



WELLS, BUBWITH ALMSHOUSE Chapel of St Saviour

Re-ordering and access improvements

DESIGN, ACCESS & HERITAGE STATEMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

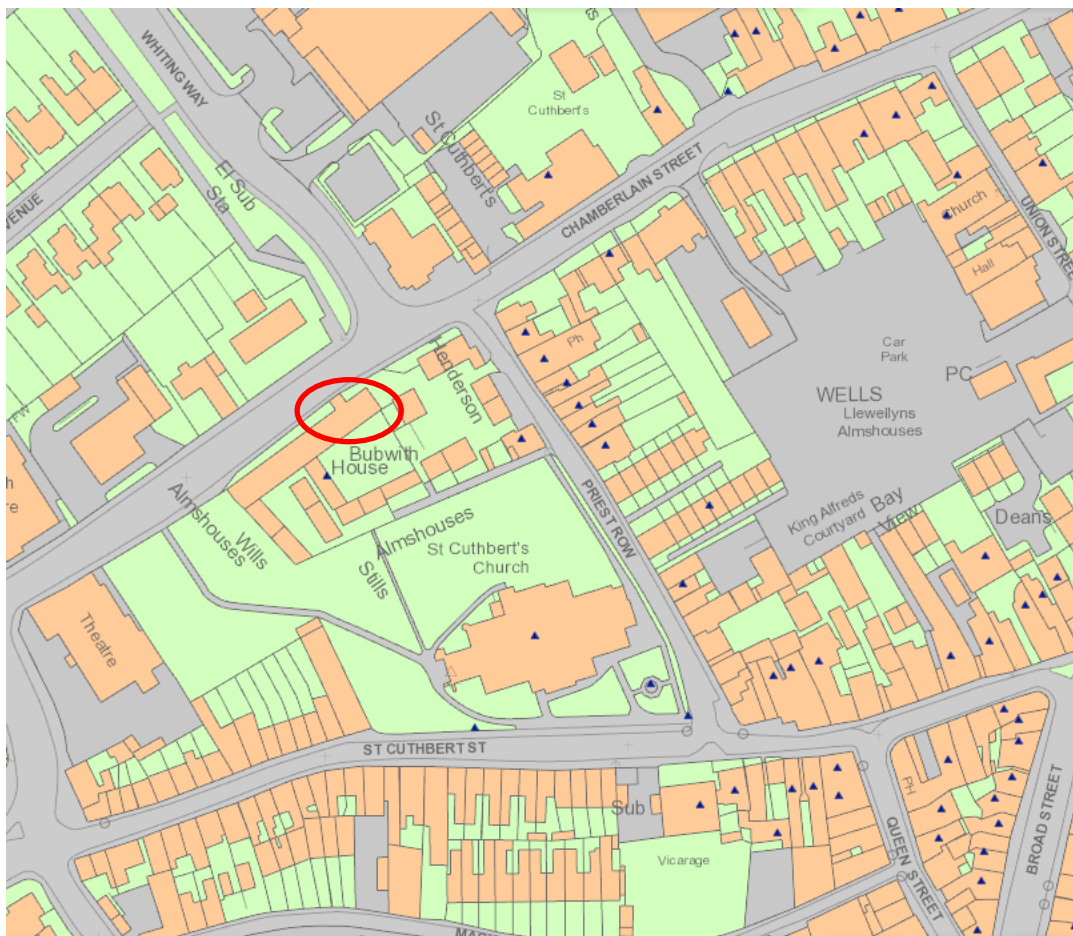
- 1.1. The following statement has been prepared in support of a Planning and Listed Building Consent application to re-order the interior of the chapel to make it more accessible and fit for both religious and secular use by both the Almshouse residents and the wider community.
- 1.2. Prior to this application being prepared, a pre-app enquiry was submitted to Mendip District Council and Historic England. The feedback from the pre-app has further informed the design ideas and alterations which are discussed with this document.
- 1.3. In December 2019, Jerry and David Sampson prepared an Archaeological Assessment of the building. In particular, the report focussed on the chapel's medieval foundation and surviving fabric. Cross refer to this report should be made.
- 1.4. In addition, In March 2019, Holy Well Glass prepared a Condition Report and assessment on the medieval glass and cross reference should be made to this document where appropriate.
- 1.5. For clarity, it is noted that whilst the chapel is a place of worship, it is a private chapel. As such, the chapel is not covered by Ecclesiastical Exemption legislation and nor have the Almshouse elected to opt into Faculty Jurisdiction. As such, it is our understanding that the building and chapel are entirely covered by secular legislation. No 'change of use' is proposed.



Above: Photo showing the main entrance (north porch) into the chapel and Almshouse complex from Chamberlain Street. Residents can also enter the building via a courtyard on the southern side.

2. THE SITE

- 2.1. The Chapel of St Saviour is located within the Wells Bubwith Almshouse site to the western side of the city centre. The almshouses are Grade II* listed with the chapel a major component of this listing. The building is also set within the Wells Conservation Area. The City of Wells Almshouse Trust manages the site.
- 2.2. The postcode is: BA5 2QE.
- 2.3. An extract from Historic England's listed buildings map shows the chapel's location with the Bubwith Almshouse chapel circled in red. All nationally listed structures are indicated with a blue triangle. To the south, is the Grade I listed St Cuthbert's Church and adjacent, the War Memorial, boundary walls and a lamp standard are Grade II listed. To the east of the site, Trewetha Cottage is also Grade II listed. There are no listed buildings close to the almshouse to the north of the site on Chamberlain Street.



3. HERITAGE STATEMENT

- 3.1. The Bubwith Almshouse was built in 1436 from a legacy provided from the estate of the former Bishop of Bath & Wells, Nicholas Bubwith. The main range, which has the chapel at the east end, has a gabled porch on the north side and a passage that connects the north door with a south door that opens out into a courtyard. A gallery now overlooks the chapel on the west side of the passage and beneath, an office, meeting room, WC and kitchen facilities have recently been created. The Guild Room is at the west end of the range and, having been divided into two floors in the 1850s, and following restoration in 1996, now includes residential accommodation. The building is built of local rubble stone with Doulling Stone dressings all under slated roofs.
- 3.2. The north four-centred north porch entrance sits tight to the edge of the Chamberlain Street pavement. Above, there is an empty badly decayed canopied niche with blind quatrefoil panels on either side. The carved stonework condition is very poor with cement pointing and mortar repairs present. A boot scraper is built into the wall on the east side of the door. The twin leaf external door is divided into three vertical boards with decorative nails and when shut provides a defensive and secure entrance.



Above: The north porch.

- 3.3. Inside the north porch, there are benches on either with a benefactor board above the door. The wagon-shaped ceiling comprises arch braced rafters and plastered infill panels meanwhile the walls are unplastered and painted. The floor comprises lias stone slabs. The Victorian twin leaf internal door is subdivided into three panels with cover strips on the inside which partially cover the decorative strap hinges.
- 3.4. The main passageway comprises a modern partition on the west side with a central opening through to the ancillary accommodation. On the east side, a fine, probably fifteenth century, screen with central opening clearly defines the extent of the chapel. The passage floor comprises a combination of lias slabs and concrete patches. There is a pair of narrow doors set within the screen with a shallow step up into the chapel. At the southern end, a solid boarded door, which mirrors that on the north side, opens out into one of the almshouse courtyard gardens.
- 3.5. The chapel itself measures 7.4metres long and 6.1metres high. The space is dominated and characterised by the dark stained arch-braced trusses set on engaged octagonal posts supported by carved heads. Wind bracing, infill painted plaster panels and a cornice complete the roof construction. An infrared heating unit hangs from the ceiling and halogen lamps are tucked behind the primary rafters.



Above left: The view looking west towards the west gallery.

Above right: The view of the altar and east window from the gallery.

- 3.6. The walls are all plastered and painted and at low level a modern damp proofing type membrane has been installed. A shadow from a former decorative frieze is discernible in the cracking paint layer above the perimeter benches. In the sanctuary, the lower walls are lined with oak panelling whose condition is poor.
- 3.7. The 5-light east window is by Joseph Bell (later of Clayton and Bell) and dates to c.1850 meanwhile the narrow square headed window on the north side retains glass from the fifteenth century and includes the arms of Sydenham/Stourton, Stafford, Bubwith and the Royal Arms.

- 3.8. The floor is laid with plain Douling Stone slabs in the central aisle with suspended stained softwood pew platforms set flush on either side. The floor void below the platforms is in excess of 300mm deep. The circulation areas are carpet covered. There are two carpet covered stone steps up to the sanctuary which is laid with geometric and encaustic tiles.
- 3.9. The chapel is currently pewed in a collegiate arrangement. The dark stained oak pew ends have good quality poppy-heads and there is more elaborately carved reading desk at the east end of the north range. The benches built against the walls are twentieth century additions with re-fixed pew ends.
- 3.10. In 1848 William Wheatley visited and painted the interior of the chapel. With the exception of simple altar, a small panelled enclosure and a single bench front, the interior is sparsely furnished.



Above: Wheatley watercolour from 1848.

- 3.11. The chapel underwent a major restoration in 1850 when the interior was thoroughly renovated. The architect is unknown with the most likely candidate being Benjamin Ferrey, the Diocesan Architect for Bath & Wells. The 1850 works were described as:
- *The thorough renovation of the whole of the interior.*
 - *The removal of the interior ochres and whitewashes.*
 - *The raising of the sanctuary floor and the creation the tiled paving*
 - *The repair of the roof and walls*
 - *The renewal of the seats and benches*
 - *The opening, repair and glazing of the east window.*
- 3.12. Further work may have been undertaken in 1884 as part of more extensive works to the almshouse building but this is poorly documented and as such it is difficult to differentiate what works relate to each phase. The new gallery balustrade was installed in the late 1990s by Caroe & Partners.

3.13. The listing description is as follows:

**ST5445 CHAMBERLAIN STREET 662-1/7/72 (South side) 12/11/53 The Old Almshouse
GV II***

Also known as: *Bubwith Almshouse CHAMBERLAIN STREET. Almshouses. Begun 1436, extended in 1614 and 1638, major restoration of 1884. Local stone rubble with Doulling stone dressings, Welsh slate roofs with stone ridge and coped gables, tall ashlar chimney stacks on rubble bases. PLAN: complex plan of medieval north wing, with attached wings of 1884 and 1614 extending southwards, a detached south range of 1638 and additional detached central block apparently of 1884.*

EXTERIOR: north wing of hall, chapel, and rooms is single storey with attics, with an elevation to Chamberlain Street of 13 bays. Bays 1 and 2 are the chapel, part of the C15 foundation. This has a large 5-light Perpendicular E window, heavily restored, and on the N side are a small single light with chamfered surround and a 3-light cinquefoil cusped window to bay 2. Bay 3 has the projecting gabled entrance porch with a pair of doors in a 4-centred arch with plain spandrels and square label under a statue niche; there is a cast-iron footscrapers left of the doorway. Bays 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 have 2-light chamfer-mullioned windows, probably C19 restorations, with small pane iron leaded casements, the attic windows have small gablets with carved finials; tall chimney stacks between each pair. Bay 8 has one similar window at mezzanine level. Bays 11, 12 and 13 are taller, with a bell turret to east gable-this is the hall, which had a second floor inserted in c1850, fenestration similar, but upper bay 13 has a 2-light cinquefoil cusped window. The west gable of the hall has a 3-light Perpendicular tracery window at first floor level, with a C20 door and window below-thereafter is the first of the two 1884 wings, replacing a 1614 wing, and behind it the second wing. The south range, 1638, building is a building of remarkable design. It is small in scale, of one storey with attic, in 5 bays, with a symmetrical elevation facing the churchyard of St Cuthbert (qv). 2-light ovolo-mould mullioned windows with labels to upper bays 2 and 4 and lower bays 1, 2, 4 and 5. Between bays 1 and 2 and bays 4 and 5 are cambered-arched doorways with labels and square recesses with labels over. Bay 3 has an ornamental 4-seat sedilia with a mixture of Gothic and Classical detailing. To the left of this range is a free-standing range of 1884, with its gable to the S, including a commemorative tablet indicating that the building replaces one of 1614.

INTERIOR: the chapel has a 4-bay roof in heavy moulded arch-braced trusses carried on octagonal posts to stone corbels, with 3 purlins, and 4 ranges of curved wind-braces; in the first 3 bays the purlins are moulded, in bay 4 they are chamfered and stopped. This roof construction also continues to the W beyond the chapel. The 5-light east window of c1850 by Bell of Bristol. The lower part of the screen at the W end has C17 panels. To the right of the chapel entry is a bay with late C20 staircase and sub-division. The private rooms not accessible, but considerable C19 and C20 modification has been made. Medieval hall roof not seen. Chapel roof has having shafts supporting the truss foot similar but more elaborate than The Rib's at 3 St Andrew Street (qv).

HISTORICAL NOTE: the original buildings were built in 1436 from an endowment by Bishop Bubwith, (d.1424), and had 12 inmates. They were extended by Bishop John Still's (d.1608) bequest in 1614, and again, for four people, in 1638. There were sundry C18 and C19 benefactions, with major additions in 1884. The range of buildings is extensive, closing off the N side of St Cuthbert's churchyard, and like the Vicars Close (qv) and The Rib was heated by fireplaces. (The Buildings of England: Pevsner N: North Somerset and Bristol: London: 1958:- 329).

4. PROJECT BRIEF

- 4.1. The project brief is to re-order the interior of the chapel to make the space more accessible and fit for both religious and secular use by both the almshouse residents and the wider community.
- 4.2. Approaching the building from the north, the porch projects out to the pavement line but the building is poorly 'signposted'. An improved presence on Chamberlain Street is essential to developing a stronger relationship to the community the building serves as well as the visiting public.
- 4.3. Prior to Covid-19, a weekly service was held in the chapel on Thursday mornings. In addition, occasional concerts and other secular events have also taken place but the lack of level access, uncomfortable inward facing seating and poor heating, lighting and comfort levels are limiting factors to the increased use of the chapel. The brief is to sensitively re-order the interior of the chapel to create increased flexibility and greater opportunity so that the chapel has a more sustainable future whilst also retaining its original function as a place of worship.
- 4.4. In addition to regular services increased opportunity for the following events has been identified:
 - Small weddings
 - Lectures
 - Concerts
 - Recitals
 - Story-telling
 - Book readings
 - Workshops
 - Activity classes
 - Educational lectures
 - Seminars and master-classes
 - Children's writing and poetry classes and competitions



Photograph showing a concert in November 2018. Note the awkward side-on seating set-up.

5. POLICY AND GUIDANCE

- 5.1. In advance of making this application, a pre-application enquiry to the Mendip District Council and Historic England.
- 5.2. A site visit attended by representatives from Mendip District Council and Historic England took place on Wednesday 26th Feb 2020.
- 5.3. Following the site visit, a formal response was received from Historic England on 27 July 2020 – Ref No: PA01082945.
- 5.4. In preparing this application, due consideration has also been given to the following National and Local Policies and advice documents:
 - National Planning Policy Framework (2019).
 - Mendip Local Plan Part 1: 2006-2029 – Development Policy 3 – Heritage Conservation
 - Wells Conservation Area Appraisal, Oct 2011.



Above: The Almshouse is identified as a 'Focal Building' in Character Area 6 on the Wells Conservation Area Appraisal. The chapel is shown circled in red.

6. DESIGN

- 6.1. The Bubwith Almshouse and associated chapel have served the Wells community for nearly 600 years and over this period of time the building has adapted to meet changing needs. Further change is again required but any harm to the heritage asset must be outweighed by the benefits of change.
- 6.2. The use of the building as a place of worship will continue but with improved access and internal re-ordering, there will be a greater opportunity to exploit the potential of the building so that it can contribute more towards education, tourism and the local economy whilst serving the community it was specifically built for. Furthermore, the increased use will raise the profile of the Almshouses and its charitable purpose within the community it serves.
- 6.3. Please cross refer to Drg No 0752.S.001 which shows the existing plan of the east end of the Bubwith Almshouse. The drawing shows the chapel at the east end and ancillary facilities to the west of the cross passage. Drg No 0752.S.005 shows the existing elevations of the chapel and drawing.
- 6.4. The majority of the residents will approach the chapel from the southern side via the sequence of private passages and courtyards, meanwhile members of the public can only approach from Chamberlain Street via the north porch. Whilst residents will be familiar with the chapel this is not the case with the wider community and to this end, subtle changes are proposed. Firstly, the north porch will be cleaned and conserved. These works will enhance the significance and setting of the building as well as the view along the street that has been identified as important in the Conservation Area Appraisal. Operationally, the outer door will be opened on a regular basis and internally it is proposed that the solid oak inner doors are replaced with partially glazed oak framed doors. With the external door open, the north porch offers a shelter and resting place and above the door, the benefactor board reminds all visitors of the building's role to care for the elderly in the community. On the southern courtyard side, a similar pair of Victorian oak doors are present and again the proposal here is to replace these doors with new oak framed glazed doors that will allow an inviting glimpse view through from Chamberlain Street into the almshouse courtyard beyond. The transparency that the new doors provide will encourage entry into the chapel and whilst the loss of these doors will result in some harm, this is outweighed by the benefit this change offers in relation to opening up, welcoming and engaging visitors.
- 6.5. The Almshouses are identified as a 'focal building' in the Conservation Area Appraisal yet there is little indication as to what the building's function is and nothing to interest and draw in an enquiring passer-by. The majority of visitors will approach the Almshouses along Chamberlain Street and as part of the opening up of the building the proposal includes the introduction of a traditional hanging sign high up above the door. The sign board will include the Bubwith Coat of Arms and will be a 'way finder' to members of the public. The sign will be traditionally made in wrought iron and take on a similar appearance to the High Street hanging sign that promotes Sexey's Hospital Almshouses in Bruton.
- 6.6. Externally, the only other alteration is the introduction of secondary protective glazing to the small window with medieval glass in the north wall. The internally vented Environmental Protective Glazing (EPG) follows best practice Historic England guidance for the conservation of medieval glass. Externally, the existing guard will be removed meanwhile the new toughened glass panel will be leaded and set in a bronze frame in front of the existing to provide both physical and

- environmental protection to the medieval glass. Please cross refer to the proposal put forward by Holy Well Glass dated 7th March 2019.
- 6.7. None of the external alterations discussed above to the chapel have any impact on the setting of other listed buildings in the vicinity. Drg No 0752.P013 illustrates the proposed changes to the elevations.
- 6.8. Internally, there is single shallow step up into the chapel and to overcome this, the proposal is to lift and relay the passage floor to slight falls. The lifting of the floor will allow the removal of the unsympathetic concrete patches and new lias stone to be laid where concrete has been removed. As part of the works, the floor will be excavated and a breathable insulated sub floor installed to assist with the preservation and long term survival of the medieval screen whose sole-plate has been adversely affected by moisture trapped by the concrete. Localised repairs will be required to the screen. Modifications will also need to be made to the floor level in the corridor that serves the office and WC facilities together with adjustments to the treads to the modern staircase which serves the gallery that overlooks the chapel.
- 6.9. Within the chapel itself, no works are proposed to the ceiling and roof structure other than the removal of the high level infrared heater. To the walls, at low level the modern damp proofing membranes will be removed and replaced with a lime plaster. Externally, a French drain will be installed where external ground levels are too high. The walls will be redecorated using compatible breathable paints so as to not adversely affect any historic decoration that may exist below.
- 6.10. The lack of ventilation in the floor void is an on-going concern and as part of the internal re-ordering, the proposal is to lift the floor between the screen and sanctuary steps and to lay a new breathable, and insulated, solid stone floor with underfloor heating. The underfloor heating will be a wet system run from a new electric boiler located in the ancillary accommodation. Inspection of the 300mm – 400mm deep floor void supports the case that a new floor can be laid with little archaeological disturbance.
- 6.11. A heated floor will provide a continuous level of background heat in winter and this will be supplemented by new radiators which will be discretely located behind benches beneath the windows to counter downdrafts. The chapel will also be relit to provide a high level of background light for various secular activities.
- 6.12. The current pews were introduced into the chapel in the 19th century and these are dark stained with good quality bench ends. The pews are arranged to face each in a collegiate style of arrangement. This arrangement offers no flexibility and is inappropriate for almost every activity. Photographs of events inside the chapel showing guests sitting on angles with twisted necks demonstrates the problem. The comfort provided by the hard backed pews has been raised as a concern by residents and a further general observation is that the pews are difficult to get up from and far from ideal which is particularly pertinent in this situation as the almshouses hold older people. As part of the initial design phase various seating options have been explored and cross reference should be made to these Options – see Drg No 0752.P008. These options illustrate the greater flexibility offered by pew removal for events such as musical performances, theatre, storytelling, crafts and hobby events. In addition, the Almshouses are looking to develop their offer to hold small weddings or private services and the increased flexibility of moveable seating assists with this. New chairs will be of timber and of high quality and will make a

positive contribution to the interior of the chapel. Chairs with arms will also be provided as these are particularly suitable for older people.

- 6.13. The proposal is therefore to dispose of the pews but to salvage the pews ends for reuse as ends to new benches constructed against the north and south walls. The removal of benches fixed to the medieval screen will once again allow the screen to be uncluttered. The new floor pattern will reflect the former pew positions meanwhile the high quality priest's stall will be moved to the sanctuary. The floor pattern will additionally incorporate the Bubwith coat of arms at the centre and record the restoration works.
- 6.14. At first floor level, the proposal is to remove the modern solid wood gallery balustrade and to replace it with a new glass balustrade. Cross refer to Drg No: 0752.P012.
- 6.15. Cross reference should be made to Drg Nos: 0752.P008 & 009 which show the proposed floor plans.
- 6.16. Ultimately, the re-ordered chapel remains a place of worship but it will also add to the range of community and performance spaces within the city and contribute further to the significant tourist and cultural destination that is the City of Wells.



Above: A performance of The Death of Arthur by the writer and performer Beth Webb with a harpist accompaniment in the chapel. Note the awkward seating angles.

7. ACCESS

- 7.1. Through the lifting and relaying of the passage floor, the step into the chapel will be removed and the chapel will be made accessible for all. The replacement of the solid doors at either end of the passage with new partially glazed doors will further improve welcome and ease of access.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1. In summary, the proposal will enable the chapel to become accessible to all whilst retaining the character of this relatively unaltered medieval space which has been at the heart of Wells community worship and life for approaching six hundred years.
- 8.2. The internal re-ordering will ensure a sustainable future for the chapel and it will add to the range of community and performance spaces within the City of Wells. The less than substantial harm caused by the loss of nineteenth century introductions is outweighed by the public benefit of making this nationally important building accessible to all and more sustainable through maximising its potential.