

The Restoration of St Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield



RECENT HISTORY

In 1995, following the resignation of the vicar, a new Benefice of Marston with Elsfield was inaugurated which renewed the link with St. Nicholas church in Marston, which had existed 150 years before. The church building was in need of extensive repairs and after consultation with the whole parish, an innovative scheme was agreed, to include a space for community use within the church building.

The quinquennial architects were asked to devise a scheme and consultations took place with the District Council's Conservation Officer and English Heritage. Eventually a plan was approved which involved building a side aisle to provide kitchen, toilet and storage facilities. The pews at the back of the church were removed and a screen was designed to divide the community space from the church, which was unaffected by the alterations. This allows social events to be carried out without the feeling of 'being in church' although on occasions the screen is opened up to allow more space in the church.

This whole project was to cost in excess of £250,000, a daunting task for a small community. Initially the cost deterred grant-giving bodies, which were interested in supporting the project but felt a small community would not achieve such an ambitious result. Furthermore, although the local authority was keen to support the community aspect of the project, the terms of their Community Trust Fund did not allow them to contribute to the church. Undaunted, a group of parishioners formed a Village Room Committee to administer that section of the project and a generous grant was allocated by South Oxfordshire District Council which opened the door for other grant-giving bodies.

The Parochial Church Council continued to raise the funding for the church repairs, which also included replacing the floor beneath the pews in the nave which had been found to be completely rotten. The whole building was re-wired and off-peak storage heating was installed, to be followed later by overhead heating as a supplement when the building is in use. External work included drainage and disabled access. As a result of these comprehensive works the church is in a good state of repair.

At the beginning of discussions, it had been hoped that it would be a project to commemorate the Millennium and qualify for a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery, but disappointingly no applications were accepted from this area.

Funding was obtained by donations, grants and fundraising by the village community. The main village effort was an annual plant and bric-a-brac sale which became a huge local attraction and involved the whole community, raising approximately £55,000 over 12 years.

The Village Room was opened in 2003 by the Lord Lieutenant, but external work continued for a further two years as funds became available. We were very fortunate to have local skilled people who volunteered to carry out some of the work.

The Village Room is available for use by the wider community, but the additional facilities have vastly improved the social and fundraising activities of the church.



THE 'SALVIATI' MOSAICS

The Venetian mosaics in the chancel are one of the most striking features of the church. The central panel is a reproduction of Leonard da Vinci's fresco of the Last Supper (to be found in Milan), which was manufactured by the Venice and Murano Glass and Mosaic Company Limited, of which Antonio Salviati had been a founder shareholder and prime mover. It is reported that the mosaics were installed behind the altar in the late 1880s, a gift to the church by Mrs. Louisa Parsons who lived at Elsfield Manor from 1851 to 1892.

In 1997, when plans for re-ordering the church were first being discussed, the mosaic was examined by conservators and found to be in very poor condition, due to years of poor drainage, which had allowed moisture to seep into the wall. Layers of etoline tissue were applied to support the damaged areas and to prevent further deterioration. In January 2011, restoration began, the wall had dried out and once again applications for grants, donations and community fundraising had raised the £50,000 required. The restored mosaics were dedicated by the Bishop of Oxford in October 2011.