

CASE STUDY

HOLY TRINITY, PARR MOUNT (FINGERPOST CHURCH), DIOCESE OF LIVERPOOL, COFE

www.stpaulsblackbrook.wordpress.com/holy-trinity-parr-mount // www.facebook.com/FingerpostChurch

Built in 1857 and known as the “Giraffe Church” due to the distinctive polygonal blocks of copper slag used for the exterior, by 2011 Holy Trinity was facing closure and demolition due to congregational decline and serious structural problems caused by the use of an inappropriate cementitious mortar when the building was repointed in the late 1970s.

When St. Helens Council refused permission to demolish the listed church, the congregation, under the leadership of Interim Minister Rev. Glyn Thomson, spent time in prayer and reflection, seeking God’s vision for the church’s future. In an economically depressed area which was gradually being abandoned by banks, retailers and other institutions, it became clear that God was calling the church to be a hub for social action within the community.

The congregation realised they could not “go it alone” and so put together a coalition of stakeholders including representatives from the Diocese of Liverpool, St. Helens Council, Helena Partnerships (the local housing association) and FINTRA (the Fingerpost Tenants and Residents Association). First Choice Day Opportunities, a local business which rents a room in the church, and the church’s architect, Anthony Grimshaw, also joined the group which became known as the Fingerpost Regeneration Project Committee – a name chosen to recognise that the

regeneration of the church would ultimately prove to be a catalyst for the regeneration of the community. Support and advice was also provided by the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division, London.

The Fingerpost area is not short of problems including: drug and alcohol misuse, debt, unemployment, single parenthood and child poverty. It was the very detailed statistics on the local health crisis, provided by the Council’s Public Health Department, which were really startling, however. The average life expectancy in St. Helens (80.7 for women / 76.0 for men) is some way lower than the national average (82.3 / 78.3). In Fingerpost, it is just 73 / 68. Roughly 1 in 5 people in Fingerpost lives with a chronic condition such as COPD or diabetes with the root cause being poor diet and lack of exercise. Mental health problems are rife, particularly among working-age men as unemployment leads to anxiety, depression and worse.



A programme of activities was devised to start tackling some of these problems. The church bought eight laptops, funded by Awards for All, to host CV-writing and computer literacy classes and to help benefit claimants apply for benefits using the new online system. It also hosted a Jobs Fair. The nave was used for light exercise classes and the NHS “iVan” mobile screening unit visited. However, there were still serious building problems to deal with and the church was added to the Heritage at Risk Register in 2014.

With the generous funding of the HLF, the National Churches Trust and Garfield Weston Foundation, the first phase of repairs was carried out in 2016. As well as repairs to the walls and roof, a new heating system was installed (meaning the church can be used all year round), as well as a new kitchen, café area and WCs and an office was created within the north transept to be used as a permanent base for FINTRA.

The new kitchen was designed so that it can be used to host healthy cookery demonstrations, particularly aimed at young mothers who learn how to produce nutritious meals for their families on a tight budget. The kitchen can also be used by wheelchair users. The café hosts regular drop-in events aimed at tackling social isolation.

There is still another phase of repairs to be done and internal redecoration is desperately needed, but Fingerpost Church is definitely “on the up” and becoming recognised as a beacon of God’s love in an area which needs all the love it can get.