

Case Study

Pyecombe Church - *a partnership funded community project*

Background

The church, which retains much of the original Norman buildings and now has the South Downs Way passing in front of it, was built in 1170 and came under the control of the Priory of St. Pancras in Lewes.

Being on the pilgrimage route from Winchester to Canterbury, it became a resting place for weary pilgrims offering refreshments for the body and soul. This tradition, which proudly continues today, was very much a driver for the “Extending our Church – Enhancing our Welcome” project.

The management group had long known that the lack of toilet and kitchen facilities was severely limiting the church’s ability to welcome visitors and be a community facility.

When the group was rejuvenated with new members the timing was felt to be right to secure the future of the church by providing these facilities and positioning the church firmly in the Pyecombe community and the South Downs National Park.

A project steering group was set up and several toilet and kitchen options were considered along with other opportunities to extend the welcome. Interpretation was added to the project to share the fascinating story of the church’s history with visitors.



The project

The decision was made to extend the church west through a previously existing Victorian door. The extension would house the kitchen, accessible toilet and storage and would require the removal of a number of pews.

The steering group estimated the cost of the project to be £146,000 and, with the support of a professional fundraiser, began seeking funds with the ambitious target of raising the funds in 18 months.

20 months later all funds had been secured and the contractors were instructed to commence work. Funds were raised from a variety of sources including; the SDNPA’s Sustainable Communities Fund (£20,000), Mid Sussex District Council (£20,000), Veolia, Garfield Weston Estate, West Sussex County Council, generous private donations and community fundraising events – the events had the added benefit of keeping the community engaged with the project.

One of the unknowns in the project was the archaeologist’s costs as they were required to be on-site at all times when digging or excavation was taking place – it was not known how much follow up work any finds may have required. Four skeletons were discovered but were not deemed significant as they were less than 200 years old.

The project was successfully completed within budget – all of the 15% contingency budget had been required. An opening ceremony was held during the Village Weekend (an annual community event) and the facilities became fully operational in November 2014.

“Thank you so much for such a lovely space! It’s a welcome and much appreciated relief on a long rainy walk.”

“Wonderful rest stop and a beautiful church, I shall return many times and bring friends. Thank you.”

Extracts from the visitors book in the church kitchen.

The outcome

The visitor book, now on its third volume and filling up quickly, is full of praise and thanks as the two quoted examples above show.

The craftsmanship of the building contractors, JH Payne Ltd, was recognised and celebrated by Sussex Heritage Trust Awards when the church won the Ecclesiastical Buildings Award in 2015.

The church and its facilities are now open for public access every day of the year during daylight hours providing free tea and coffee refreshments and use of the toilet for all visitors.

The kitchen area is stocked with leaflets and booklets giving information on the local area and the South Downs National Park and the church has since completed the interpretation project which provides heritage information to visitors.



southdowns.gov.uk/care-for/supporting-communities-business/sustainable-communities-fund/

The future

In 2013 the running costs of the church was £339 per week before the costs of any repairs or maintenance work.

The increased footfall has resulted in greater donations to the church which in turn enables the management team to better care for this community and cultural heritage asset for Pyecombe and for the National Park as a whole.

The venue can now also be hired out to groups like the Parish Council and the District Council who use it as a polling station.

Other users include the local Beaver Scouts Group, walker’s groups (a recent event catered for 200 walkers!), a Downland Celebration event which raised £1,000 and the village social committee.

For further information;

downlandchurches.co.uk/Pyecombe-Church.html

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