enforceable and substantial financial commitments to lenders with the encouragement of the Diocese?

Yet if the Diocese does need the cash, the question is: why? Why, when it has hitherto been one of the more solvent dioceses, would it need Astwood Church to be removed from the books of the Diocesan Board of Finance if not to obtain a financial return? I fear it is because, since 1998, the dioceses have been responsible for future pension accruals. They have therefore borne the brunt of the unprecedented negligible or negative real interest rates that have prevailed since the turn of the century – rates that no reasonable person could have predicted in 1997. The financial burden weighing upon the dioceses grows with every passing year, and there may come a point where a fire-sale of assets (like Astwood Church) becomes not merely necessary but imperative in order to allow diocesan authorities to fulfil their contractual undertakings to their pensioners. Thus, churches may have to die so that the clergy who have served them might live. The change in responsibility for accruals was promoted, in part, by the Commissioners who wished to reduce their commitments and obtain some breathing space in order to recover from the mistakes they had committed in the 1980s. They have certainly recovered handsomely since then, no doubt largely due to the acuity of their investment committee. However, what pension fund would not wax mightily if the primary calls upon it were reducing year on year or, at any rate, not increasing? Whilst the financial fortunes of the Commissioners wax, those of the dioceses wane to a corresponding extent: indeed, the good fortune of the former is the distress of the latter, and vice versa. The ‘quasi-judicial’ process that is to apply to this Scheme requires the Commissioners to decide whether or not Astwood Church is to be privatised for all time. Why should the Commissioners not take account of the financial demands of the Diocese and conclude that they must be satisfied in this instance as a form of natural justice? After all, the balances currently enjoyed by the Commissioners are a function of diocesan distress; in this context the Commissioners would, surely, be ingrates if they were to refuse to satisfy Diocesan demands.

Now I do not mean to put things this way in order to impugn the integrity of the members of the Committee (whom I believe would always act in good faith, and many of

whom have to, or have had to, care for ancient church buildings in their own benefices). Nor am I suggesting that the Commissioners as an institution are absolutely conflicted, but there are subtle forces at work that might lead the Committee to look a certain way in determining whether or not Astwood Church should become a house. The problem is that this all goes to the trust that the public will have in the whole process run by the Commissioners. If the Church is in a desperate plight at almost every level, especially at the diocesan level (where it matters the most), how can the Church of England be trusted as the custodian of one of our most valuable national assets – our stock of churches – when the decisions that have to be taken by the dioceses are a consequence of financial arrangements, instituted by Synod and sanctioned by Parliament, from which the Commissioners have derived, and continue to derive, considerable economic benefit? It pains me to write this, but I think that the Church has, whether wittingly or unwittingly, placed itself in an acute institutional dilemma from which it can only extricate itself with difficulty, but which might also put its position as a responsible custodian of this great patrimony – our historic churches – into question. I consider that Astwood Church would have had a relatively good chance of being vested in the CCT in the 1970s or 1980s (though, of course, I am aware of perfectly decent ancient churches that were not so vested during that period); that it is now to be privatised seems to me to be an apt instance of the negative consequences of this dilemma.

Some recent schemes approving the conversion of ancient church buildings to residential use have been understandable, but not wholly happy: Upper Gravenhurst in Bedfordshire has (as I can attest from local conversations) caused some local disquiet – and it leaves a not insubstantial community unchurched (a fact recognised by the local incumbent who informed me that he is trying to make more active use of the CCT building at Lower Gravenhurst, which unlike Upper Gravenhurst is at a distance from the residential area, by way of some pastoral compensation); Wolferlow in Herefordshire – an obvious candidate for CCT/FFC vesting despite the critical structural condition of the nave (though note the considerable expense incurred by the CCT in neighbouring Lower Sapey, Worcestershire) – must be the only church that boasts an interior photograph in Pevsner that is now to be barred to the public; Saxby in Leicestershire, one of a fine trio of George Richardson churches (Stapleford [CCT], also Leicestershire, and Teigh in Rutland, all built for the 4<sup>th</sup> earl of Harborough), etc. If Astwood Church to be vested in the CCT the allowance of six public Sunday services per annum would at least allow for some form of mission in the parish (as per Lower Gravenhurst or many of the other CCT churches where I have attended services), and the potential revival of the cause of Christianity in the community were the demography ever to permit it; naturally, any such a revival would be difficult, if not impossible, were the building to be converted to residential use.

Please note, therefore, that I am making this representation in opposition to the Scheme, for the reasons given above. Please accept my apologies for some of the impertinent remarks I have made and for any inadvertent inaccuracies in this letter, but please also be aware that I have a real foreboding about the fate of more than 90% of the national stock as almost all congregations everywhere become extinct within the next decade or so (only a relatively small handful of the thousands of congregations I have seen have genuinely sustainable demographic profiles, perhaps no more than a hundred or so out

of the nearly 4,000 churches where I have attended services). Despite the protestations of the national authorities, the demographic situation is quite beyond repair (and, in certain critical respects is probably worsening quite quickly, as the latest published statistics and analyses of them by Professor Bernard Silverman, David Keen, etc., attest). I am at a loss to know why the authorities think it is still a good idea that the Church of England should, or indeed can, act as a responsible custodian for most parish churches if there is no realistic prospect of there being a mass revival in attendance across the country (and, on current projections and based upon my own experience, there is absolutely no realistic prospect whatever of any such revival occurring, although the timetabling of 99% of services has taken no account of shifting patterns of weekend behaviour since the early 1990s: a massive 'own goal' by the Church). As far as I am concerned the least worst solution would be the transfer of the greater part of the stock (including all pre-1830 foundations) to the state in tandem with partial dis-endowment (so that the assumption of future maintenance by the state is rendered politically palatable in a harsh economic climate), in return for a perpetual and free ongoing right of use for worship, with the Church thereby being freed from all further maintenance obligations in respect of that transferred stock which, as we are so frequently told by so many clergy, inhibits effective mission and pastoral engagement by imposing a considerable burden of administration they are not often trained to undertake. Any transfer without a substantial financial settlement from the Church is not politically plausible. Such a transfer ought to be effected before any remaining political window of opportunity closes, a distinct possibility in the near future; it would certainly obviate the need to make hard decisions like this one.

As noted above, I will be far from surprised if the Committee affirms the decision made by the Diocese (and presumably supported by the Statutory Advisory Committee), but I do think that in the case of Astwood Church it is worth challenging the presumption that disposal for residential use is the right way to proceed when there might still be alternative options of the kind noted above. I consider that (however excellent and sympathetic the plans of the purchaser(s) are likely to be) conversion to residential use would be deplorable. In any event, I must apologise for not having put this suggestion to the authorities in writing several years ago – since I had thought, erroneously, that the future of Astwood Church as a place of Christian witness had been secured. I must also apologise to the prospective purchaser(s) for making the points I have made. However, the better part of a millennium of faith, commitment and history should not be sloughed off lightly, and I wonder whether future residents of the parish might not come to regret the ostensible indifference the current generation in Astwood has shown to the fate of their most prominent building, and what it represents.

Please also accept my apologies for the length and rambling nature of this letter.

Yours faithfully



**JAMES DREVER**



Historic England

SOUTH EAST OFFICE

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The Church of England  
Pastoral and Closed Churches  
Birmingham Diocesan Office, 1 Colmore Row  
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Direct Dial: 01483 252026

Our ref: E00176786

1 November 2017

Ms Griffiths

**Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011**

**LOCATION: CHURCH OF ST PETER, ASTWOOD, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE**

Thank you for consulting Historic England on this matter. It was also a pleasure to meet you when we visited site on the 15<sup>th</sup> June with David Spragg. David also supplied details of the marketing campaign that took place before the sale of the church was agreed.

Residential conversion, as is proposed, is bound to have a major impact on its significance as a historic building. Thanks to a bomb hitting the nave in 1940 the interior has few furnishings of interest. The nave and chancel furniture were presumably all introduced as part of the 1963 restoration and the benches in the south aisle while old (they are assembled out of reused 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century panelling, probably in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) are not works of craftsmanship, nor are they of great historic value. The nave and chancel roofs are modern and of no importance. Nevertheless, the open nature of the interior is a vital element of the church's architectural and historic interest. This impressive space is not only a vital element of the building's architectural value but contributes to the historical value of the building, its openness is necessary to understand how services were conducted. While much has changed it is still possible to imagine relatively easily how it would have appeared to a medieval worshipper and the sharp contrast it would have presented to their modest dwellings.

Given the importance of its openness, dividing up the interior, which would be necessary to convert it into a dwelling, would inevitably entail what we would consider to be substantial harm to its significance. Any planning and listed building consent application for conversion would have to meet the criteria set out in the National Planning Policy Framework if it is to win approval. Paragraph 132 of this document states that substantial harm to a grade II\* building such as this should be wholly exceptional and paragraph 133 goes on to set out a series of tests that need to be met if this level of harm is to be accepted. These are:



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- The nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and
- No viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and
- Conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and
- The harm of loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use.

The key question is whether a viable use which would not involve subdividing the building, such as community use, has been seriously sought and not materialised. Having seen the marketing information supplied I am satisfied that reasonable steps have been made to find an alternative use that would avoid subdivision of the interior. In such a small village, which already has a village hall, community uses are likely to be very limited, so the lack of interest in non-residential uses is not surprising. Therefore, with great regret we accept that residential conversion, and the substantial harm that this would inevitably entail, is the only practical way of preserving the building currently on offer.

There are a number of fittings and furnishings which we consider make a valuable contribution to the significance of the church and should remain in situ. These include the medieval font; the 17<sup>th</sup> century bell-frame and the bells within it, which date from the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; a number of monuments, including 15<sup>th</sup> century brasses and 18<sup>th</sup> century ledger stones and wall memorials; the Royal Arms of William IV and an 18<sup>th</sup> century charity board. These should be regarded as fittings and would need listed building consent to remove once out of faculty jurisdiction. As the bells have been associated with the church for a very long time their removal would diminish both their significance and that of the church. Furthermore, the closure of the church for worship does not necessarily mean that ringing can never take place again. The bells could be restored to ringing condition at some point and that the owner of the church occasionally allowed them to be used. To my mind the best course of action would be to ensure that the bells were safe and secure within the frame as this preserves an interesting artefact and leaves open the potential for restoration to full ringing at some point in the future. While fonts are often broken and buried when no longer required to prevent misuse, my understanding is that current Church of England policy contains a presumption against the destruction or burial of historically or artistically significant fonts. In my opinion the font is of historical significance and therefore should be retained within the building.

As the nave and chancel furnishings are of very limited interest and I have no objection to their being disposed of. While the pipe organ is a high quality instrument its association with the church has been brief and is not strong. It would be better to find it a new home where it would be properly used and cared for. The benches in the



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aisle are not of particular significance, despite the age of the material they are formed from, I think they can be disposed of after careful recording.

Yours sincerely

**Richard Peats**

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas

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**Duncan Sharkey**  
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**Brett Leahy**  
Head of Planning

**Our Ref:** 17/02895/CONS

**Your Ref:**

**Reply To:** Luke Gledhill

**Direct Line:** 01908252271

**e-mail:** [luke.gledhill@milton-keynes.gov.uk](mailto:luke.gledhill@milton-keynes.gov.uk)

24th November 2017

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Application no: 17/02895/CONS**

**Proposal: Consultations for a draft Pastoral (Church Buildings Disposal) Scheme for a sale of St Peters Church and change of use to a residential dwelling.**

**At: St Peters Church, Main Road, Astwood, Newport Pagnell, MK16 9JS**

I am writing to confirm that Milton Keynes Council has no objections to the Pastoral (Church Buildings Disposal) Scheme put forward by the Church Commissioners for the closure, sale and conversion of the church of St Peter, Astwood and annexed land to use as a single residential dwelling, subject to planning permission and listed building consent.

Yours faithfully,

  
**Luke Gledhill**  
Planning Officer

**On behalf of Head of Development Management**

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