

Church: St Andrew and St Peter, Blofield

Interviewee: A3 - Jeremy Bell

Date: Wednesday, 22 July 2015

1. NW: Good. OK, so thank you Jeremy for agreeing to this. ... So could you just outline briefly your involvement with the Blofield project?
2. A3: I think that as is usual we probably got a phone call, I can't remember exactly, but we probably got a phone call or an email from the Blofield church. Or they might have met us at CRE [the Christian Resources Exhibition] or something. I think that there was a competitive interview, and we went there in order to just do an initial appraisal of the place, of the site. And somewhere along the line we were selected; I have no idea who else was on the competitive interview panel, but somewhere along the line we were selected. And we proposed a feasibility study, which we undertook...
3. NW: So this was for a gallery at the back of the church, is that right?
4. A3: Well, we don't usually take their solution, but we always ask the church about their vision. We say it's a vision-driven process, and where are you going as a church, because the building needs to accommodate the worship and mission of the church, it's not about the building. So we initially asked them to outline their vision for where they were going and what they were doing. And they did have this gallery solution and a little model, which was architecturally fairly clumsy, because it had a lightwell in the middle of the gallery, and staircases down from the ringing chamber, but in concept it was not a bad solution. What it gained was fellowship space at the back, and this seemed to be what they really wanted, because it was a large barn of a church, very, very large. From a historic point of view fairly significant, with some very curious and elegant box pews which raise up at the back, with the doors of the box pews raising up in a curve which gives it a sort of tremendous character. But like so many churches it was built for a very large attendance at a formal service. So they had vast space at the east end, and a lot of seating space, but no space for a Sunday school, no space for children, no space for children's work, and that was the thrust of the need, to accommodate families and young people in such a way as the church could grow.
5. NW: OK. Excellent, thank you. And just in terms of understanding the extent of your involvement, the project proceeded on the basis of that feasibility study?
6. A3: Yes.
7. NW: But then it came to a stop, is that right?
8. A3: Well, we were appointed to do a feasibility study, which we did.
9. NW: Right.
10. A3: There's been no further involvement since then.
11. NW: Right. Because I understand they discovered problems with their tower...

12. A3: I don't know about that. Our involvement was... we did not take over the quinquennial aspect of the church, we simply got involved in doing a feasibility study for the design of rooms. So that's what we did.
13. NW: Right, excellent. So looking at a building like that, which is a grade 1 listed building, with a church in it with particular needs, as you described, for fellowship space, families, children, how do you see the relationship between those competing constraints, or needs, or...
14. A3: Well, in that particular case, a very large, massive church, with great historic character and great presence in the landscape, and a lot of it built with very thick walls which were very damp, ... and roof beams which really looked like things out of some kind of marine technology, I think they might have been parts of ships or something, the kind of dilemma is that they're such vast structural problems to the church itself that to make an adaptation for a functional building for a small village church, with a big 'C', we call 'Church' as a people with a big 'C' and 'church' as a building with a small 'c'. The Church becomes a custodian of a historic building, which is not really its essential purpose. The Church is a worshipping community, so if what you say is true, which is Blofield is now having to deal with massive problems with the tower, they are locked into custodianship of a historic building, as their primary purpose, and it's a pity, because there are no funding arrangements for that. There's no money, people have got to dip into their pockets as well as paying their Parish Share, they've got to somehow raise money for a grade 1 historic building. We had a wonderful client in the suffragan bishop of Plymouth who had 12 such churches, and he said these buildings are a millstone around the people's necks; I'm going to pull them down and build something new. And he was quite revolutionary. And we were involved in three such projects where the church was actually demolished.
15. NW: Listed churches?
16. A3: They were not listed...
17. NW: OK.
18. A3: ...but they were listable, they were problematic. One church was demolished and on the site was built 19 flats and a new church. On another, pulled down the church, sold the site to a Coop, and on the site of the hall built both a new church and a hall. And the church was over the moon, because they had a lovely little building which was appropriate for today's needs, and which didn't have all the issues and problems. So there is a major tension in that issue, which is: who is taking responsibility for all these pieces of ancient architecture. It's all very well having English Heritage and the Vic. Soc. and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings all trying to steer those in authority over the buildings, but the people in authority over the buildings are the people like you and me who are working and who are giving some money to the Church, and the primary concern isn't taking care of a listed building. So there's a huge gap in those taking responsibility. You can say in Oxford where we're based, as you know, there's the Oxford Churches Trust, a nice little charity which you can get maybe £10,000 from

if you need some repairs to a roof, but there aren't millions of pounds available. There is the Heritage Lottery Fund, but they're mainly dealing with the big cathedrals and the fairly major projects. There isn't a connect up between English Heritage concerns for the conservation of listed buildings, grade 1 listed buildings, there isn't a pot of money. There needs to be about £100m, or £200m to deal with all the grade 1 listed buildings. It's not a lot of money in a national economy. Yes, I know there's Heritage Lottery Fund, but Heritage Lottery Fund buildings are really complex. The only way that you can get that money is to turn the building over to some kind of community use and turn it into some sort of museum where there's an art trail and making it into a venue for people to travel to and visit and pay.

19. NW: They want to make the heritage more accessible, don't they, that's what comes with the money.
20. A3: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The idea that you actually retain it as a church is just not acceptable, because everything's so secular. You can't get money to restore a church. The Anglican church has sort of a bit lost its way in the power struggle for available finance. They should really take quite a strong line and say 'We are not primarily custodians of grade 1 listed buildings; if you the grade 1 listed buildings maintained, then by all means find some money and we will be custodians of that, but that is not our primary purpose. Our primary purpose is to pay priests, to train them, to pay their pensions when they retire, and to pay for the worship and mission of the church.' That's my view, and what I see happening all over really.
21. NW: You mentioned English Heritage etc, Victorian Society and so on; would you say that the balance of power between those bodies and the Church, would you say that's out of balance? In terms of a congregation trying to deal with their historic building.
22. A3: Well I think where the out of balance is, if you go into a meeting you have a DAC, you have the Church Care, you have English Heritage (now Historic England), you possibly have SPAB, Vic. Soc. or Twentieth Century Society or Georgian Society or whatever else it is. Now all of those people sitting around the table, each of whom has a particular agenda, and most of their agenda is a preservationist agenda. The DACs theoretically should be considering the Church as a whole, but on the DAC only your archdeacon is the person who is particularly with the agenda of the future of the Church. Completely absent from that team is somebody who would be representing a hypothetical organisation called the 'Council for the Future of the Church'. There is no such thing. There is no such thing as the 'Council for the Future of the Church'. There is no investment, there is no money being poured into the future of the Church. There is some analysis of where the Church is going, and why some Churches are mushrooming in size and some not, but there is no real focus of attention and concern for the future of the church in an academic way. There was the Springboard project, which was really very good, and there were some books published...
23. NW: What was the Springboard project?

24. A3: The Springboard project was a... The previous archbishop mounted a Springboard project and out of that came a movement for new types of church, so the 'Fresh Expressions'...
25. NW: So the *Mission-shaped Church* report, for example.
26. A3: Well that, as well as books like... The archdeacon of Lichfield, who happened to be a statistician, produced two wonderful books which looked at why Churches are growing, and where they're growing, and it's a very statistically based, very, very sound and solid. And he established, for example, that the introduction of women priests had a really beneficial effect on the growth of the Church. But he also found that about 15 years ago, the average age of an ordinand was 56, because the Church had a policy that they wanted priests who had some experience of outside life. Well what happened in that case was that priests saw ordination as a way to see out their working career until retirement, when they hadn't made it in business or whatever, and that kind of age of priest made churches decline. The churches who had young vicars straight out of university almost, with young wives and young families, Churches grew. From a statistical point of view it was much more beneficial to train ordinands straight out of university. Whether they've got experience of life or not, this argument in this book was to say you don't take generals in the Army from the outside world and at 56 say they've got experience in real life, let's bring them over and make them generals. You train them up from scratch. They go up the ranks, and if they're brilliant they're generals at the age of 23 or 33 or something. Look at the Second World War. So the Church's policy has changed, because they have started connecting statistical analysis with policy. But still they have long interregnums of a year, perhaps a year and a half, between priests, simply because it seems to save money, but statistically it does not work. The haemorrhage of congregation from those Churches during the interregnum is large, and the income drops. The book's called *The Road to Growth*.
27. NW: OK.
28. A3: That's one of his books. He wrote another one. So just coming back to the main point, which is that the Springboard project mounted all of these little initiatives in order to try and look at it. And yes, it has done some work, but you don't find, at the coalface of the approval process of change to a listed building, you don't find somebody saying 'This project is absolutely essential for the future of this Church.' We use the argument often, because you probably well know the first sentence of Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure says 'All persons shall have due regard to the worship and mission of the Church'. The entire Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure whereby they took out from the secular authority the administration of listed churches, was for the reason that the secular planning authority and conservation officer did not have an understanding of worship and mission, and they said 'You can't leave churches for those people.' But the way it works in practice is that the DACs guard... That Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure comes out of the secular world for only a limited period, and then it has to be reviewed, so it's a temporary

arrangement for 'x' number of years, I'm not quite sure how many. But the DACs guard this very carefully by trying to demonstrate that they know more about conservation than the conservation officer. And so they tend to be architectural historians, and historians, and art historians, and archaeologists, and people who love history. No I value their input, it's enormous, but absent from the groups is any major voice with academic clout saying 'Despite the history, this Church will only have a future if this and this happens.' So [an] English Heritage fieldworker might well be somebody who is not a Christian, has no understanding of modern church practice, and whose church experience is going to weddings and funerals where there are no toilets and no kitchen, and they're saying 'I don't know why this church needs a toilet. People just come to church, they sit in their pew and they go home again.' There's no wide academic understanding of the fact that in the non-Anglican world the Churches are mushrooming, there's huge growth. How do you get a Church like Hillsong in London with 10,000 people, or Trent Vineyard with 5,000 people, where anybody over 40 is really old? Why is that happening? Where is the academic analysis for that, and where is the representative on this balanced viewpoint who says 'These pews may be old, they may be oak, they may be beautifully carved, but if you continue to say that they have to stay in those places then you do not allow this church to be changed, to have flexibility of use where they can run a playgroup in here, where they could stack all the chairs up and have a barn dance, where they could increase the community use of this building where it will have a huge future.'

29. NW: In the case of Blofield did you get as far as having that conversation with those stakeholders?
30. A3: In the case of Blofield ... I mean I'm talking much more generally. I think since we started focusing on churches in 2004, we have probably dealt with about 80 or 100 churches, we see this over and over again. But in the specific case of Blofield I think that there was an understanding that they could achieve what they wanted to achieve without an enormous change to what they needed to do. Because there is already some kind of screen there, if I remember correctly.
31. NW: So they could achieve their aims without the extensive changes of that scheme.
32. A3: Yeah. They were not planning to move the pews, because the pews are delightful. As I said, they stack up. They could achieve the fairly large fellowship space at the back of the church. It needed a lid on it, hence the gallery solution is a good solution because it gives them another space as well. That would give them a hall-ish space that they could use for all sorts of functions, it could have a kitchen, it could have more than one toilet, they already had one disabled toilet. It could still have a tower room. So the tower room could be one space, the fellowship space another, and then there was a proposal to extend the vestry to have yet a third space. So there was a really good compromise between actual alteration of the character of the listed building, where in substance the main worship space would be left so that all its big civic functions, and its Carols by Candlelight and its Easter Service it could be filled with people.

33. NW: And these other stakeholders, did you get as far as finding out whether they thought this was a good compromise or not?
34. A3: I think there was general acceptance. The DAC in that diocese was quite forward-thinking. There was no real opposition from the DAC, as far as I can recall. I think there was quite a lot of support from the DAC. We had meetings with all of those big stakeholders, and I think the general feeling was that it was OK. We proposed a fairly modern balcony front with glass so that it would be... I also proposed it not butting into the columns; I don't like doing that, I think it rather messes it up, so I think the balcony front was going to come forward of the main pillars so that they penetrated and they stood on their own, so there was a three dimensional interplay between the plane of the gallery front and the plane of the columns coming down.
35. NW: So turning to the more general picture, from what you say I think that you don't think that the current process with its politics can be relied upon to produce good results for Churches. Is that fair to say?
36. A3: I think I would be much more precise about that statement, and say that the balance of opinion is on the preservation of the listed buildings, which is all very worthy, and unquestionably good, but the mechanism of control is in order to steer the local Church authority and the wider Church authority into conservation/preservation practice. Because there's very little difference now between the word 'conservation' and the word 'preservation'. But there is no global understanding from the people with heritage responsibility of the decline in attendance at Anglican churches, and the erosion of the economy that supports those heritage assets. Dioceses are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet, and so there is less and less money available for the heritage assets to be maintained. But purely looking at it from a point of view of preservation of the heritage assets, adaptation is essential. And at some point there's going to be a huge outcry because Churches have declined into such small numbers that there are unsustainable levels of finance available for the heritage assets.
37. NW: Yes.
38. A3: New paragraph almost, as it were. How much easier is it to operate a young, to use the derogatory term (which I don't use), a 'young, lively' Church from a school hall, where they have no responsibility for taking care of a building, where they can give their money away, they can pay their pastor and give their money away, where there's no difficulty in putting in a sound system or making tea or coffee, or going to the toilets, they can use the classrooms for the children. Is it any wonder that the denominations like Vineyard, and the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches are growing at 20% a year, whereas the Anglicans are declining at 20% a year [sic]. There's no real connect between the two, and there's no cognisance of the effect that the preservation agenda is having on making it so difficult to make adaptations to listed places of worship.
39. NW: In that setting, what specific skills do you think the Church client needs?
40. A3: Well they need... Let me think this out. What sort of skills do they need?

41. NW: Let me give you a little bit more that's behind that question. I observe that some Churches have skills in house already; you might have somebody with a, let's say, project management background or something. And you have other churches that have no such skills, and presumably that has some impact upon the way they're able to work within that system or not. I don't know what your experience is.
42. A3: Yeah, it's a mixed blessing that. Let's go biblical for a moment. The Bible says 'Where there is no vision, the people perish'. So the corollary of that, is where there is vision, the people flourish; that's really what it means. But the essential skill that is required is one of vision. That's the essential skill. Because the Churches start out, and most of them have no money. The project manager is all very well for steering a project in terms of efficiency and detail, but the essential skill they require is vision.
43. NW: Which is not a project management skill.
44. A3: Which is not usually a project management skill. Project managers are usually like a horse with blinkers: they can only see in one direction, and they can't really see forwards, they don't have the bright ideas. But it takes a vicar who can see a vision and who can say this is what we need to do. And it takes a united church group to say 'This is where we should go, this is what we need to do.'
45. NW: But then I would observe, absolutely one needs that vision, but then one needs to sustain the vision through what is a drawn out process that seems to be...
46. A3: A drawn out *and difficult* process.
47. NW: Indeed.
48. A3: So in a way the Churches that succeed are the ones that have unity and prayer support, from a spiritual point of view, because it is a spiritual battle. It's just like Nehemiah in the Bible. If you look at Nehemiah, he was called by God to go and rebuild the Temple [sic]. He moved from current day Baghdad back to Israel. He said 'OK, I'm going to go and rebuild the Temple,' and he took a few people with him. There were a lot of scoffers who said 'You'll never do this'. So they had to carry a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other, and they rebuilt the walls. So it takes both vision and perseverance, and a kind of dogmatic perseverance to get it achieved. Because who are the scoffers? The scoffers are the preservationists and the many people who say 'No, you can't do it like this,' or 'No you shouldn't do this,' or 'No, you shouldn't do that,', or 'No, you can't do this.' The architect supports the vision; the architect is a supporter of the vision. The skill of the architect is far wider than in any other aspect of the architectural profession.
49. NW: Do you mean far wider in the case of churches?
50. A3: I think so. Because you have to come into that spiritual process. You have to see what is possible, and have to work out whether what... You have to understand how the church functions as a group, and sometimes challenge what they say. I'm trying to think of examples. When they say we want to do this and this and this and this and this, the architect doesn't just do the drawings to show this and this, you really have to go back and question why you want to do that. I need to know

the why, and then move to the how. It's always a vision-driven process, as I say. So that skill is huge.

51. NW: So for you, the architect needs to take a part in the vision, so needs to be 'vision-literate', if you like.
52. A3: That's a good word, 'vision-literate.' And we find often that the quinquennial architect might come up with a rather dull solution, of having a little box here or a box there with toilets in it or whatever, but won't look at the wider picture. And sometimes we miss a trick. Like, for example, St Mary's Wallingford. We went in there, and the vicar said 'What is wrong with this church, it has lost its spirituality, it has lost its sense of the sacred.' And it took us a while to analyse why, and that's because they had inserted boxes everywhere. They had screened off the north aisle east end, screened off the south aisle east end. In 1934 a rood screen had been put in to screen off the chancel. A previous vicar who was an architect had screened off the west end tower with knotty pine Swiss style chalet character. He'd installed a hall in the upper part of the north aisle, underneath where you came in. So the overall spatial effect had been lost completely by the insertion of all these boxes. The box pews had not been removed. The Victorian pews were still in place, so you couldn't see for clutter. That was the reason. The total spatial effect was lost. And there was this dilemma. They had every day a play school meeting in this little hall at the top, which was successful. It produces the lifeblood of the church. It was really a fully functional church, but spatially it didn't work. It was cold, and the light was terrible, etc. And our proposals were to remove the rood screen and the pews, and to put in a beautiful floor in order to achieve a spatial effect. But when I argued with the DAC they said 'Why don't you remove the hall from the north aisle?' And I said 'Because it is working its socks off. I know that it's an intrusion.' And they said 'Why can't you actually remove the hall, and move that function into the church?' And that was a really good idea; I had not thought so far. And they said 'We aren't going to allow you to remove the rood screen.' I had a huge battle to remove the rood screen, and I lost. But it actually worked, because at the end of the day we painted the chancel a beautiful terracotta colour, and lost the contrast between the rood screen and the chancel. And by getting rid of all the other boxes, the whole place is beautifully open and spacious again, and is now working its socks off for the church, because they can do so much more.
53. NW: Hmm, hmm.
54. A3: They can have marriage courses and banquets and [have] the church [as] a marketplace. It's really successful.
55. NW: So in moving towards a summary of the discussion, could I summarise your thoughts, would it be fair to say that the important thing about a church building is the life-giving activity that takes place within it, rather than the physical frame of that activity? Is that fair?
56. A3: Well the two are linked. I think I could summarise it by saying... Greyfriars Church in Reading. We reordered that church in the year 2000, and they have expanded

and expanded and expanded in numbers, and in depth, and in success. I said to Jonathan Wilmot 'What did the reordering do?' It was a grade 1 listed building. We removed the pews, put in underfloor heating, put in beautiful lighting, put in a pale tiled floor, increased the spaciousness, increased the flexibility, increased the adaptability, made it possible to do lots of things in the church. And I said to Jonathan Wilmot, about 10 years later, I said to him, 'What did the reordering do?' He said 'It made it possible to do so much more. We could run Alpha courses, we could run banquets, we could have healing on the streets, we could invite people in, we could just do anything we wanted in that church. It wasn't stuck in a liturgical arrangement only to behave yourself in formal church for one hour a week.' And I think that's my summary really.

57. NW: That's helpful, thank you. And if you had a magic wand, and could change one thing about the process of changing historic buildings, what would it be? Is there one thing?
58. A3: I think I would start something called the 'Council for the Future of the Church', in order to evaluate and to form a body of opinion and an investment where the long term future of the Church takes a higher priority than the preservation of its past.
59. NW: So a different balance between past and future then?
60. A3: Yes, yes. Just look at the Victorian era. Nobody was concerned about the medieval church that stood there before. Nobody had any regard for it. They just said 'Well, let's take off the roof and raise it up, and build another few aisles.'
61. NW: Or they may have had regard for it, but they didn't see it as a limiting constraint.
62. A3: It wasn't a limiting constraint, no. They had regard for it, they studied it. But the stranglehold that the secular historical world... everything is historical now, people love it, people worship it. The stranglehold that has on the process is absolutely enormous. It takes sometimes years to get through. We're just finishing a project in Birmingham, St Stephen's. It has taken us from perhaps 2006 up to now, 2007, to actually get that project through to completion. There have been years in delay by obstacles such as the introduction of underfloor heating in the church. That has perhaps delayed for two years the process, through the power of one person on the DAC, who has said 'That causes damp to be driven up the walls.' There is no scientific evidence for this. It's a wives' tale, but it has gone round English Heritage, it's gone round the DAC conference. It's a wives' tale; there's no scientific evidence. In physics there's something called Dalton's Law of Partial Pressures, which would equal out the vapour pressure under the building and on the side of a building, because the foundations are porous. So if there was an accumulation of water underneath the floor of the church, the vapour pressure would even out, it would just go outside. But there's this wives' tale that when you seal a floor and it's not breathable any more, and you stick in underfloor heating, it causes the damp to be driven up the walls. And just 'driven up the walls' is enough to make anybody think that that's a terrible thing to do, to be 'driven up the walls'. But it doesn't bear any scientific scrutiny; it's complete nonsense.

63. NW: I mean I can think of places where a concrete floor, therefore much less permeable, you sometimes see moisture in walls and indeed in arcade columns, and the spalling of stonework in areas where the floor has been made less permeable, so I think...
64. A3: But has that been tested, has it been actually measured? Has it been measured that that's the reason?
65. NW: Well, certainly not by me...
66. A3: And was it there before? Were there moisture tests before, and were there moisture tests afterwards. Is there scientific scrutiny on that whole process?
67. NW: So in the case of St Stephen's, you obviously won that argument, but did you have a sacrificial strip [of permeable floor] at the edge?
68. A3: No, I don't want to put a sacrificial strip of gravel. Now we're having a really lovely discussion about this. I don't want to put a sacrificial strip of gravel because you know what will happen? Because that is cold, you'll get terrific condensation in that gravel strip, because it will be below the insulation level, so do you want to take that risk? I don't want to take that risk, because that's dealing with water, not vapour. What I've done at St Stephen's, what we've done everywhere, is we've put a gravel layer in of what I call cobbles. So there's a gravel layer in there, so the sub-floor ventilation persists, it just just can continue on. And if you really need to you can put down a probe and test how damp is the ground. Because if you're in a place like Cambridge – is it 'Fenland'?
69. NW: Yes, yes.
70. A3: Well the ground is damp, the ground is wet. It's wet, your walls are in the water, so they're going to suck up water anyway. So is putting your concrete making that any wetter? I don't think so. When you're dealing with a wet place, you're dealing with a wet place. A place like Blofield, the walls are wet. They're perhaps 80 or 90% damp. They just are. They're going to be damp, whatever you do.
71. NW: I think we've probably got to the end of our...
72. A3: Yeah, we can discuss... that's another subject.
73. NW: It is, somewhat, thank you. That's been extremely helpful Jeremy. I don't know if there is anything else that you'd like to add, or...?
74. A3: No, thank you very much. I've enjoyed this conversation, because these are things I have thought out over the last 15 years, and we just have them time and time again. And all the best with your PhD, and I'm so glad you're dealing with this stuff.
75. NW: Thank you very much.
76. A3: You're very able at it.
77. NW: Well, that remains to be seen [laughs].
78. A3: Well, you are very good at putting this stuff into words. And there needs to be argument. But the essential fact... Whenever I look around this table with all of these people, I'm always the naughty boy who is trying to change the past. I'm the rebel who wants to change the past. But actually, our heart is in the future of

the Church, and when we have finally succeeded, I think every church we have ever reordered has grown.

79. NW: That's both very encouraging, and a good note to end on I think.

80. A3: Yeah. Unless some vicar has come in and destroyed it by something. I'll just give you an example. This isn't something we were responsible for, but St James' in Gerrards Cross. They built a brand new building, it cost them £3m. And they moved their evening service from the traditional church into the new building, and it grew 300% in 3 weeks. Because, people said 'Hey, have you been there, it's cool, it's a modern place.' So that's what we should be dealing with, we should be dealing with contemporary people in their twenties and thirties, that's what we should be doing, that's what Church should be, not about the bells and the smells and the old fashioned nineteenth century liturgical structure in the liturgical building. Everywhere else in the world you're allowed to change a building. Even the Queen can change Buckingham Palace if she feels she needs a toilet here. Does she have to go through English Heritage? [Laughs] I think I've said enough.

81. NW: Excellent, thank you very much indeed.

82. A3: Goodbye, all the best.

83. NW: Thank you, goodbye.