



# WYMONDHAM ABBEY

The Abbey Church of St Mary and St Thomas of Canterbury, Wymondham, Norfolk

## 'THE ABBEY EXPERIENCE' PROJECT

### STATEMENT OF NEED FOR IMPROVED FACILITIES

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| 1. | <b>Introduction:</b> |
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- 1.1 Wymondham Abbey represents four interrelated roles in both the local and wider community. Firstly, it is the most significant heritage focus in Wymondham and environs, secondly, it is developing as a focus for cultural events, thirdly, it has great potential as an educational resource for schools and the wider community, and fourthly, it has an overriding spiritual focus as the parish church. This statement sets out the strengths, constraints and opportunities for improvement for the Abbey in all its roles and its place at the heart of the local community.
  - 1.2 Wymondham is a busy market town with a strong sense of identity and a wide variety of well-supported community organizations. The town has almost doubled in size over the past twenty years to a current population of some 15,000, set to increase with the building of up to 2,200 new homes over the coming years. The Abbey holds a special place in the hearts of local people – an estimated 6,000 people attended events in the Abbey during the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary year in 2007.
  - 1.3 Although what remains standing and in use today is only half of the great Abbey church, it still dominates the surrounding South Norfolk countryside and is also of international historic, architectural and archaeological importance. Visitors are able to witness a full architectural experience ranging from the 12<sup>th</sup> century arcaded Romanesque Nave through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Altar Screen designed by Sir Ninian Comper. In addition, the Abbey retains a substantial collection of archives, including many medieval charters and documents, housed in the church Muniment room.
  - 1.4 The special and architectural quality of the building has fostered a developing cultural role for the Abbey. The seating capacity, acoustic quality and overall ambiance offered by the Abbey is increasingly being appreciated as an excellent venue for musical concerts.
  - 1.5 The Abbey is an educational resource regularly visited and much valued by local schools. Given appropriate facilities and resources there is considerable potential for further development of this role in partnership with schools, educational organisations and other venues.
  - 1.6 The Abbey, dedicated in honour of St Mary the Virgin and St Thomas of Canterbury, was originally founded in 1107 not only as a Priory of the Benedictine Monastery of St Albans (and later as an independent abbey) but also as the parish church. This spiritual focus for Wymondham has been maintained through the centuries and, as the nine hundredth anniversary has recently been celebrated, the Abbey still continues as an active place of worship, day by day.

## 2. Interpretation of the Abbey Heritage:

### 2.1 Strengths:

- ❖ The Abbey is of international architectural significance and has much to offer historic buildings experts and enthusiasts, those with an interest in ecclesiastical history and architecture as well as casual visitors. Some 20,000 heritage visitors are welcomed per year –visiting hours being 10am to 5pm during the summer and 10am to 3pm in the winter.
- ❖ Volunteer stewards are on duty throughout the year to welcome visitors and help them with any information they require. Guide sheets are available in several languages, colourful interpretative panels provide visitors with introductory information, a small selection of items from the archives are displayed in secure cases and a full-colour guide book can be purchased. The Abbey has regularly won awards for the quality of the visitor experience.
- ❖ The Abbey's archives are preserved in a controlled environment. They are of considerable scholarly interest, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and include several rare and important items that may be seen by appointment with the honorary archivist.
- ❖ Information about the Abbey is readily available on the internet through its own high-quality website, local heritage sites, Wikipedia, etc. The complete and very detailed Victoria Country History entry on the Abbey is freely accessible online.
- ❖ Thanks to the sensitively designed floodlighting, funded by the Friends organisation, the Abbey is also a significant and welcoming feature of the landscape after dark.

### 2.2 Constraints:

- ❖ The very restricted space available for the shop curtails the amount and range of interpretative materials that can currently be stocked and made available for visitors.
- ❖ The siting of the shop within the space in front of the West door is unfortunate and incongruous. Not only does it prevent the west door being used as a much needed extra access point, but also the scale and grandeur of the entrance cannot be appreciated from within the church. Volunteering in the current shop can be a cold and solitary experience.
- ❖ The temporary vestry/sacristy has to be kept locked for security reasons. This prevents public access to view not only some of the best 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century mural monuments in the county but also evidence of the 14<sup>th</sup> century monk's dormitory with the associated squints through to the Nave. The temporary structure also architecturally disfigures the South Aisle.
- ❖ There is insufficient space available for providing temporary or permanent interpretative exhibitions and displays. The importance of the buildings and associated site, as well as the available archive material, creates a demand for interpretation that cannot be fulfilled.
- ❖ The Abbey Muniment room, where the archives are held, is small and inaccessible to people with disabilities.
- ❖ The appearance of the former St Margaret's Chapel area is marred by an unsightly fence, oil tank and redundant brick flue from the underground boiler room.

### 2.3 Improved Facilities Needed:

- ❖ Exhibition and archive display areas.
- ❖ New and enlarged shop facilities which can be accessed from within the building and with sufficient space for storage of stock.
- ❖ Temporary vestry to be cleared away to enable public access to view the memorials.
- ❖ Current shop to be cleared away to allow the West door to be opened up once more. This may require the construction of a draught proof lobby.
- ❖ A comfortable and secure space is required to enable scholars or students who may not be able to reach the Muniment room to have supervised access to archive materials.

### 3. The Cultural Role of the Abbey:

#### 3.1 **Strengths:**

- ❖ The Abbey has developed a role for staging arts and musical events featuring both local and national performers in a variety of media. The building provides the largest seating capacity (approximately 400) within the town of Wymondham, and the surrounding area, for accommodating orchestral and choral concerts. Furthermore, visiting musicians, performers and audiences from across the county and beyond appreciate the acoustic quality and interior setting of the Abbey.
- ❖ The building features as an important venue for events during the annual Wymondham Music Festival and Norwich Music Festival and has in the past hosted one of the series of 'Music in Country Churches' concerts promoted and attended by the Prince of Wales.
- ❖ The Abbey provides a popular and historic venue for local art exhibitions and craft workshops. Artists in residence have also featured at various times over the last two years.

#### 3.2 **Constraints:**

- ❖ Although providing a memorable setting for concerts, the changing facilities for visiting musicians that are offered by the "temporary" vestry are extremely restricted, limited in quality and lacking in amenities.
- ❖ The lack of any sinks, toilet and refreshment preparation facilities within the building also impose inconvenient constraints for artists, musicians and singers such as those delivering workshops or rehearsing before an event.
- ❖ Lack of on-site refreshment facilities or toilets can make the Abbey an uncomfortable environment for its volunteer stewards, most of whom are of retirement age. In this respect, volunteering at the Abbey is less attractive than at other sites in the town such as the Heritage Museum or charity shops.
- ❖ For health and safety reasons, the lack of sufficient access and egress points currently seriously curtails the number of people allowed to attend concerts. Larger or more costly professional performances are often unviable because of restricted numbers for ticket sales.
- ❖ The exit door from the current clergy vestry is currently the only alternative exit from the building. Unfortunately it is inward-opening, narrow and stepped and thus does not qualify as an emergency exit, thus leaving the building with no second escape route.

#### 3.3 **Improved Facilities Needed:**

- ❖ New flexible areas should be planned, as eastward extensions to both the south and north aisles, that will be usable not only for the educational, interpretation and ecclesiastical roles but also as changing and rehearsal facilities for visiting musicians.
- ❖ Toilet facilities and a small kitchen would improve the hospitality of the Abbey for all its users, particularly the large numbers attending concerts, events and services.
- ❖ The re-opening of the West door (see 2.3 above) would provide an extra egress point allowing more people to attend concerts safely in full compliance with fire safety requirements.
- ❖ The north and south extensions should allow for further egress points.
- ❖ The clearance of the existing vestry structure would free-up space for extra seating for concerts and events in the South Aisle, allowing the full historic and architectural character of the aisle to be seen and used.
- ❖ On-site storage space is required for equipment such as additional lighting and purpose-built portable staging. This will facilitate varied and effective performances in the church and avoid the potential damage from hired equipment.

## 4. The Educational Role of the Abbey:

### 4.1 Strengths:

- ❖ The Abbey has a long history of involvement with the education of Wymondham children, from medieval monastic school to 19<sup>th</sup> century elementary schooling. Local schools continue to look to the Abbey for inspiration and resources to support their work, principally in RE and History. Primary schools, and Wymondham High School, make regular visits to the Abbey, either for independent study or to participate in events, and regular contact with schools is maintained by the clergy, the Abbey's Youth Worker, and event organisers.
- ❖ Some 3,000 children attend schools within walking distance of the Abbey. It is a safe, secure and fully risk-assessed environment for out of school visits and can potentially accommodate large numbers.
- ❖ The wealth and variety of Abbey's structure and ornamentation makes it a visible and tangible textbook of history and architecture. Children invariably respond positively to the experience of visiting the church and, as a result, they and their families come to value this important part of their local heritage.
- ❖ The Abbey is committed to working with teachers to provide enhanced facilities and resources to develop work across the curriculum, such as on-site activities to support primary Maths, Science and Art.
- ❖ There is a responsibility to inform and train volunteer stewards and others who represent the "public face" of the Abbey on a daily basis.

### 4.2 Constraints:

- ❖ The Abbey currently lacks most of the basic "housekeeping" facilities that are needed for educational and group visits. There are no on-site lavatories, refreshments, coat hooks or lunch-eating areas.
- ❖ Educational visits usually involve large numbers of students divided into smaller study groups. The lack of separate self-contained study areas makes it difficult to engage students on different tasks without distraction.
- ❖ There is nowhere within the building to store or provide access to study or project materials, nor is there any designated classroom equipped with basic study aids such as white boards or A/V equipment.
- ❖ Practical art activities are inhibited by lack of storage, sinks and "messy" areas.

### 4.3 Improved Facilities Needed:

- ❖ Lavatories, cloakrooms, etc. (see 3.3 above)
- ❖ A space for the use of visiting schools and educational groups. This would be well-equipped with ample storage and seating at tables for a minimum 30 persons. It could also serve as a meeting and training room for volunteers, Abbey staff and outside organisations. Such a room would need to be generously proportioned, with direct access to the Abbey interior and an external door with fire escape.
- ❖ Additional multi-use spaces which could be used by smaller groups studying, perhaps in conjunction with displays and exhibitions or archive study.
- ❖ Designated education and meeting spaces to be heated to acceptable levels.

## 5. The Abbey as a place of worship:

### 5.1 Strengths:

- ❖ The Abbey functions as an active parish church, offering differing patterns of worship to meet a variety of preferences and requirements. There are four services every Sunday and further services during the week – the average weekly attendance at services is about 160.
- ❖ The fabric of the building has been well maintained and any repairs recommended in the

Quinquennial Inspection reports are quickly carried out with funding support from the Abbey Preservation Trust. In addition, the maintenance of the attractive churchyard setting of the Abbey is undertaken and funded by the Wymondham Town Council. The funding support for the maintenance of the fabric and churchyard thus enables the full support of the laity to be focused on meeting the day to day running costs and diocesan parish share. The small shop, manned by volunteers, also contributes to the running costs.

- ❖ The flourishing Friends of Wymondham Abbey organisation also helps to meet the provision of one-off items such as choir robes, vestments, candles etc.
- ❖ New gas boilers fitted two years ago have ensured that a more comfortable temperature can be maintained during cold periods. The output from the boilers has been designed to cope with future extensions to the building.
- ❖ Improvements carried out to the sound amplification system some three years ago have benefitted the congregation during services.

### 5.2 **Constraints:**

- ❖ The existing 'temporary' structure in the South Aisle, which serves as sacristy, clergy vestry, choir vestry and music library, is extremely constricted and most inadequate for the needs of the Abbey as an active place of worship. Furthermore, its appearance is seriously detrimental to the appearance of the interior of the building and to the splendour of formal liturgical processions.
- ❖ The comfort of the congregation, often including the very young and elderly, is also compromised by the lack of toilet facilities and a refreshment preparation area.

### 5.3 **Improved Facilities Needed:**

- ❖ The provision of new flexible spaces should enable the inclusion of uses such as a sacristy, clergy vestry, choir vestry, music library, toilets (including provision for the disabled) and small kitchen.
- ❖ Storage for vestments, stacking chairs etc.

## 6. **Summary:**

- 6.1 The Vicar, Churchwardens and Parochial Church Council are fully aware of their duty to have regard to the historic, architectural and archaeological importance of the Abbey, and the statutory processes that relate to such buildings, when considering changes to the structure and appearance. In carrying out this duty they need to be satisfied that every effort will be made by the architect to prepare plans that carefully reflect, firstly, the needs of the users of the Abbey in all its roles, and secondly, the interests of the local and national bodies and agencies, in what is one of the finest and most interesting of the historic churches of East Anglia.