

**Church:** St Mary and St Thomas of Canterbury, Wymondham

**Interviewee:** E2 – Mike Halls

**Date:** Thursday, 2 July 2015

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1. NW: Thank you very much Mike for agreeing to be part of this. Perhaps I could start just by asking how long you've been connected with Wymondham Abbey.
2. E2: Well I suppose I have been attending Wymondham Abbey since about 1990 I guess, something like that, 1990. I have gone through being a member of PCC, I've been a churchwarden, and I'm currently fabric officer for the building and I'm also vice chairman of the project steering group for the development project, which I'm the only one I think who's been involved since... well I appointed the architect Henry Freeland in 1997 [laughs] and we got our first planning permission in 2002 and it was then shelved because we couldn't get major funding at the time. And then the current incumbent Fr. Christopher Davies came in 2007, which was the year of the 900th anniversary of the founding of the abbey, and there was a lot happening in that year, and he came in the middle of it and I think he was greatly taken by the support of the building and of the church locally and said we ought to be resurrecting and having another go at the project, the development project. So in [2008] I suppose it was we set up another little group, and we started all over again.
3. NW: The earlier scheme – I'm familiar with the...
4. E2: Yes, current one.
5. NW: ...did the earlier scheme differ significantly from...
6. E2: Well, it was far more grandiose. It was two or three storeys on the south east side, and that was one of the reasons that, when the new project started in 2008 we took on board a company called A Different View, who specialised in helping people get funding from the Lottery Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and it became obvious in about 2009/10 that the balance of capital build to the outputs, the interpretation, education and learning outputs that we were seeking was far too much, far too heavy on the capital side. So in about 2010/11 we started scaling it down, so that we've now got one storey on either side, south east and north. So the 2002 scheme had either two or three storeys on the south east side, yeah.
7. NW: Thank you. How do you see the building, what's important about the building?
8. E2: Well, I'll hand over to you something which has been vital all the way through the project and that's the Statement of Need[s]. I would say that anybody starting out must very early on set out a Statement of Needs, and that has become illuminated later on when we were applying for planning permission, the judgment that the diocesan chancellor gave in considering the faculty petition, when there were two major objectors, SPAB, Church Buildings Council, she put a lot of weight on the needs and balanced them against whatever impact the new building was having on the church. So, I'm sorry, back to your original question...

9. NW: In terms of the way ... the importance of the building for you...
10. E2: You'll see that Needs Statement is set out and highlights the fact that there are four distinct roles that this church plays as well as obviously the spiritual role, there's an educational role we've had for many years schools come along here. The building we're in was built in the early 1800s as a school room by a vicar, he funded it, so this building has always served an educational purpose from the monks all the way through to the present day. It's also very important from the heritage point of view, it's the most important building historically in the town, it sits in the landscape – so you drive along the A11 and there it is with its twin towers beckoning to you. Oh, I can't remember what the fourth role was now – cultural role – because it's got a large capacity music festivals happen here, and concerts throughout the year, art exhibitions. So it's got those four roles, and none of them were being met fully by the present building. You'll probably see when you look later at the needs there are no facilities on site, there's one toilet or two toilets downstairs here, storage is pathetic, if schools come along there were no break out rooms, they can only spend a little while here, then had to go back to school. We're aiming to get facilitates so they could spend a day here if necessary. The concerts are... there's only one access into the building, a good level access, there are no steps or anything, but there's just one access in, one access out. And so that restricted the number of people we could have in for a safe environment for them. The new one has two more fire exits; we've opened up the great west doors again which were locked, had been locked since the '50s, no the '70s, since the '70s. So there were various obstacles for us to develop each of those roles that I see the church carrying out in Wymondham.
11. NW: Hopefully you'll end up with a building, I'm sure, which is a much better fit for all these...
12. E2: Indeed, indeed, yes. The whole thinking behind what we're providing there is to make it far more fit for purpose for each of those roles.
13. NW: Turning to the process of making a project like this happen, would you describe that process as a good one... has it been good or has it been frustrating, or...
14. E2: There has been some frustration with the DAC, and we're still being frustrated even though the building is supposed to be finished in September. Mind you, we've now settled everything, apart from there's been a great discovery with unblocking one of the windows we've found a medieval incised drawing of a window on the reveal of this window and we've got to protect that somehow and that's proving difficult to do, to protect it, because it's right on the outside. It has been protected because of course the window has been blocked up for all these centuries and in unblocking it we have now uncovered this, and there's got to be some investigative work carried out to try and date it a bit better – there's some paint samples to be looked at and that sort of thing. So that's the last hurdle, if you like. But when you consider the building, it's a grade 1 listed building, it's surrounded on the east by a Scheduled Ancient Monument, and it's a building with a great history, a former abbey, I suppose there's bound to be hiccoughs

along the road. But a lot were ironed out quite early on by our architect, who was quite clever in... When the DAC said 'We'd like to come along [and] bring the whole DAC and hold a meeting in this room, hold our monthly meeting in this room, and also come and look at what you propose, and the architect can give us a presentation, Henry said 'Right oh, OK, would you mind inviting English Heritage, the local planning conservation officer, SPAB, and anybody else you think ought to be interested', and that has helped enormously, because everybody was in at the beginning. It helped the planning permission went through, Scheduled Ancient Monument [permission] went through... The DAC, that's been the greatest thing, I mean there were two major objectors, but the chancellor – I've actually got a copy of her judgment, would you like to take it?

15. NW: Yes, yes, happily.
16. E2: It will be useful I think in that she spells out the various judgments in the past taken throughout the country in judging faculties, and she judged this one similarly. I have flagged up various bits of it of interest on it for you. She was great. She actually came down very heavily in support of us and gave us the faculty, but there was a list of things that still had to be approved between us and the DAC, and some of those have gone on a little bit, various sub-committees have visited. Because not only is there the building, there is the interpretation as well has had to be approved and the displays and that sort of thing.
17. NW: So overall you've found the DAC to be helpful?
18. E2: Yes... yes, it's been frustrating in the length of time. Let me tell you, I'm a chartered town planner, or I was until I retired, and I specialised since the '60s in conservation planning. I was head of conservation at Norfolk County Council before I retired in 2003, so all my working life I have dealt with architects, landscape architects, architectural historians and that sort of thing. It's never going to be easy when you're dealing with a committee with all the various different interests on it, each of them there for a specific reason. So we got through it, but it has been a bit frustrating at times. I mean it held up, until we got the faculty we couldn't get our permission to start planning things with the Lottery Fund like getting our men starting on site and that sort of thing. It's just dovetailing everything together in a building like this is difficult. I mean they're very nice people. Henry knows most of them because he sits with some of them [on the DAC] at Ely, and Henry also sits on the fabric committee at Norwich Cathedral as well, so he knows a lot of them, and I think a lot of them feel that he can be trusted to do what is right for the building.
19. NW: So Henry is obviously very prominent in those sorts of circles, his credibility is very important.
20. E2: It's very important, yes, on a building like this, certainly, yes. We've had meetings here and he's given various presentations to them, and that's helped. And then when the list of things that appear in the back of that judgment that have still got to be approved by them they've sent sub-committees here and then of course they have to report back, and they only meet once a month. And this is the

frustrating thing when you've got to tie builders down and that sort of thing. But English Heritage have been great, or Historic England as they are now, they've been in from the beginning on discussions. They've got two interests of course, as the building, but also the Scheduled Monument side as well. We've got a proposed herb garden that is going to be at the back and things like the footpath to the herb garden affects the Scheduled Ancient Monument. At various places we're going to have outside interpretation panels; two of those sit in the Ancient Monument, so they've got to be approved and that sort of thing. But we very quickly got the Scheduled Monument consent because we had a very, very good archaeological assessment of the impact of the proposal, and a statement on how those impacts were going to be ameliorated, for instance in the way the sub-structure was missing graves and missing all sorts of things. That's another very important element particularly if you've got a Scheduled Ancient Monument, is to have a very strong archaeological impact assessment. So that was another feature of this building that we had to cope with.

21. NW: The archaeology alone, that didn't prevent there being these two objectors to the scheme...
22. E2: No, the objectors were mainly ... SPAB, and I don't mind saying it, SPAB will always object to any extension. They've objected all the way through to everything that we've proposed. I mean Henry's got a fantastic scheme – the whole of the south east wall which has got lots of visible archaeology in it is not affected by the scheme. It's all bridged over by this magnificent single storey – but it's the same height as the south aisle, he's followed the shape of the south aisle and that sort of thing – and they felt we'd got to produce everything we needed inside the existing church. We couldn't go along with that, and nor did the diocesan chancellor, she felt that everything that we were proposing outdid any harm that she felt was being done.
23. NW: And where was the other objection from?
24. E2: The Church Buildings Council. I think they were probably the same people feeding in the same objection.
25. NW: So was there a similar set of concerns?
26. E2: A similar set of concerns, but they're spelt out in that judgment, you'll be able to see.
27. NW: What do you think, for folk such as SPAB, what do you think they think of as being most important about the building?
28. E2: I think, for some reason, they felt the existing footprint should be preserved, should be kept. They seemed to forget the building we've got there now was only a minute part of what was there originally, and we're just sort of filling it in again where the original foundation was, without affecting the archaeology unduly, and without affecting the standing archaeology as well. We felt our scheme took into account all the circumstances. I think that's what they felt... they seemed to be against extending the current footprint for some reason.

29. NW: So for them the current envelope of the building had much greater importance than to anybody else perhaps?
30. E2: Yes, I suppose so, yeah, yeah.
31. NW: Obviously you came to the project with a wealth of experience from your professional life which is a huge asset for the church; did you learn anything in particular from this project?
32. E2: Yes, I suppose there were far more interests – the plates had to be kept spinning at any time – than I was perhaps used to.
33. NW: More stakeholders?
34. E2: More stakeholders, yes, that's right, that's right. And the *raison d'être* of our new project is based on getting the community to use the building more, not just for worship, but getting in there and using its space and that sort of thing. And that was one of the points that the Lottery Fund felt was an important plus. And another plus that we had that not many churches have, we have our own archives, many going back to medieval [times], unfortunately none relating to the abbey side, but even so judgments going way back, where the Pope got involved, and that sort of thing, rattling heads together at one stage. The founder had this grandiose scheme, William d'Aubigny had this grandiose scheme that it was going to be shared between the monks and the town and of course very soon they got fighting about spaces and who does what. So the Pope said, 'OK, the monks shall have their part of the... the nave shall belong to the town, the south aisle shall belong to the monks, and the south...' – because [being] a typical Romanesque building it had the twin towers at the west end originally – '...the monks shall have the south tower, the town shall have the north tower, and the town shall have the north aisle'. So that was the Pope's sort of... And when the dissolution of the monasteries came about the town then bought some land and extended the various aisles and that sort of thing. So Wymondham has always been renowned for a little bit of jostling between town... and it's something we don't want to happen now [laughs], you know we feel there's a great deal in that building, and we've always been quite shocked when we have open days and things going on and you get people [saying] 'I was born in this town and this is the first time I've ever been in the church'. And they're amazed by it.
35. NW: It's rather nice, it feels as though the project that you're doing is in some ways a return to the founder's original vision.
36. E2: It is indeed, it is indeed, very much so, yes. And now we shall have this way [...] through the south aisle into the new south east extension and out there under the ruined tower with a path linking it to the new north extension, and then back into the north aisle. So we've broken through both aisles now, to get a sort of circular route going.
37. NW: It's early days obviously, you haven't finished it yet, you haven't opened it...
38. E2: No, no.
39. MW: ...but what impact do you think it will have on the community as a whole...?

40. E2: Well, one part of the project that the Lottery Fund are funding for three years is a full time Learning and Events Co-ordinator. And she started two months ago – we got her to hit the ground running – and she's already getting more schools in, starting tours, arranging tours and that sort of thing, and events. So we're already getting a flavour of how people... she's getting more volunteers coming along already and she's only been in post a couple of months, so we're already getting a flavour of how people are quite willing and happy to make more use of the building.
41. NW: That's excellent isn't it. I suppose the question then is after the three years whether...
42. E2: We've got to... One of her jobs is to set up a charging system; we've never charged in the past, but charging to schools to come along, and offer them packages, not just for the use of the building, but information and packages and that sort of thing which she's already working on, so that after three years we hope that things are flowing so that we can continue, at least half time, to continue to appoint her.
43. NW: Great. If you had to start again on another project like this, is there anything that you would do differently, do you think?
44. E2: I don't think so, I don't think so. I mean I would encourage the early meetings with everybody involved, so that they're all singing from the same hymn sheet. Funnily enough a couple of weeks ago Henry and I met... There was the summer school in Norwich for the Institute of Historic Building Conservation, their annual summer school, and we hosted – they had tours on the Saturday and they split up – and we hosted, some 15 came along here, and one or two of them had experiences that we said 'Well if you'd held a meeting as Henry did at the start and got everybody involved' and two of the people on that were David Eve from Historic England, and a chap called David Eddlestone who used to be conservation officer for the local planning authority; both said 'Ah, we were in on this scheme from the beginning, and we say if you get that right in the beginning everybody knows what to expect, and that's what a lot of them took away with them, a lot of the conservation officers. So that thing I would certainly employ. I would certainly go for the Statement of Needs as well, because that's lived with us all the way through. It was useful for telling the planners as part of the planning application, for the faculty and everybody involved had a copy of that Statement of Needs, which spelt...
45. NW: And it seems to me to be good as an exercise in any case to put down on paper...
46. E2: That's right
47. NW: ...in hard black and white terms what it is you're about...
48. E2: Well that's right. And it was useful for Henry, when his first sketch plan, he said 'This is what you need, how can I fit it in on this site?'
49. NW: The magic bullet question: if you could change one thing about the process of changing an old building like this, is there anything...?

50. E2: Yes, I would hope that... I mean the Church fought long and hard to get their ecclesiastical exemption, so they ain't going to be giving it back, but I still would like them to work a lot closer with the other grant aiding -- not grant aiding -- but the other statutory bodies. I mean the planners go through a process of consultation and evaluating a building, English Heritage do the same, and the diocese does the same; I would like to see somehow them working... it's all very well coming to the meeting, but getting their processes working a lot closer together. I can't see the Church giving back their ecclesiastical exemption, and probably nor should they.
51. NW: And the benefit that you have in mind for that...?
52. E2: Well, rather than having three separate bodies all going away and deciding what needs to be... you know what their views are, getting together and getting a co-ordinated set of views.
53. NW: That's excellent Mike, thank you very much. Unless there's anything else you'd like to add...
54. E2: No. There's a timeline there which might be useful.
55. NW: That's very helpful thank you, yes.
56. E2: And also Fr. Christopher and I have had meetings with two churches who are thinking of... wanting to pick our brains and I did put down some salient points which they might like. Now they won't [all] be relevant to you, but some of them will. These are things like advice, I advise them on how they finance it and that sort of thing. But I mean it's something that I put down, so I thought it might be useful to you.
57. NW: Thank you very much.
58. E2: Oh, and this is the project structure as well that we had, which we had to convince the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, the funders, that we've got a robust management structure to manage the project.
59. NW: That's fantastic, thank you very much.
60. E2: OK... I would advise anybody to go for flexible uses for the spaces, the new spaces. On the south east side we've got what is a sacristy on a Sunday and when there's services, but during the week it's going to be a reading room for anybody wanting to read our archives, because our archives are kept above the porch, up a winding stone staircase which not everybody can manage, so we've got a facility there. On the north side we've got a new building which is going to be a choir vestry on a Sunday, but during the week is a breakout room for schools, or if there is a concert a green room for musicians, and also both sides have got new interpretation displays, touch screens and that sort of thing are going to be coming. So it's getting as much flexibility as possible, because it's in a church, attached to a church, but it's for community use as well. And they're some of the important outputs as far as I see in the project.
61. NW: It seems to me it requires a rethinking on the part of the church as to how you hold this possession...

62. E2: Yes.
63. NW: ...it's holding it in trust for the benefit of everybody, isn't it?
64. E2: That's right, that's right.
65. NW: A project like this, what I'm hearing from you, is that it has involved a renegotiation of boundaries as to who owns what, and who has rights over what.
66. E2: Yes.
67. NW: Is that fair?
68. E2: Yes, yes. And there is a part of the Scheduled Ancient Monument, there is a meadow just over the back wall that belongs to a local trust set up by the man who built this [school] building, Revd Papillon. We're now negotiating with them to have parties go onto that because there are still lumps and bumps in the field and you can actually see where the former abbey spread. So that's another thing that's come out of the whole exercise, working with this trust.
69. NW: Excellent, thank you Mike.
70. E2: OK.