

‘What’s stopping you?’: a project with Six Churches in York Diocese



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Background to the project:

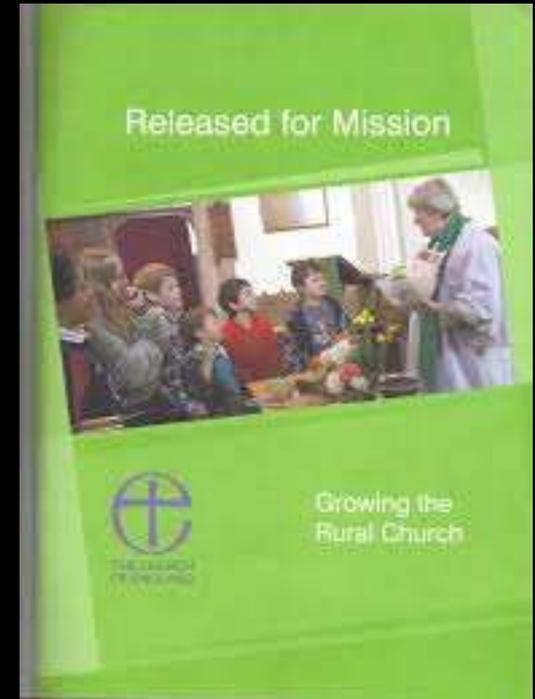
- What are the practical barriers to sustainability?
- What help and support does a church need?
- How can that be provided affordably?

Project scope

- The Diocese of York secured funding from the Church Commissioners to find out what support churches need to become sustainable.
- They commissioned CSCC to do this with 6 churches.
- The project chose churches of very different size, location, age and social setting.
- Each church is very different in its needs
- The project runs until November 2022

Common long-standing trends and issues

- Small congregations, frequently mostly elderly, predominantly ladies!
- Difficult to attract younger members of congregation, family commitments (including those of grandparents)
- Small numbers of individuals acting as churchwardens, PCC Secretaries, Treasurers, sidesmen
- Larger numbers involved in cleaning, flowers, church and churchyard maintenance, but can be difficult for new people to 'break into' such groups
- Challenges in bridging the gap between 'secular' use and mission
- Pressures on clergy time and availability
- Building condition: costs of repair or renewal may far exceed available income



Impact of Covid

- Congregation attendance and giving hit by Covid, and proving slow to recover
- Online 'attendees' do not automatically donate, and many churches have little or no provision for this to happen easily.
- Volunteer numbers reduced.

Common issues with church buildings

- Cost of maintaining, heating, lighting - and the drive to carbon neutrality
- Outdated heating, lighting, audio
- No or unsuitable/inadequate toilets, kitchens
- Pews and other furniture prevent flexible use
- Restricted disabled access
- Competition for fundraising with other churches, local groups, causes
- Lack of knowledge of funding schemes and strategies
- Competition for users with other venues (village halls with parking, schools, pubs)
- Lack of awareness of potential as social hubs?
- Resistance to change within the church community or beyond?

Impact of Covid

- Churchyards have become very important to local communities.
- Churches are uncertain about Covid protocols - a lot of residual fear around having paper items, things to use and take away.
- Ventilation vs soaring heating costs!

What have we found? One example

ON THE PLUS SIDE:

One small rural church is a small, welcoming space which is bright, quirkily decorated with its distinctive blue pews and woodwork and richly patterned tiled central aisle.

It was largely rebuilt in the 18th century and has a distinctive barrel-vaulted roof.

It has a very fine Shrigley and Hunt stained glass window at the east end.

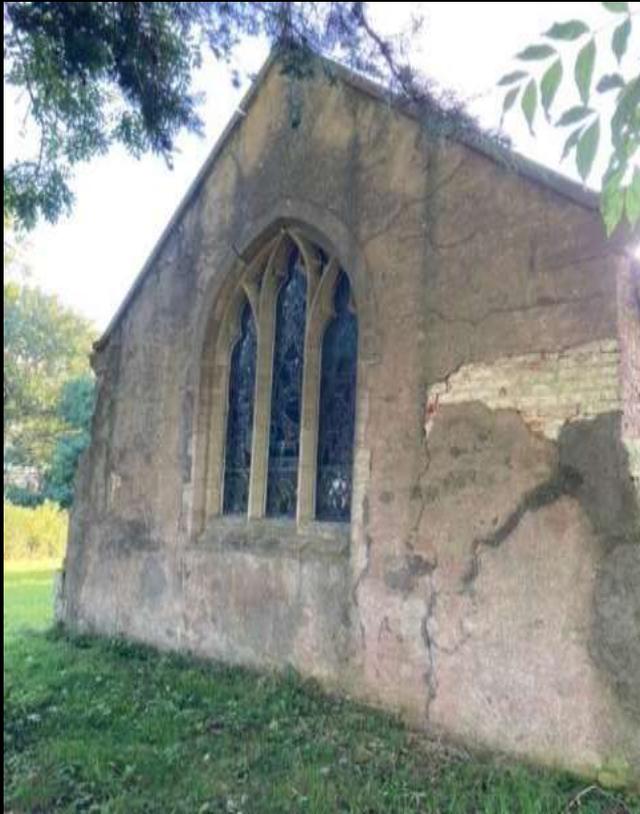
It is much loved by walkers and cyclists from the nearby town who call it an “undiscovered gem, well worth a visit”.



HOWEVER:

The east end is twisting away from the rest of the body due to subsidence. This is urgent!

There is now a crack about 6cms wide which is growing rapidly.



The porch is unsafe

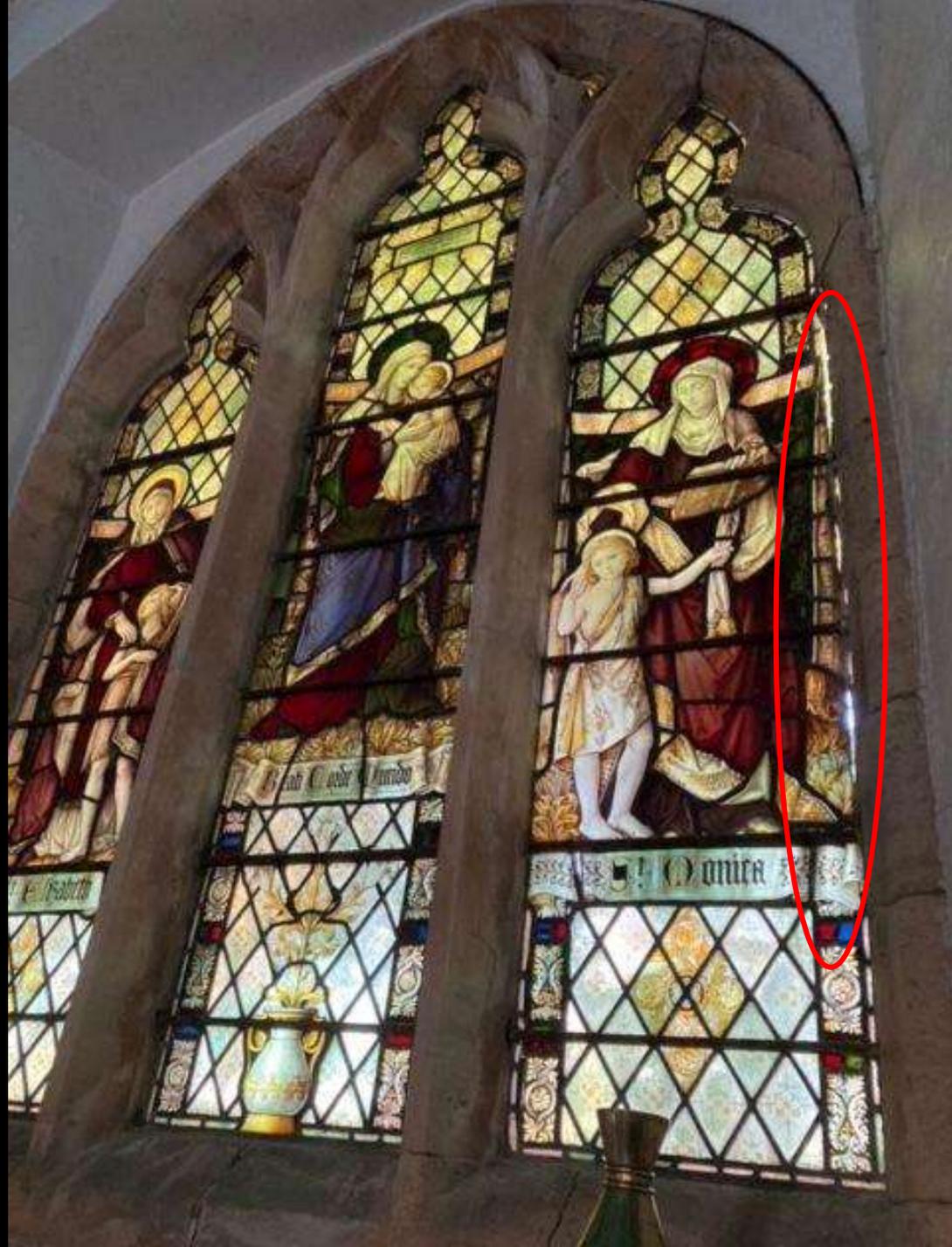


The roof needs repair.



The Shrigley and Hunt window is being torn apart: the masonry has detached from the leads and they in turn have been pulled away from the glass, exposing the raw glass edges!

You should NOT be able to see daylight or feel the breeze at the edge of a window.



The heating is not adequate and costly to run.

The lighting is unsympathetic.



The old boiler flue has left a gap in the wall and a dangerous 'pit' in the churchyard.



The lighting is out of keeping with the style of the interior.

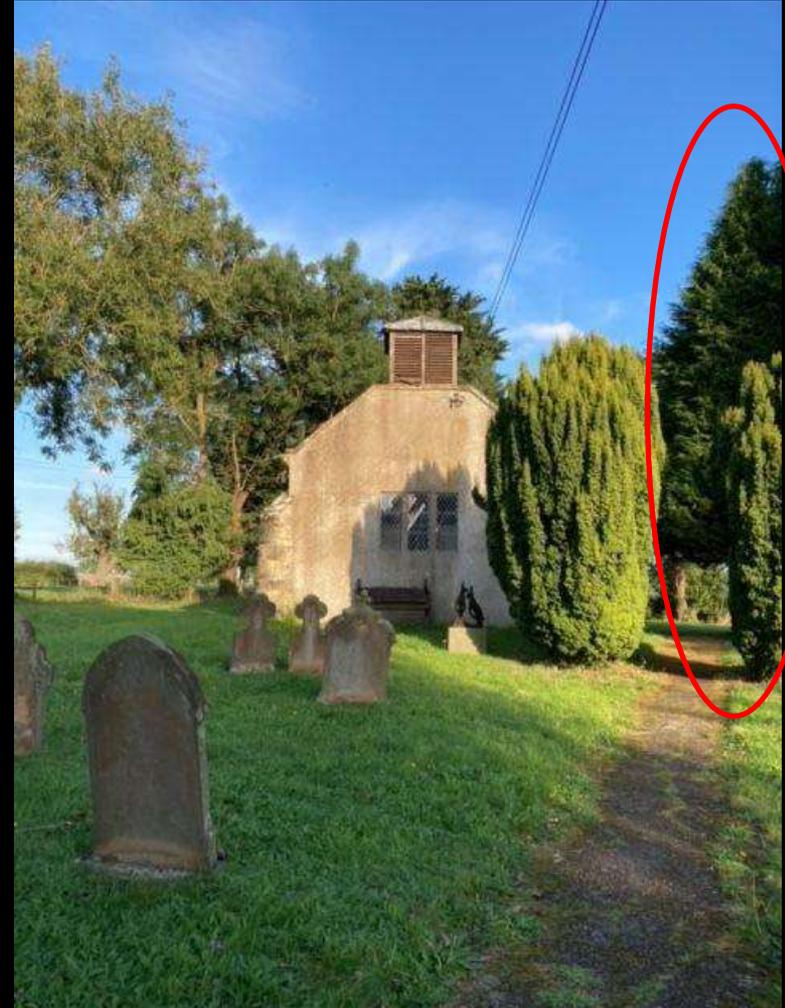


How has it got this bad?

Recent weather extremes of the last two years have caused the clay on which the church sits (without any real foundations!) to shrink and expand far more than in earlier years.

The trees around the church have affected the ground structure and put the roof at risk - especially the cupressus by the porch.

The congregation is small and some of the problems and costs have been beyond them to resolve.



Village consultation feedback:

The question, 'What does the church mean to you?', responses have been collated as a wordcloud here:



46% respondents were aged 66-75, 23% aged 36-50 and 51-65, and 8% over 75

Consultation feedback: the numbers

Frequency of use of the church by respondents

61.5% respondents used the church several times a year and the same proportion attended festival services

61.5% used it for Life Events such as weddings, funerals and baptisms

54% used the churchyard for quiet reflection

38% used the footpath regularly

Although several of the respondents were already supporting the church through volunteering, the following responses came from those not currently involved, but who offered assistance with:

- **Making a regular donation** (as disability prevented greater physical involvement)
 - **ACTION:** review current methods of giving to the church remotely/online
- **Helping with the churchyard** (1 new volunteer – plus an offer to assist with general maintenance)
- **Fundraising and flower rota** (2 new volunteers, one of whom is also an artist and designer)
 - **ACTION:** These people need to be invited to upcoming meetings and project planning
- **Using the church more**
 - Suggested activities included **tourism, plant sales and concerts**

Partnerships

The main recommendation here was the Village Hall

Making the church more accessible and more used by local communities

61.5% suggested facilities for local residents and visitors including churchyard benches would be a priority

46% respondents asked for/recommended resources for quiet reflection

38% suggested nearby facilities including toilets and kettle would be helpful

What are we going to do?

PHASE 1: NOW

- Apply for grant funding to pay for work to make the fabric safe and watertight. - *but the congregation need significant admin support to do this:*
- Reattach the east end.
- Repair the roof.
- Repair the porch.
- Repair and reset the very fine window.

What are we going to do?

PHASE 2: TO BE AGREED

- Replace the heating to make it carbon neutral and replace the lights.
- Explore, with other churches built on clay, sustainable techniques to halt further deterioration in the face of climate change.
- Build on the interest expressed by people from the wider community to extend facilities for walkers and cyclists to enjoy the church and churchyard.
 - This would explore the refurbishment of the outdoor loos and the addition of some basic drinks facilities.
 - Look to work with Caring for God's Acre charity to enhance the churchyard and increase biodiversity.
- Develop proposals for shared events with the Village Hall e.g. small weddings, funeral catering, local talks etc.

Interim Conclusions

- The project has shown that many churches find the sheer logistics of getting permissions, grants and interacting with professionals overwhelming.
- However, with some structured support they grow in confidence and can take on projects.
- Case studies must be used with care: they can make people feel inadequate.
- Relatively modest amounts of investment in support can bring multiples of grant income and keep churches alive and active. This *really* matters for place-making and wider engagement with their communities.
- This also matters for keeping churches able to pay into their diocese and maintain themselves in the long term.

Thank you!

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