

St Benedict's, Gyffin – architectural brief



Context

The large circular churchyard of St Benedict's suggests a Celtic foundation but the present building dates from the 12th Century. It is Grade 1 Listed, with an exceptional 15th Century painted Chancel wagon roof and timber screens plus a 14th Century porch decorated with what may be the grave cover of Llywelyn Fawr. One of the translators of the New Testament into Welsh, Bishop Richard Davies, was baptised in St Benedict's 13th Century font. 'Y Gyffin' (precinct or boundary) stream marked the edge of Edward I's colonial walled town of Conwy so St Benedict's, on the riverbank was the nearest Welsh church. Today it is a numinous hidden gem, just outside the walls in the most populous part of Conwy but surprisingly little known by locals or visitors.

St Benedict's has always had a bilingual and unfussy rural Welsh Eucharistic tradition. Services moved to mid-week during the Covid-19 pandemic, attracting 25-30 people including a number of profoundly deaf sign language users. Over recent years a monthly evening congregation of 75-80 has been attracted to candle-lit contemporary worship in St Benedict's and as many as 170 to Carol Services and Gymanfa Ganu. It has also held a number of successful open days and events – including biodiversity 'bug hunts' in the churchyard.

We have welcomed pilgrims, held a community cinema in the North transept and hosted school Art engagement projects. During the pandemic an extensive lay-led pastoral ministry has supported large numbers of people by regular 'phone calls, visits and deliveries of cards or flowers.

Maintenance and repair

Tree works, better standards of grounds maintenance and award-winning boundary wall repairs have improved the presentation and visibility of St Benedict's. The building has been rewired, with a new Chancel and external lighting scheme. A churchyard bench has been installed. Planning permission is pending for bollard pathway lighting. A specialist contractor has been engaged to replace cast-iron downspouts and stolen ventilation grilles. Crack monitoring has been initiated, particularly at the West gable.

Priority A (Health & Safety) repairs identified by the 2019 Ezra quinquennial inspection have been completed. *Please refer to that report for outstanding items in other categories.*

Aspirations

There are no community centres in Gyffin, despite the size and diversity of its resident population. St Benedict's is the closest church building to our two Anglican Primary Schools. Yet an absence of any flexible space, lavatory or catering facilities continually thwart St Benedict's folk in wanting to welcoming people properly. The (humanly and physically) warm, intimate and hospitable qualities of St Benedict's offer something distinctive from St Mary's Conwy and it has already proved to be an effective location for creative mission ventures. There is also potential for a much greater wedding, baptism and funeral ministry. However, without reordering it is difficult to see how these opportunities will be seized. A timely investment of the restricted reserves associated with this very special church would be more than justified and assure the long-term viability of its Mission.

Proposals

- Remove the (plain Victorian) pews from both transepts and those at the Nave west end to create flexible spaces for congregational and community activity. Provide chairs for worship when that additional capacity is needed.
- Connecting (down the church path) to mains drainage in Henryd Road; introducing an accessible lavatory and storage at the west end of the Nave (with associated relocation or removal of the freestanding pipe organ and possible relocation of the font).
- Consider removing the 1954 Thompson choir stalls, pulpit and vicar's stall. They are out of scale with (and unsympathetic to) the building, disconnecting the current Nave congregation from the Chancel. Chairs around the altar and waggon ceiling would create a much more coherent and spiritually engaging setting for the Eucharist and other worship.
- Consider complete removal of pews from the Nave to create a flexible community space, providing chairs for worship when necessary.
- Sensitively introduce a small kitchen 'pod' and some storage in the South transept, removing the curtained screen and replacing the current sink (whilst forming a connection to mains drainage). Decluttered, there is an opportunity to uncover the windows and make use of good natural light here.
- Address drainage issues, particularly ingress of water to the North under-croft (and consider relocating the boiler from there).