

7th May 2024

By way of a preface – what I have to say is certainly not critical of or hostile to anyone or anything. Just for the record our Chairman, and husband, Peter do more for the upkeep of our churchyard than the rest of us put together.

Bullet points

- 1/ A living, vital Mary's Church has been at the heart of the Gt Bealings Community for centuries.**
- 2/ It has been the scene of baptisms, marriages and funerals, for hundreds of years. Many people are brought back to the church because of this, often from far away, particularly to graves of loved ones. The beauty of the church attracts many church tourists. It is still a living church – but only just.**
- 3/ As an integral part of the village, its future should be a major concern of the Parish Council. The matter of belief or non-belief, secular or non-secular should not come into it. The church is a treasure which belongs to the whole of our village community. We can all call to mind ruined church buildings – beautiful in their own way, but a warning of what the future may hold.**
- 4/ If the church has to close – and we are currently making a loss of £4000 a year – Gt Bealings Parish Council will have within its boundaries no public buildings at all. Many of our activities take place in Little Bealings, which is increasingly draining social life away from our own village.**
- 5/ Many churches are finding ways of combining religious and community use within the same building. St Mary's could offer the same, but only if we can manage significant re-ordering of the space, particularly at the back of the church.**
- 6/ We already stage significant events, for the village and beyond, and have gained ourselves a good reputation: concerts, Arts exhibitions, talks, French/Italian evenings. It is a reputation to build on.**

7/ We have identified possible activities, specific to this building and this setting, and which do not necessarily duplicate what is on offer in Little Bealings: History group; wild life group; walking parties; painting and drawing activities; coffee mornings; small social celebrations.

8/ The area outside the south door could be land-scaped, and used as an outside extension to the indoor space, with attractive views across the valley.

9/ We invite the Parish council to consider whether there might be events which could be held under ITS auspices which could significantly increase the community use of this space. Perhaps a small working group, drawn from both the PC and the PCC could look at possible options.

10/ We have architect's plans for re-ordering the space at the back. We will seek funding, and have ideas for sourcing, but much will be dependent on our being able to show the value of the church as a general community space, rather than as the focal point of an increasingly small worshipping congregation.

The fate of the old Hall, once behind the red brick wall, and countless ruins across the country shows what happens when a fine building ceases to fulfil a purpose. Do we want a building like these in the heart of Great Bealings?

To conclude: in the glory days of the Church of England the secular, the social and the sacred were closely intertwined – for better or for worse. Nowadays, in this ever more secular world of ours, that relationship has unravelled. I've probably not that many years left to me, but while I'm at it, I'd like to see something of a renewal of that partnership of the sacred and the secular, in a way that fits in with modern times.

Without it, we risk handing down a delapidated church ruin to the generations who will follow us.

