

Providence Chapel, Charlwood

The Restoration Project 2007 - 2019



Chapel Farm, adjacent to the chapel, had become the Charlwood village brothel - a sad decline from the time when Chapel Farm was the home of the devout Joseph Flint who in 1815 had purchased an army surplus barracks building in Horsham, brought it to Charlwood, and re-erected it near his house as a non-conformist chapel.

The brothel owner, a Mr Anthony Cox, was concerned that the chapel windows overlooked his front door, and that his clients might be embarrassed. He therefore planted a row of leylandii trees close to the chapel wall. By 2007 these were keeping the light out of the chapel, and were in danger of undermining the foundations and causing the wooden wall to rot. The leylandii were the start of local concern about the future of the chapel.

The chapel was listed grade 2*, making it the most important building in Charlwood after the church. Patrick Billingham and Brendon Sewill decided something needed to be done. Patrick knocked on the brothel door, was welcomed in but, when he explained that his purpose was not as expected, was quickly evicted. Brendon discovered that the chapel was owned by an elderly group of trustees who were the successors to the trustees appointed in 1816 by Joseph Flint. They were mostly former ministers of religion, and all lived some distance away. In July 2005 he wrote to the chairman of the trustees, Mr Leslie Jarvis of Chatham, to suggest that he should bring the problem to the attention of their insurance company so that the company could then write to Mr Cox, to warn him that they would hold him responsible for the cost of repairing any damage to the chapel. That also got nowhere.

It was clear that the chapel needed to be rescued or it would become derelict. Colin Gates, Jean Shelley and Brendon wrote a paper discussing various options for the future of the chapel:

- Ownership by the National Trust. But, we suggested, they would need a large endowment, perhaps £100,000, and there was no hope of raising that sort of sum.
- Ownership by the Charlwood charity, the John Bristow and Thomas Mason Trust (JBMT). However, it was our opinion that they would probably not be keen to take on an extra responsibility.
- Setting up a new Providence Chapel Trust, which could be registered as a charity, could allow religious services to continue, and which would be in a better position to apply for grants including perhaps from the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- A future use of the chapel might be as an archive store for documents and artifacts relating to the history of Charlwood (a need subsequently met by the Parish Council which included an archive room in their new sports pavilion). Or, it was suggested, the chapel might be used by the nearby school.

We sent the paper to the original chapel trustees but they showed no interest. The solution to the leylandii came, however, when the police raided the brothel. The report in the local paper tells the story:

A PENSIONER single-handedly ran a brothel ... from his Charlwood home, ... a court has heard. Anthony Cox was sentenced to 14 months in prison at Guildford Crown Court ... The 72-year-old was caught out after police raided his home and found paraphernalia, including sex toys and costumes....

Hugh Forgan, prosecuting, told the court Cox had around 123 prostitutes working for him, who he would audition by asking them to have sexual intercourse with him. Gordon Ross, defending said Cox admitted running the brothel but said he in no way coerced the girls and was merely "helping them out". The court heard Cox earned more than £200,000 from his enterprise, which he has been ordered to repay. [Surrey Today. 12 March 2009]

Chapel Farm was sold and in due course the new owner eventually agreed that the leylandii should be removed.

By this time the congregation of the chapel had declined to two, Jane Eade and Marion Dalison. Jane acted as the local organiser and played the organ. But she was becoming increasingly disabled.

2010 - The John Bristow and Thomas Mason Trust

Charlwood is fortunate in having the John Bristow and Thomas Mason Trust (JBTMT) which has an annual income of over £80,000 all of which has to be spent in the parish of Charlwood.

The reverend gentlemen who were the Chapel trustees had applied to JBTMT in 2005 for a grant for minor repairs. JBTMT replied, reasonably enough, that, before giving a grant, JBTMT would wish to have a complete survey made of all the work that needed to be done to protect the building. The chapel trustees arranged for this survey to be done, obtained estimates from three builders and submitted the lowest estimate - for £13,110. Not a large sum!

To their dismay, JBTMT replied that they could not give them a grant - with no explanation of why. Colin Gates, who had been a JBTMT trustee but who had retired, could not understand the reason for the reversal. Brendon Sewill raised the matter in public in April 2010 at the Charlwood annual parish meeting at which the JBTMT annual report was presented (showing that they had £137,000 available for grants). The chairman promised to look at it again. On 2 June JBTMT wrote to the reverend gentlemen still refusing to give a grant, giving no explanation, just (not very helpfully) sending a copy of their Objects.

It was surmised that perhaps JBTMT thought that, as their purpose was to benefit [all] the inhabitants of Charlwood, the congregation of two or three people was not a sufficient number. Brendon wrote a paper laced with academic quotations on the benefit to the general public of the preservation of historic buildings. JBTMT remained unmoved.

To drum up public enthusiasm for saving the chapel, an Open Day was held on Saturday September 11, 2010, as part of the Heritage Open Days. 85 people came. Several had stories to tell about having attended Sunday School in the chapel, or having parents or grandparents who had been members of the congregation, and were buried in the graveyard. Colin Gates expounded the crucial part the building had played in British history as the home of the new elite light infantry who eventually led to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.

2011 - Bringing in the experts

The next move was to contact Robert Williams of English Heritage (now Historic England). And also Martin Higgins and Peter Mills, Conservation Officers for Surrey County Council and for Mole Valley Council. Brendon knew them well from two projects which he had previously led: moving the windmill from Lowfield Heath to Charlwood, and building an extension onto Charlwood church.

By this time most of the reverend gentlemen had resigned leaving only two private individuals, but with the addition of the Grace Baptist Trust as a corporate trustee with Eric Cousins as its more business-like Chief Executive.

Several meetings took place in the summer of 2011 with the experts - Robert Williams, Martin Higgins and Peter Mills; also with Nicola Westbury a trustee of the Surrey Historic Buildings Trust and consultant architect to the Historic Chapels Trust, and Tessa Hilder of the Architectural Heritage Fund. English Heritage agreed to put the chapel on their 'Buildings at Risk Register'. The then chapel architect revised his survey and estimated the cost of the necessary repairs at £150,000 (increased to £200,000 by English Heritage). But then it turned out that he was not properly qualified, and the Heritage Lottery Fund would only agree to pay a grant if the project was assessed by a bona fide architect.

Some idea of the future practical use of the chapel was crucial to the discussions at this stage. No one was keen to restore the building if it had no purpose. Vicky Lanham, head teacher of Charlwood School, was invited to visit the chapel. She explained that the school was due to change from an Infant school (4-7 years) to a Primary (4-11). They would need more space. The chapel would not be suitable as a classroom but she was enthusiastic about its possible use for teaching special subjects. She brought all her staff to the chapel, and had a brain-storming session on how the school could use it. Vicky has remained a strong supporter of the chapel project, and subsequently became a trustee.

At another meeting Robert Williams asked if he could bring a young lady with him. It turned out that she was Emily Greenaway, a project manager from the Heritage Lottery Fund. 'What a lovely little building,' she said. *'Ask us for as much money*

as you like, but don't make it more than £500,000 or else it will need to go to a more senior committee. And' she added for good measure 'be sure to put everything in your application: don't have any little extras coming in late. My committee doesn't like that.' The future looked rosy indeed.

2012 - Religious bombshells

Then the reverend gentlemen launched two bombshells. First, they decided that they were unable to accept a grant from the lottery because it was based on gambling and, since Victorian days, the Baptists had viewed gambling as immoral. All hopes of lottery wealth blown out of the water!

Second, they decided that they were bound by the deed drawn up in 1816 by Joseph Flint which stated (in modern English): *If public worship in the said chapel shall be totally discontinued for the space of six months (unless prevented by persecution for religious opinion ...) then the trustees may mortgage or sell the ground and premises. Trustees ... shall apply ... the money to arise from such sale ... to such religious purposes as have a tendency to promote and spread the knowledge of Jesus Christ....* .

Accordingly, the chapel was put up for sale by Reigate estate agents in August 2012 for £89,950. The sale particulars stated: 'suitable for other uses subject to all necessary consents being obtained.' English Heritage and the conservation officers were worried that it would be sold for conversion into a house (as had happened to the Congregational chapel in Ifield Road) or even into a warehouse or workshop. Brendon was particularly worried that the estate agent who had bought (cheaply) the ex-brothel next door would see the chapel as another profitable venture. To add to our worry, there was no reserve price.

Mole Valley conservation officer, Peter Mills, wrote to the estate agent to warn him that it was unlikely that permission would be granted for any conversion. We threw out threats of compulsory repairs costing £200,000. But the biggest help came from the reverend gentlemen themselves who put three covenants on the sale, that:

- occasional services would be permitted;
- burials would be permitted for twenty-five years; and
- the graveyard would be maintained in perpetuity.

That sufficed to see off any purchaser.

2012 - Setting up the Trust

Our thoughts turned to The Historic Chapels Trust (HCT), a charity similar to the National Trust. Set up in 1993, the HCT owned a handful of old chapels but none in the South East. We contacted them, and the possibility of taking on Providence Chapel was considered by the HCT at their meeting on 1 March 2012. They resolved that they would accept the chapel on two conditions: first, that it could be demonstrated that all other possible solutions had been explored and that transfer to the HCT was the only solution to safeguard the chapel; and second, that the chapel had been fully repaired.

The possibility that JBTMT might take ownership of the chapel was also floated but, as expected, they showed no enthusiasm.

In February 2012, Brendon produced a paper describing the current situation with regards to the chapel, and circulated it to the experts asking them for information and action.

On 8 March, a revised situation paper concluded: *'It has been suggested that a way forward might be for local people to set up a new trust called, say, 'The Providence Chapel Trust'. This trust would be registered as a charity, and ... would have power to raise funds and receive grants, and might purchase the chapel at a nominal price.'*

That was followed up by a series of situation papers in June, July, and August as our thinking developed.

Five potential trustees were approached by Brendon (actually a few more, but five rashly said 'yes'). In alphabetical order, they were:

- Peter Anderson. He lived in Providence Cottages, close to the chapel, and had been project manager for a large construction project in Croydon. He subsequently became a church warden which gave us a useful link to the church.
- Paul Gilmartin. Paul volunteered to act as our contact with the Charity Commission and to act as company secretary.
- Nick Hague, who also lived near the chapel and provided a link to the Parish Council of which he was a member. He had organised the Charlwood Festival in 1980 which had been an outstanding success.
- Tony Kett, a retired senior accountant. Despite protesting that he was far too senior to have done elementary bookkeeping for years he produced exquisite accounts. We did later briefly employ a bookkeeper but Tony found it easier to do the accounts himself than to instruct her.

- Christine Sargent, who volunteered to be Trust Secretary, and later became our very competent Administrator.

And the sixth trustee was:

- Brendon Sewill, who had initiated the project, and who had previous experience nationally as a member of the National Trust Council, and locally with moving the Lowfield Heath Windmill and building the extension onto the parish church.

Paul and Christine subsequently got married, making a good commendation for the amicable qualities of the trust. They proved excellent hosts. Meetings of the trust were frequently held at their house, Bench Cottage on Norwood Hill, and were always well supplied with wine and refreshments. Cheerful jolly meetings are essential for successful local projects.

When recruiting the new trustees, Brendon told each that the task should not last more than a year. At the time that seemed realistic. All we had to do was to get the promised grant from the lottery (in 1991, the first year of the HLF's existence, getting a grant for the windmill had only taken a few months), employ a builder and hand the renovated chapel over to the Historic Chapels Trust. In practice, however, the restoration took over six years and the Historic Chapels Trust proved a mirage: they ran out of money, and added a condition that any acquisition must come with an endowment to cover all future expenses. That was beyond our means, and anyway by then, we were all rather proud of our own little chapel and had no wish to hand it over to anyone. But his rash promise of a one-year task was used regularly to tease him.

The first meeting of the 'shadow' Trust was held on 23 August 2012, followed by a meeting with the experts on 21 September. We resolved to apply to become a charity, and gave ourselves official Objects:

"To promote for the benefit of the public the conservation, protection and improvement of Providence Chapel, a Grade 2 listed building in Charlwood, Surrey.*

To advance the education of the public in the historic heritage of Providence Chapel, and through use of the building for educational purposes.

To allow public access, to permit community activities and to permit religious services and burials."

We also applied to become a company limited by guarantee. That meant that if a member of the public tripped over a gravestone and we were facing a claim for damages of, say, £1 million, each trustee would only be liable for their £10 share in the company.

The first proper meeting of the Trust was held on 7 November 2012 at the chapel. By then the estate agent had reported that no offers had been received, and we were offered the opportunity to purchase the chapel and graveyard for £1.

It is pleasant, if only partially true, to say that we bought the chapel for £1.00, and each put in 17p which meant that we started the project with 2p in the bank (since $6 \times 17p = 102p$). What was true was that we started with very little. In fact a £2,000 grant from our County Councillor, Helyn Clack, enabled us to pay our legal costs on the purchase.

Starting from that 2p we were able to spend over £400,000 on the project.

2013 - and a new architect

Vicky Lanham came to our meeting on 4 March, and 'was positive that the School could use the Chapel for a variety of purposes such as a quiet space for reflection, teaching year groups separately, possibly drama classes and parent/teacher workshops.'

On 6 April an Open Afternoon was held for members of the public, at which we garnered ideas for the future use of the chapel. That was important for raising grants and for designing any alterations that might be needed.

On 15 April we met with Robert Williams, Nicola Westbury, Tessa Hilder, Emily Greenaway, Martin Higgins, and Peter Mills. We were 'encouraged to think as widely as possible about the Chapel's potential in order to inform thinking regarding necessary but sensitive upgrading/alterations (lighting, flooring, technical equipment, kitchen, lavatory extension etc) whilst still retaining the character and heritage of the building.'

Our first task was to appoint an architect. Government and EU rules say that any large contract has to go out to competitive tender. English Heritage sent us a list, and we asked them to quote. We were delighted when the lowest tender came in from Paul Sharrock of Thomas Ford and Sons of Sydenham. He was the official architect for St Nicholas' Church, and had designed the church extension, completed in 2009 so we knew he was good. And he proved just as good in dealing with a half-rotten timber building as in building a sympathetic addition in stone to a building which had not been altered since 1480. When he retired half way through our project, his place was taken by his professional partner, Karen Butti. She was every bit as good, and continuity was ensured by the fact that she later became his wife.

Sadly an era came to an end in 2013 when Jane Eade died, and we buried her in the chapel graveyard, next to her parents and grandparents. The funeral was packed, many former preachers, standing room only round the chapel walls, and the singing of the hymns metaphorically lifted the roof. It was an unexpected duty

for our trustees to find themselves responsible for a burial, and a revelation that there are no rules or regulations governing where a person can be buried.

2014 - involving the public

The Heritage Lottery Fund gave us a Start-up Grant of £9,000 to spend how we liked, no forms to fill. And the Architectural Heritage Fund added an extra £3,000. These grants enabled Paul Sharrock to produce for us a very professional Condition Survey and an Options Appraisal. These were discussed on 3 April 2014 with the experts, including English Heritage and the Lottery Fund, and formed the basis for all future work on the chapel.

With our architect came a quietly competent quantity surveyor, Terry Pursey, who accurately calculated all the probable costs of the repairs. Also an equally expert structural engineer, Robert Bowles. His role was crucial in working out how to repair the roof which was on the point of collapse.

What we had not reckoned with was that the lottery fund was determined to ensure that the public appreciated the heritage when it had been restored. Not enough to just prop up an old building: it had to be used, understood and enjoyed. That was OK for the generations of Charlwood school children who it was planned would absorb the heritage while having lessons in the chapel. It however became apparent to us that the Lottery Fund wanted a lot more. Indeed at one stage we were threatened with having the plug pulled on the whole project if we did not comply.

The main project to fulfil this educational role was a fixed exhibition around the walls. We were fortunate to have the renowned Barry Mazur to design it - he had previously designed the Cutty Sark exhibition - and he threw himself into it with great enthusiasm. How did we get him? Simple - his son had married Christine Sargent's daughter!

2015 - applying to the Lottery

We were fortunate to obtain the services of two powerful women. Sophia Mirchandani, from Winchester, was a professional consultant who specialised in knowing how to submit applications to the Heritage Lottery Fund. So she told us what to do, drew up our application and was paid a hefty fee for doing so by the lottery.

Marilyn Scott, the Director of The Lightbox in Woking, was also a Heritage Consultant. She organised research into the history of the chapel (which is all recorded on our website), produced various booklets and leaflets for us, and trained our volunteers.

We were now ready to submit our Round 1 application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant of just over £40,000. We did so in November. This was now obviously a major project and so we appointed Christine Sargent as our Administrator. She resigned as a trustee, because the Charity Commission does not approve of payments to trustees.

We recruited three more trustees, making eight in total:

- Colin Gates who had been in at the beginning, and who in 2015 organised two packed evenings of Napoleonic songs in the chapel;
- Vicky Lanham, head teacher of the school who was crucial to the use of the chapel; and
- Chris Mitchell, a retired professional surveyor who proved invaluable as building project manager, spending countless hours on site and drawing up all our (not always fully appreciated) health and safety requirements.

2016 - a grant of £447,000

Our Round 1 grant enabled Paul Sharrock to draw up detailed plans for all the work to be done, and to apply for planning permission. We were also able to develop our activity plan with Marilyn and Sophia which illustrated for HLF how the Chapel would be used to benefit the community in the future. With those under our belt, in June we put in our Round 2 lottery application. The cost of the restoration of the chapel was calculated at £260,000 but the total costs of the whole project, including Round 1, fees and planning permissions, and all the education of the public, was put at £471,000. We asked for a grant of £447,000.

And we got it!

A condition of the grant was that we must raise 12% of the total cost from supplementary sources. The main source for our supplementary funding was a grant of £20,000 from Mole Valley Council. We also got grants from Gatwick airport, and the Surrey Historic Buildings Trust who held their AGM in the chapel.

The lottery gave us a grant to cover the remaining cost - including VAT. And they told us that we could keep any VAT reclaimed from the HMRC and count it towards the 12%. Fortunately for us, the Government had a scheme whereby historic churches could reclaim VAT on repairs. Fortunately that also applied to historic chapels. And fortunately it also applied to redundant churches and chapels.

Two hundred years ago, in 1816, the ex-barracks were opened as a nonconformist chapel. To celebrate the anniversary, we invited children from the school to a tea party - with a memorable cake!



2017 - and the appointment of Riverside as our contractors

Our next task was to seek tenders from half a dozen contractors. It was an unexpected pleasure when Riverside from Tonbridge put in the lowest bid. They had built the Charlwood church extension, and also the new Charlwood sports pavilion, so we knew they were good. The managing director, Brian Wallis, was particularly amenable with no detail too small for him to sort out.

But they were not able to start before the end of the year.

2018 - restoration

At last, five years after we bought the chapel, work started. The chapel was full of the noise of sawing and hammering. Once a month, architect Karen Butti held a cacophonous site meeting in the chapel kitchen with Brian Wallis, Terry Pursey, Chris Mitchell, Peter Anderson and Brendon Sewill, and with Robert Bowles, the structural engineer, clambering about in the roof.

To quote from our website: 'the big beam around the base of the wall, the sole plate, was rotten; it was completely replaced. The 50 or so wall uprights (studs)

were all rotten for the first two or three feet. New wood was spliced into each one. The veranda posts had sunk, causing the roof timbers to crack. Each timber was repaired with a separately designed metal brace, and a new roof structure constructed. Four of the veranda pillars had to be replaced. The roof was re-slatted. The ceiling was falling down and had to be partially replaced. Other work included the provision of a new kitchen and a disabled toilet, a new floor, a new electricity supply and phone line, new storage sheds and improved drainage.'

But in the middle of all that the structural engineer went ill, and was carted off to hospital. That meant that all progress came to a halt for five months. The Grand Re-opening had to be postponed.

Eventually the work was finished by December.

2019 - Re-opening

The school started to use the chapel as from January.

To celebrate the completion of the restoration, we organised (thanks to the lottery) a number of events. The first, in January, was for 30 or so selected members of the village community - we hoped that they would rush to hire the chapel but no such luck.

Then we held a re-dedication service, organised by the retired Baptist minister, Michael Toogood. Since then, until the lockdown, the Crawley Baptists have held one service a month in Providence Chapel but without yet procreating a regular nonconformist congregation in Charlwood.

The next party was a posh lunch, with a good quality caterer, for all the experts who had given us so much help in the early years of the project and all the donors including of course the Heritage Lottery Fund, Mole Valley Council, the Surrey Historic Buildings Trust, Gatwick Airport, and the Architectural Heritage Trust.

Finally, in April, we were able to hold our postponed Grand Opening for the public. The highlight of the day were the military re-enactors from the 2/91st Regiment. A dozen soldiers in full 18th century uniform camped overnight with their camp followers, cooked on camp fires, marched up and down, gave a display of musket firing, and mounted guard while our County Councillor, Helyn Clack, formally 'opened' the chapel. A good time was had by all.



In due course, the project was wound up and we settled our account with the lottery. Thanks to Tony's accountancy, we finished up with a respectable bank-balance. We had been able to complete the whole restoration project without seeking a grant from the John Bristow and Thomas Mason Trust. That was partly due to the fact that the lottery were so generous; partly because we knew that JBTMT had spent most of their available funds on the new sports pavilion, and partly because (as we had found back in 2010) their terms of reference did not include propping up ancient buildings.

Nevertheless we decided to charge the school an annual rent for which they could have full use of the chapel whenever they wanted it. The school would apply to JBTMT for a grant to enable them to pay the rent. JBTMT had a duty (dating from 1637 when Rector Bristow set up Bristow's charity) to use part of their funds to support the education of Charlwood children. We were pleased when in 2020 they agreed in principle to support the long-term funding of the chapel rent - which should ensure its long-term viability.

Having contributed greatly to all the practical details of the project, Chris Mitchell retired when it was completed, and in his place we appointed:

- Janet Cookson, a lively and intelligent young lady who by chance had come to live in Jean Shelley's old house, and had inherited her interest in village history; and

- Steph Page, another lively and intelligent young lady, who actually remembers attending Sunday school in the chapel, and standing on a table to watch the Hunt go by.

We were told by various experts that it was a miracle that, as a wooden building, Providence Chapel had survived for over 200 years. Thanks to the work that has been done, it can now last for at least 200 more years.

BS

April 2021