

STANDON: ALL SAINTS

THE PETITION OF DARREN AND RICK CLAPHAM

JUDGMENT

- 1) The late Charles Clapham died on 10th March 2011 and is buried in All Saints churchyard. His sons, Darren and Rick Clapham, seek a faculty in respect of a memorial which they propose to erect over his grave.
- 2) Charles Clapham lived alongside the churchyard. He had acted as keyholder for the church and had supported the local school. Indeed, it is apparent that Mr. Clapham was something of a “character”. He had been involved in popular music (though I suspect he would have described his music in stronger terms); he dressed colourfully (almost eccentrically it would appear); and was forthright in speech and manner. However, that external appearance and manner did not give the full picture of the man who was a deep thinker and who contributed generously both to the local community and to individuals in need of help. He was clearly well-liked in Standon and proud to be part of that community.
- 3) The Petitioners wish to erect a memorial which reflects their father’s individuality and character. The proposed memorial would be of natural sandstone and would be 3’ high and 1’ 9” wide. A memorial of that material and size would be wholly unexceptionable. The difficulty lies in the proposed wording. The Petitioners propose that the inscription on the memorial should read:

“Now Then” [apparently a phrase frequently used by Mr. Clapham]

Here lies

Charles David William Clapham

Left us on

10th March 2011

A loving father and grandfather

“It’s only rock and roll”.

- 4) The foregoing is the Petitioners' preferred form of words but they have put forward two further possible inscriptions. Version B reads as above but with the words "Finally fell off his perch" used instead of "Left us on" and with "Sadly missed by his many friends and family" replacing "It's only rock and roll". Version C uses both the "Finally fell off his perch" and "It's only rock and roll" variants.
- 5) The Petitioners explain that their father was a distinctive character and say that a more conventional inscription would not reflect his character. I have received letters in support of the petition from Tracey O'Flaherty and Peter de Vries. Those correspondents pay tribute to Mr. Clapham's qualities and to his individuality. They support the argument that something out of the norm is appropriate for his memorial as it was in his life.
- 6) There have been no objections as a result of the public notice of the petition and the Petitioners have consented to the matter being determined on the basis of written representations.
- 7) The proposed memorial has been considered by the Diocesan Advisory Committee which concluded that the words "*It's only rock and roll*" were inappropriate on two grounds. First, that they might not be understood by future generations. Second, that the phrase might be taken to express the view that life was not precious and that such a message was not consistent with a churchyard (this being recorded as the collective view of the Archdeacons).
- 8) Similarly the Petitioners' preferred wording is not supported by the Parochial Church Council. It considered the three versions and indicated a preference for Version B as being most in keeping with the churchyard.
- 9) The question I have to address is whether the proposed wording is such as can be permitted in the particular circumstances of this case.
- 10) My consideration of that question must be undertaken in the context of the nature and purpose of a churchyard. Churchyards are consecrated to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and what is set out on memorials therein must be consistent with that consecrated status. It follows that inscriptions must be consonant with orthodox Christian belief. Not only is this because of the purpose of the churchyard but also because inscriptions convey a message to those who visit churchyards. It is important that the message that such visitors receive is one which proclaims (or at the very least is not inconsistent with) the message of hope and faith being given to them by Christ's Church. In addition it is to be

remembered that the memorial will be read not just by those who knew the deceased in question but by those who did not. Indeed, the message conveyed to those who did not know the deceased is in many ways more important than the message being given to those who did know him or her. Moreover, the memorials placed in churchyards must be fitting and appropriate not just for today but also for the future.

- 11) That does not mean that there has to be a characterless uniformity in the inscriptions in a churchyard. Human individuality and diversity – indeed human eccentricity and non-conformity – are gifts from God and are to be celebrated as such. Accordingly, individuality and diversity in churchyard inscriptions reflecting the diversity and different characters of those commemorated are to be encouraged. Very many churchyards are enhanced and their purpose reaffirmed by inscriptions which are varied (and often quirky or eccentric) and which convey something of the character or life of the departed person. The message that we are individuals and are loved by God as individuals with our God-given differences and eccentricities is an important part of the Christian message proclaimed in our church buildings and to which our churchyards should bear witness.
- 12) In short individuality, even quirkiness, is to be encouraged in the inscriptions on memorials but what cannot be permitted is anything which can be seen as inconsistent with the Church's message. In addition there is a difference between quirkiness and humour which are to be welcomed on memorials and flippancy and irreverence which would be impermissible.
- 13) I have to apply those principles to the current petition. It is entirely right (indeed desirable) that the colourful and "different" aspects of Charles Clapham's life be commemorated but this must be done in a way which is consistent with orthodox Christian belief.
- 14) The words "*Now then*" are just about acceptable. They convey little to anyone who did not know Mr. Clapham and who did not know that he used this phrase but they do not give any false or unchristian message. Moreover, to those who did know him they help to bring something of his character and personality back to mind. An inscription bearing those words would be permissible if the remainder of it were to be acceptable.

- 15) I regret that the words "*It's only rock and roll*" are in a different category and are not acceptable. What is the message being conveyed by those words? Even when seen as some kind of catchphrase account must be taken of what the phrase means. What is the "*it*" to which reference is being made and which is described as being "*only rock and roll*"? The obvious implication is that this is a reference to life or perhaps to death. On either basis this is an assertion of a position of regarding important things as unimportant. It amounts to a trivialising of God's precious gift of life or of the ending of that gift. There is a very real risk that the use of these words will be seen as projecting an inappropriate message.
- 16) The words "*finally fell off his perch*" are also unacceptable. They cross the line going beyond quirkiness and humour to undue flippancy and irreverence. There can be too much solemnity about inscriptions on gravestones and a degree of humour is acceptable. Nonetheless, the ending of a human life is a serious matter and the proposed phrase goes too far in treating it as a light matter.
- 17) It follows that each of the three proposed inscriptions contains wording which is unacceptable in a churchyard and none of them can be permitted in their current form. Accordingly, I refuse the petition.
- 18) Notwithstanding the fact that I have been compelled to refuse this petition I am very conscious that the aim of the Petitioners is not to convey a message inconsistent with Christian belief but to find some way of celebrating their father's individuality. I have already said that this is to be welcomed and encouraged. I should add that I doubt whether the proposed form of words would have been an adequate reflection of Mr. Clapham's character. The material before me indicates that he regarded his rock career as important and that he took a carefree approach to troubles. However, it also indicates that he was an intelligent and thoughtful man who showed real care for and generosity towards others. A message that "*it's all rock and roll*" would not convey the true nature of the man described in the material before me.
- 19) Given the desirability of celebrating individuality and the colourful nature of Mr. Clapham's life I would be prepared to authorise an inscription going beyond the recording of Mr. Clapham's age at death and his attributes as a loving father and grandfather. What is essential is that any such inscription give a message which conveys something of Mr. Clapham's character without being capable of being seen as inconsistent with the Christian Gospel. I hope that the Petitioners can

come up with a form of words which achieves that. On that basis I authorise the Petitioners to apply to amend the form of words. If they wish to propose a different wording the proposed new words can be referred to me without the need for a fresh petition or for public notice. On receipt of such wording I will consider whether further input from the Parochial Church Council or the Diocesan Advisory Committee is needed or whether I am able to determine the matter without such assistance.

STEPHEN EYRE
CHANCELLOR
3rd June 2013