

A New Future for St Wistan's Church, Wigston Magna

Following discussions by Church authorities and the Borough Council over the past 18 months, plans are being made to include the public in a process to discuss the future of St Wistan's Church building in Wigston Magna.

Sadly, the Grade II listed church has not been used for worship for more than two years for safety reasons. The building, which only came back into use by the Church of England in the 1950s after a wide variety of uses including a barn, a school and alms-houses, became unsafe due to the need for costly restoration work.

Its small congregation has been worshipping with fellow Anglicans at the town's Grade I listed parish church, All Saints, since St Wistan's was temporarily closed when part of its South East wall started to collapse in 2018. The cost of repairs is estimated as at around £200,000 (including VAT).

As a result, Wigston Magna Parochial Church Council (PCC) – which is responsible for the building and whose Trustees are mostly volunteers – began exploring a number of options in the months before the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

A spokesperson for the PCC said: "The options we looked at ranged from simply undertaking the essential repairs to redeveloping the church so that it is more suitable both for modern worship and wider community use, installing a kitchen/food servery and toilet. At present the building doesn't have a mains water supply. Unfortunately, the cost of such an undertaking would be prohibitive and unviable for a sustainable future and the PCC feels that the money and effort involved may be better directed at the Parish Church of All Saints, Moat Street, where there is more potential for growth and space for development for community purposes. Sadly, this means that permanent closure of St Wistan's as an Anglican place of worship has become a possibility and we have been discussing with the Borough Council having an exhibition at the planned St Wistan's Festival about exploring new possibilities for the building to try to preserve this historic place for the benefit of the community.

A spokesperson for the Borough Council said: "We still hope that a St Wistan Festival will be possible in the future and will be happy to consider including an event that might help local people to explore possibilities for the church's future. We remain keen to see it continuing to be a benefit to the community as it has over many years in different ways in the past."

The PCC spokesperson said: **"One of our key concerns will be to ensure that any future use of the building is sensitive to its location and its historic significance, not least the 'Two Steeples' heritage of Wigston. The churchyard will need to be maintained and properly respected, and we would hope that the steeple of St Wistan's will continue to be a local landmark as it has throughout its very varied and fascinating history."**

"We had been expecting to host a public exhibition about the history of the church and invite members of the public to share their thoughts about its future at the St Wistan's Festival, which we were planning in conjunction with the Borough Council for June but sadly, the ongoing pandemic has meant that the Council has had to postpone the Festival once again.

We now propose to host our own exhibition and information morning and invite members of the public to call in to All Saints Church to share their thoughts about the history and future of St Wistan's on Saturday 22nd May from 10.00am to 12.30pm. The drop-in event will explain the processes that have to be gone through to permanently

close the building for Anglican worship and then to establish a new use for it and the surrounding churchyard. A response card will be available for people to fill in, sharing their thoughts about the past and future of the buildings and churchyard and we will use local newsletters to keep the community informed.

St Wistan's has undergone a number of changes of use in the past. Originally a Roman Catholic shrine church before it was Anglican, it has at various points of history fallen into disuse and has been used as a barn, as a school, as alms-houses and as a non-conformist Chapel. It was in the 1950s that it came into use as by the Church of England at a time when there was demand for a second church in the town. Sadly, this has no longer been the case for some time and a diminishing and elderly congregation worshipped in the building for several decades and the PCC had been battling ongoing and costly building maintenance and repair costs for two churches. Whilst holding the building in great affection, the PCC and the St Wistan's congregation recognised that they need to take a pragmatic approach.

The PCC has requested the assistance of the diocese in exploring the possibility of closure as a place of worship given the large and ongoing cost of the building and the small congregation, which has successfully relocated to worship in the Parish Church, All Saints. Church of England buildings are funded locally (not centrally) and are reliant on local donations and grants and depend on the continual work of volunteers to tackle ongoing maintenance and repair bills. Funding from external grants etc for repairs will always be tied to the future use of the building, so the official end of worship would need to be formally confirmed in order to enable new uses to be explored and funded.

The PCC's decision to request the exploration of closure of the building as a place of Anglican worship means there will be a formal consultation processes in which the public have a right to comment. This is a statutory legal process required as part of the law of England which ensures local people and organisations are invited to comment ([you can read about that process here](#)). If the process leads to a decision in favour of permanent closure there will then have to be another legal process to determine any future use. **Again, the public will be formally included in that process and will have the chance to make representations about any proposal.**

Enquiries for the PCC can be sent to WigstonRector@yahoo.com for response after the bank holiday 3 May.