

(2018) ECC Por 3

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT FOR THE DIOCESE OF PORTSMOUTH

Re the Church of St Wilfred, Portsea in the Parish of St Mary, Portsea

JUDGMENT

Introduction

1. The incumbent and churchwardens of the Church of St Wilfred, Portsea in the Parish of St Mary, Portsea petition for a faculty to move the following World War 1 memorials from their present positions within the church to an adjacent room which is used for community purposes:
 - (i) a memorial listing those who served from the 20 Streets in the area in the First World War;
 - (ii) a First World War grave marker; and
 - (iii) a smaller memorial of those who gave their lives in the First World War.
2. The intention is to display the items together in a prominent place with explanatory material and related information from the church's recent 20 Streets WW1 project. The petitioners consider that the location of the memorials in the community space (known as the Lounge) would increase their visibility, highlight their significance for the wider community and provide a focus for prayer and reflection.

Background

3. St Wilfrid's Church is a mission Church of the Parish of St Mary, Portsea. It is a dual purpose building completed in 1907. It is unlisted. Following a request about four years ago, Historic England undertook an inspection, but decided there was nothing to merit listing the church building. The only contents noted as being of particular interest are the three items which are the subject of the petition.
4. The church has a small worshipping congregation but also serves the local community. It has strong links with a number of schools and groups and works in partnership with them. The Lounge, or community room, adjacent to the church is used for a variety of community purposes and there is an active pre-school group and child care provision based in the building.
5. The three WW1 items were, it seems, placed in an area described as a memorial chapel in the mid 1920's, but have since been moved and the petitioners consider that they have been largely un-noticed or recognised by many who visit the building. The larger memorial is a list of those who served (although recent research has shown this is not complete or factually accurate) and the smaller one a list of those who died. The grave marker was given to the Church by a sister of the deceased soldier and is apparently one of only a few in Hampshire.

6. The larger memorial now hangs behind the high altar; photographs reveal that it is largely hidden from public view and would not be apparent to anyone who did not know it was there. The grave marker and smaller memorial are placed on the rear wall of a side chapel; although visible, they are not in a prominent position and they are, it is felt unnoticed by many visitors to the church.

The reasons for the proposed relocation

7. The parish has recently been part of a major piece of research in the '20 Streets' project, exploring and highlighting the community's historical connections with WW1. They wish to bring the WW1 items together in one place where they can be a focus for the wider community and they consider that the community room adjacent to the church would best serve that purpose. Descriptions and information from the project could then be displayed alongside the memorials, putting them in context, in a way which is not possible in their current locations. The intention is that the items be more readily visible and accessible to the community and become more of a feature of the church and a focus for prayer and reflection.

Objections

8. Letters of objection have been received from the Rev'd K. Appleford (30.6.17) and from Christine Lavis (1.7.17). Neither has sought to become a party opponent, but their objections must be taken into account. The Rev'd Appleford does not consider the proposed move to the adjacent room to be suitable for items of this nature and is concerned that they will not attract appropriate reverence. He says that the memorials are well-known in genealogical circles.
9. Ms Lavis, too, considers the location of the memorials in the adjacent room to be inappropriate; she feels that their siting in a room used by the wider community may affect the ambience of the room and may make people feel uncomfortable. The memorials have a particular significance for her, as her grandfather's name appears on them; their position in the church is, she feels, an important point of focus; she suggests that there may be another suitable location in the church.
10. Ms Lavis also raises questions about the adequacy of the public notice and the extent of any consultation in the parish.

The petitioner's response

11. Ms Lavis' objection had been set out in an earlier letter which was considered by the PCC at its meeting on 14th May 2017, when approval was given for the faculty application to proceed. The PCC considered the points she raised, but remained of the view that the location of the memorials in the community room would be more likely to enhance their significance.

12. The petitioners do not accept that there was any irregularity in the public notice, but in any event the time for responses has been extended to enable the objections to be considered. They say that the proposals have widespread support and that a presentation of the '20 Streets' project research highlighted the interest of the local community in its WW1 history.

Approvals

13. The proposal to move the memorials was approved by the PCC by 21:0 with three abstentions.
14. The Diocesan Advisory Committee recommends the proposals for approval by the court, subject to a proviso that the position and fixings are agreed by the Archdeacon and an architect member.

Applicable principles

15. The proposal to relocate the memorials would not cause any harm to the fabric of church itself or affect the significance of the church building. The question is whether the move would reduce or detract from the respect and reverence with which they should be treated or whether as the petitioners contend, the new location would enhance their significance and the church's mission among the wider community. It is for the petitioners to demonstrate that there are good reasons for the move and that it accords with the church's ministry.

Discussion and conclusion

16. I have considered carefully the reasons given for the proposed relocation of the two WW1 memorials and the grave marker and the concerns expressed in the two letters of objection. I recognise that the siting of memorials of this nature can be sensitive, particularly for members of the congregation who have a direct link with those commemorated. I understand also the view of the objectors about the siting of the memorials within the church or chapel. However, the reality is that the larger memorial is hidden from view and the smaller memorial and grave marker, while displayed in the chapel, are not generally observed and are not felt to be a focus of prayer. The proposal to relocate all three items together will enable them to be displayed more prominently, with suitable explanatory material and in a place where they can be recognised and respected by the wider community. It is not suggested that there is anywhere within the church where that could be achieved to the same extent. These are of course items of historical and personal significance both to the congregation and to others who visit or use the church. In my judgment their significance and prominence is likely to be enhanced, rather than diminished, by the proposed relocation and the mission and ministry of the church within the community is likely to benefit as a result. I am therefore satisfied that it is appropriate to grant the faculty sought. The final position and fixings of the memorials and grave marker should be agreed locally.

17. Accordingly I direct that a faculty shall issue permitting the relocation of the two memorials and the grave marker, subject to the proviso that the position and fixings are agreed by the Archdeacon and an architect member.

HH Judge Philip Waller CBE

Chancellor

8 August 2018