

All Saints Church, Rothbury, in the Parish of Upper Coquetdale

JUDGEMENT

1. This is a petition by Margaret Joan Pope and Kenneth Branson, Churchwardens of All Saints Church, Rothbury, to carry out certain works to the church, and in particular the tower, roof and walls as required by the Quinquennial Report of 2014 and an Ecclesiastical Insurance Report of 2017.
2. The works, on the whole, are entirely uncontroversial, clearly necessary and are set out in the petition thus:

Re-slating of roof of south aisle and south transept and associated work, re-bedding and re-pointing of ridge stones to nave roof, covering of boiler house flat roof with mastic asphalt, renewal of sections of rainwater goods, introduction of safety rails along the tower parapets, localised internal re-rendering, re-plastering, redecoration and a new handrail for the tower staircase as per the accompanying documents.

3. The only aspect of the works which has caused difficulty is the proposal for a new handrail to the tower staircase. The inclusion of this particular piece of work followed a visit by the Risk Management Surveyor of Ecclesiastical Insurance on 5 September 2017 and a subsequent report which included the advice:

In addition we would strongly recommend consideration of the following measures:

- 1) The installation of a handrail in the tower steps. Given the narrow width of the spiral steps the best solution may be a nylon rope hanging down the centre of the spiral steps and fixed at the top and bottom.
4. Following receipt of that report/advice the church architect, Christopher Blackburn, added the handrail to his specification of works. He along with the Petitioners had considered the advice of Ecclesiastical Insurance but, as is set out in an exchange of emails with which I have been provided, he

considered that a rope handrail should be placed on the outer radius of the staircase as opposed to the inside radius. That was on the basis that, running down the inside radius, is an electrical conduit and he was of the view that that should clearly not be used as a handrail as that would constitute an electrical risk “with far more serious consequences than any of the other items on the risk assessment!” In an email to the Secretary of the DAC he stated:

“The handrail would be on the outer radius of the staircase. We did consider putting it on the inner radius to take up less space but there is an electrical conduit radiating down the staircase at this point.”

5. Following the Public Notice, which was displayed from 24 June to 24 July 2018 an objection was received by the Registrar from Colin Wheeler, the Tower Captain of All Saints Rothbury Bell Ringers. In his letter of objection Mr Wheeler included a copy of a Risk Assessment drafted by two chartered engineer members of the bell ringers, with which he stated the members of the bell ringers always sought to comply. His letter then states:

“Whilst our Risk Assessment questions the need for any additional hand rail or similar we would have no objection (apart from the incurring of unnecessary cost) to the provision of a central grab rope which I know is standard practice in many towers with steeper and narrower steps than ours.

However the Church Warden tells me that the Architect prefers the idea of installing a handrail on the outer wall of the stairwell. On our spiral staircase this would restrict the tread width available forcing people onto the narrower central area of stair treads. This would inevitably increase the risk of falling.”

6. In accordance with the provisions of Part 10 Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015 Mr Wheeler was written to informing him of the alternative courses of becoming a party opponent in the proceedings or having his letter of objection taken into account by myself and what might follow from each course. By a letter of 5 August 2018 he chose not to become a party opponent and asked that I consider his letter of objection. He also added five further comments which he invited the Petitioners to take into account, along with his original

letter, when responding to his letter of objection. Thereafter, in accordance with the approved procedures, the Petitioners were sent copies of the Mr Wheeler's letters and invited to make comments upon them, which they did by a response dated 16 August 2018.

7. In their response the Petitioners set out the advice that they had been given by Ecclesiastical Insurance, make it clear that they and the D.C.C. took the view that a safety rope was essential, but that they would be guided by the Church Architect as to its positioning and indicated that, if my decision was that a central grab rope was preferable, they would be entirely content with that.
8. I considered that, in order to make the best informed decision, I ought to visit the church and personally view the tower and steps in question. I therefore arranged a visit on Sunday 16 September and was met by both of the Petitioners, Mr Wheeler and another member of the bell ringers group, who showed me the physical situation and I ascended the tower to the roof. In a helpful discussion the Petitioners and Mr Wheeler pointed out the different practices that individuals employ when ascending and descending – either to the bell rope platform (which is approximately half way up the tower) or (much less frequently) the roof of the church.
9. Having visited the scene and considered all of the different issues raised by the various parties I am satisfied that the optimum positioning of a safety rope/rail will be down the central part of the staircase. The steps are a narrow winding staircase going from the bottom of the bell tower all the way to the roof. They are steep and narrower than many similar winding staircases that I have seen. Care is needed in ascending or descending. I consider that there is some force in the view of Mr Wheeler that any rope or fixings on the outside wall would slightly push a user to the narrow part of the steps. It is of some significance that Mr Wheeler represents the bell ringers, who I am told all support his objection, and who are the body of individuals who use the stairs most frequently and therefore may be better informed than the architect, who I understand has viewed the tower and steps, but clearly has not used the steps frequently.

10. The concern of the architect and Petitioners in relation to the electrical conduit pipe running down the centre of the tower is understandable and proper. However, I consider that the presence of a central grab rope will make it less likely that anyone will take a hold of the conduit, whereas at present and if there was a rope rail on the outer wall, I consider it likely that individuals descending would still be likely to take hold of the conduit, as I understand some do at present.
11. It is suggested by Mr Wheeler that any central grab rope could be fixed with threadable eyelets to the central pillar. The report of Ecclesiastical Insurance suggests a rope fixed only at the top and bottom. I do not profess any expertise or particular knowledge of the optimum method of fixing, but my instinct is that there ought to be fixings at intervals down the staircase as well as at the top and bottom. I direct that the method of fixing the central rope rail is to be agreed with the D.A.C., who will have the benefit of the advice of the members who have expertise in this area.

Euan Duff (Chancellor)
19 September 2018.