

BLETSOE ST MARY: CHANCEL PROJECT UPDATE FOR BLETSOE PARISH COUNCIL

1 Councillors will recall that the main purposes of the project are to reclaim the extra space in the bricked-off derelict chancel and insert a kitchenette, to convert a re-roofed vestry into a DDA-compliant WC and to build a lobby entrance so that the repaired space can be used flexibly as part of the church building or separately.

2 Since April 2015 the project has obtained income of almost £170,000 in the form of 19 grants received or offered, 65 pledges and donations with associated Gift Aid and the Friends' resources. 63 grant applications have been made. Professional fund-raisers advise this is an impressive achievement for a small community, but that we also seem to have tapped all the main sources. The project has so far spent £39,600 in fees, assessment surveys and the repair of the chancel east window.

3 Over £128,000 is therefore currently available for the main works. Tenders sought by the former church architect, Bruce Deacon, in 2015 came in at £289k but are now out-of-date. A re-tendering process just completed by the new church architect, Mike Dales, shows a 13% increase up to about £325k. Amongst other factors, building prices are rising and ironically matters are made worse by several short-term national grant schemes creating a contractors' market.

4 A phased approach to the project is therefore essential, as well redoubling efforts to attract income from grants and donations. The Friends' Committee and the Parochial Church Council met with the architect on 27 February to consider the options. In outline it was decided that:

- a key priority is removal of the disfiguring brick wall so that the chancel with its newly repaired east window can once more be seen as part of the re-ordered building
- the chancel must be made usable by replacing the damaged floor, inserting services ducts and placing the kitchenette in the south-west corner, but, depending on the outcome of current grant applications, possibly postponing some decorative work
- an equally key priority is conversion of the old vestry into a WC, without which use of the building is seriously curtailed
- the lobby will be postponed to a later phase
- basic runs for essential services (water, gas, heating, foul drainage) will be installed, but full heating and lighting systems postponed, with a considerably cheaper but more short-term electrical heating system installed.

5 Currently the architect is analysing the successful comprehensive tender in accord with these priorities so that we can confirm what it will be possible to do in the first phase. This is also likely to involve a community archaeology project, of which more in due course.

6 The grant sought from the Parish Council will be combined with one already obtained from the Jill Franklin Trust to pay for preparation of a grant-qualifying report and specification by an accredited specialist for conservation work on the reredos, memorials and medieval carvings in the chancel.

FoSM / PCC

1 March 2017