



Public Consultation regarding the sale of The Marshall Rooms: Your Questions Answered

*A response to the Public Consultation held
1st November 1st – 17th December 2023.*

Forward by The Reverend Benjamin Thompson BA (Oxon), MA.

I am extremely grateful to all who contributed feedback to the Public Consultation concerning the proposed sale of the Marshall Rooms. It has been useful to receive feedback from people who represent a range of views, with about a third of respondents being strongly in favour of the proposed sale, a third supportive of the sale but with some significant concerns, and a third opposed to the sale altogether.

The consultation responses have often contained important questions, and occasionally have made suggestions which might work in commercial contexts but don't match the reality of working within the limitations of both charity and ecclesiastical law. Most of what follows are the questions that have been asked, but I have taken the liberty of reframing some suggestions and comments as questions to try and provide consistency and clear responses.

Whilst I have shared these responses with members of the St James-the-less redevelopment group (a group empowered by the Parochial Church Council to oversee the whole project of redeveloping St James' Church, made up of Church Officers and other members of the local community), these responses are mine. They may not necessarily reflect the view of the 'Church', either those responsible for St James, or wider Church structures.

I hope these responses to the questions raised in the public consultation are helpful and provide insight into how the redevelopment group and PCC, almost all residents in the parish except me, have reached this point in their decision-making to safeguard the future of the Parish Church.

Every Blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B Thompson', written in a cursive style.

Fr Ben Thompson

Fr Ben is the Priest with Pastoral and Missional Responsibility for the parish of Iron Acton within the Fromeside Benefice of Churches, where he is licensed as an Assistant Curate.

Section I: The Marshall Rooms

Would the sale of the Marshall Rooms mean the village will lose a community asset?

The Marshall Rooms have become seen as a community asset (if a dormant one) over the last twenty-five years by many. However, they were not built for this purpose: they were built as meeting space when meeting rooms in a previously owned church property were sold and the then Rector was threatened with holding meetings in his home.

Assurances were given by the Marshall Trust to the then-neighbours that the rooms would not be used for toddler groups, parties, fundraising events, or other similar usage, but within five years necessity forced this change of use. Complaints were made, but the original assurances had been made in a non-legally binding way.

It is my personal belief, both as a priest with responsibility for the village and as a member of the extended Iron Acton community as a parent linked to the village school, that whilst the sale of the Marshall Rooms would be the loss of a potential asset to the village, the reinforcement of the church as a community asset would ultimately lead to a better outcome for the whole community.

Could the management of the Marshall Rooms be professionalised to make it a profit-making asset in order to raise funds for church work whilst maintain the building?

There are churches in the Diocese with very large buildings and resources who are able to employ staff members who are responsible for promoting and managing their buildings as profit-making assets to further support the work of the church in question. As our parish income is less than £30,000 annually, and often finely balanced with expenditure, the professional management of the Marshall Rooms is not a viable option for St James-the-Less.

What's more, whilst the building is well-maintained and in good condition, the Marshall Rooms are not an attractive facility themselves because of the limited access. There is currently no parking except for an accessibility spot. Local convention (although, according to our records, never legally codified) is that access to them should be through the poorly lit churchyard, with multiple steps and other trip hazards. As a result, the Rooms cannot compete as a function space with the Parish Hall, or the public houses within the village.

How will this affect the memorial Garden in the Churchyard?

The churchyard memorial garden is consecrated land which belongs to the Rector of the Parish along with the Diocesan Board of Finance. As such, it would not be sold as part of the land attached to the Marshall Rooms.

We have been advised to make sealing the wall between the two patches of land a condition of sale.

Will this create a disproportionately negative impact on local residents?

One of my biggest concerns, and I believe of those who are working on this project with me, is seeking to minimize the impact on the quality of life of those who live in the immediate vicinity of the Marshall Rooms. Looking through the archives, it would appear that the Church has locally not always given full due consideration to this, and whilst I won't claim we are now perfect when it comes to caring about those being impacted, I do hope we have done a better job so far than might have been the case in a different context.

Members of the redevelopment group met with the neighbours of the Marshall Rooms a few months ago to notify them of our intention to sell the Marshall Rooms with planning permission. On that occasion, we set out the reasons why, including the vision for the Church re-ordering, and invited them to share their views and concerns to feed into the planning process.

Several months later, a smaller number of the redevelopment group met with the neighbours with the draft plans to be sold with the Marshall Rooms. There were several significant concerns with the plans and how they might impact their quality of life, and we spent an evening discussing how these might be addressed. That meeting ended with an agreement on adjustments to the plans, which were fed back to the Architect who made all the requested adjustments except one due to the requirements of planning law. I then spoke to the affected neighbours and was able to work with them to find a way forward which allowed them to maintain their quality of life in the way they have been able to do until now.

If we were not to sell the Marshall Rooms, the choice the PCC as managing trustee of the Marshall Trust would be faced with would be to either mothball the building without ongoing maintenance, potentially leading to dereliction, or to significantly increase the use of the hall, leading to a significant increase in strangers accessing the hall via the lane due to accessibility requirements.

We believe that a sale with Planning permission for plans made in consultation with the neighbours is the way forward which has the least impact on the site's neighbours.

Would the proceeds of the sale of the Marshall Room really all go into the redevelopment work?

Yes. One of our early concerns about proceeding on this path was that the Diocese of Bristol's Finance Board (DBF, the Custodian Trustee of the Marshall Trust) would demand some or all of the money from the sale of the property. I met early in 2023 with the Archdeacon of Malmsbury, a senior member of the DBF, and received assurances that any capital from the sale of the property would not be requested by the diocese but would be held by the PCC on behalf of the parish.

The nature of the Scheme which governs the Marshall Trust, and the process by which it is intended the Trust will be closed, requires that any such money would have to be spent on the redevelopment work.

What will happen to the Jubilee Time capsule placed in the grounds of the Marshall Rooms in 2002?

We are currently in the process of identifying and contacting the Custodian Trustees of the Golden Jubilee time capsule. When we have done this, we will work with them to identify a suitable course of action for the future of the time capsule.

Section 2: The Parish Church

Why have costs for work on the Church increased so much?

The costs have increased for several significant reasons. One is the exponential increase in the cost of materials over the past five years. This, itself, is in part for another significant factor: the rise in inflation, and the impact this has had on the price of labour.

The other increase in costs comes from the necessary change to the nature of the project. Since 2019, the Church of England has committed to be Carbon Neutral by 2030, which we are required to work towards: any plans which fail to address this are likely to be denied permission by the church authorities responsible for overseeing the care of our historic buildings.

Furthermore, the Global Pandemic prevented issues with the building's fabric, such as masonry and tiling, from being repaired having been identified in the five-yearly building inspection (called 'The Quinquennial Inspection'). Not only are these outstanding, but we have recently had another Quinquennial which has identified further issues. If we want the Parish Church to be safe and accessible for years to come, these issues need to be addressed. The most affordable way to do this is to build them into the existing building scheme rather than tackle them independently.

Why have the plans for the church redevelopment not been more transparent?

Plans for the re-ordering of St James the Less were first announced in 2019 at a meeting open to the public and attended by people from across the parish. The Church Architect's plans, which had been chosen over two other proposals by the Parochial Church Council (PCC, primarily residents in the parish or members of the church with historic links to the parish), were put on display on that occasion.

At this point, the plans themselves have not changed, although there is a recognition that they will probably need some adjustment. This is because of the increase in costs, the need to install a carbon-neutral heating system, and the wear and tear to the fabric of the building which has become a priority for repair since 2019.

Whilst the church redevelopment group (a group of parish residents and myself empowered by the PCC) and the PCC have yet to consider the choices in front of them, we will inevitably want to share these plans once they have been agreed. Details of how this will be done will follow once this is decided.

Is the church going to lose its character of reverence if it has modern facilities fitted?

I do not believe so. The modern facilities would be primarily at the back of the church and fitted in a style which is in harmony with the existing architecture and furniture within the church. The toilet facilities would occupy the space currently occupied by the vestry, whilst the limited catering facilities will be encased in a way that they are not visible when they are not being used.

I recently visited the parish of Sutton Benger in Wiltshire, where a similar redevelopment plan has taken place inside the church with the installation of facilities and a flexible education space. The vast majority of the pews and the chancel remain unchanged. Given the number of hours I spend in historic church buildings, I was caught by surprise when these things were pointed out to me, my eye having been drawn to the historical and religious features when I walked through the door. I believe this impact would remain the case for St James' with the plans being proposed.

Is it realistic to expect that selling the Marshall Rooms will lead to improved usage of the Parish Church? Is this not a separate issue?

I believe that this is very much the case. I don't believe, however, that this is simply because the activities that take place, or have taken place in the Marshall Rooms historically, will all happen within the church building when the space is reconfigured. If I did, I think that I would be deluding myself. Whilst some activities might transfer into a slightly reconfigured space in the south side of the church building, some activities would be better suited to one of the many well-maintained rooms in the Parish Hall.

Adaptations to the south side of the church building would open up greater possibilities for the use of the building which builds upon the existing use of the space. We are fortunate that, through the kindness of supportive neighbours, the Church is open daily, with people visiting to research the history of the church and parish, to spend some time in quiet reflection or prayer, and staff and children coming from Iron Acton Primary School for learning through the use of the space and for events. The proposed changes include space for the secure display of historical artefacts, the potential for improvements in conserving historical monuments, flexible space for both adult and child education activities, and small-scale catering and accessible toilet facilities.

Combined with efficient heating, the proposed changes would offer the potential for the church to provide an additional learning space for the school as and when required; a community cafe and warm space hub; a destination for historians concerned with the Poyntz family and Late-Medieval and Tudor Church architecture, a venue for local

history groups to meet in, or to visit if coming from further afield; a flexible public art gallery; a large 'games' space; and so much more. Many of these things are theoretically possible in the Marshall Rooms, but all of them are likely to be significantly more attractive within the atmosphere and architecture of a centuries old, well-cared-for parish church.

Can we not do village fundraising gradually over many years to help increase the church's relevance in people's minds and keep all the buildings?

It would be wonderful for St James-the-less to be able to offer two well-resourced buildings for the people of Iron Acton for many years to come. The financial and demographic reality, however, prevents this from being a viable option; this scheme plays into addressing a larger strategy issue for the Parish Church. The combination of the age demographic of those who regularly contribute to the parish church, financially and through their time, and a best-case scenario of inflation averaging out at 2% over the coming decade means that, without a change in how the main church building is used and supported or ending the annual multi-thousand financial drain on resources the Marshall Rooms provides, the Parish Church risks total insolvency within the next ten-fifteen years. This would probably lead to closure, and either the sale of the church building for redevelopment as flats, or it falling into dereliction.

Section 3: The village community

Is it not better for the village cohesion if we maintain the current facilities in St James so people band together to make things happen?

I don't believe so, because there will still be plenty of opportunities for people to help one another when the church hosts services and events. Whilst there might be catering facilities, tables will always need putting up and folding down; mugs, plates and glasses will always need putting out, collecting, and cleaning; cakes and biscuits will always need baking or buying, and delivering. What the installation of facilities would allow, however, would be the ability to do these things more safely; for there to be adequate space for people to share in hot drinks and risk spilling them when people try and pass in narrow aisles; for there to be open and visible space for cleaning and preparation helping us to better safeguard children and vulnerable adults. I would go as far as contending that we are fortunate that the present situation does support village cohesion whilst the ongoing safety and safeguarding risks could easily lead to a collapse in this cohesion.

Will this mean better support for the Parish hall and increased community cohesion?

I believe this will be the case. For several years, the Church has rented the Parish Hall for events over using the Marshall Rooms due to their limitation. I would hope that the removal of the Marshall Rooms as a potential 'competitor' in a limited market would increase the volume of instances where the Church would seek or be open to work in partnership with the Parish Hall. Similarly, I would hope that the Church space would be more attractive to other local groups such as Acton Aid and the school when they wish to use a space which offers calm, peace, or a sense of the village's history.

Section 4: The consultation process

Was the public consultation sufficiently publicised?

On the 1st of November, 2023, notices regarding the consultation, setting out the proposals and their context within the wider redevelopment scheme, were posted on North Road, on the main road through Latteridge, and the Door of the Parish Church. In addition, the same notice was published on the village website on the same date (<https://www.ironacton.info>). This meant that notices were publicly visible in the three main residential areas within the ecclesiastical parish of Iron Acton, and accessible online.

The same notice was also published in the parish magazine, *Local Poyntz*. The publication schedule of the magazine meant that this was not in each household until early December but before the 17th of December closure of the consultation.

The process was announced in the Parish Church during the notices in the Parish Communion on 5th of November, and many of the following weeks with a final reminder made on 10th of December. This means that the process received more than the equivalent public notification than the reading of Banns of Marriage, which occurs three times.

The inclusion of the relevant information on the notice has been criticized as having made it too dense and insufficiently 'eye-catching'. The font print size was size 12, larger than most planning application notices. I would argue the inclusion of this information made the majority of the responses received far more informed and considered than might have been the case without sharing any rationale.

A strategic decision was made by the Rector of the Fromeside Benefice (incorporating Iron Acton), The Reverend Malcolm Strange, the Churchwardens, and myself that a notification would not be posted on social media. Whilst this might have yielded more responses, this decision was made in the belief that comments would be made on these posts rather than within the formal scope of the consultation process and would therefore be lost and not recorded. Furthermore, we hold a general position that social media is a useful tool for promoting events but is damaging and divisive when used to discuss interests, concerns, and legal matters.

It is my belief that every appropriate avenue for publicising the process was pursued, and with no dedicated staff member, lay or ordained, available for the parish of Iron Acton, the publicity was proportionate to the resources available.