

Ten years after the re-ordering of St James's Church, the PCC were ready to take on a new challenge – the creation of a community centre. Once again, Churchwarden Mike Willmott picks up the story!

A vicar's vision – the development of St James's Centre, Devizes

The St James Centre story is more one of taking advantage of unexpected opportunities when they come along, as well as Vicars changing their minds!

In short, the Diocese (DBE) owned the former Victorian school buildings opposite the church. They were leased out to Wiltshire Council who ran a Youth Centre from there, whilst we used one smaller building (marked as hall) for church youth work.

Wiltshire Council handed back the lease as they wound down their Youth work and the DBE in 2017 decided to sell the buildings. As we had a 3/14th's interest in the site due to the original agreement when the land was donated and the school established, the DBE had to talk to us. Wonderful we thought – the DBE can sell the buildings and we will take our share in the form of the ownership of the small hall we were already using without any money changing hands.



Everyone was happy with this... except after a few months, and before the complex was put up for sale, our new Vicar, the Rev'd Keith Brindle, had second thoughts. What if we bought the bigger building on the site instead and used it for a community hub? It had the space on two floors to provide meeting rooms for the community, a debt centre, youth work etc.

The rest as they say, is history...!



The problem with this was that it would cost £92k to purchase and another 200k to refurbish. So we had a choice – a small building for free or a bigger project and the potential financial issues surrounding finding £300k?

However, with the knowledge of what had been achieved ten years before, and with the church pivoting towards envisioning a more outward facing missional role in the local community, we voted for the latter. So, ten years after completing the re-ordering of the church, we found ourselves with another campaign to purchase and refurbish a building for mixed community and church use.

Our pitch to the congregation was:

This isn't about buildings; it's about loving God with our hearts, our souls and our minds and going out and making disciples of Jesus.

Because the congregation had a heart for our community, and could see that the building could be a means to bless and help local people, we successfully raised over £113,000 at the outset from our members. Because bridges had been built with the local community, the Devizes Area Board pitched in with £5,000, and we were successful in approaching other local charities and grant giving bodies (Ecclesiastical again, and others) to raise the money – so grant application aid on this was far more pivotal in achieving the outcome and was obtainable because of the community hub aspect - not a building for 'public worship'.

Things don't always work out how you anticipate, as the completion of the works took place during covid, and demand for hiring of the rooms in the building by the wider community has not been as high as might have been anticipated as many activities shut down during covid and failed to re-start. However, the building does enable us to offer many services to the community, including a debt centre (financed by the church with a part-time worker); we have community games nights and chat and craft and offer the ability for travellers on the canal to take a shower; and the Devizes Food bank is using it for a CAB worker to hold sessions.

We have also used it for hosting a lot of Ukrainian refugees support sessions – so the building is fulfilling its purpose as a place where we can meet the needs of our local community. We also use it for our children and youth work, and one large room on the ground floor functions as our office.

Without the capacity that the building gives us as a resource, we simply wouldn't be able to function as the outward-looking church we seek to be, loving God through serving others. Looking back, it was a bold but forward thinking move by Keith and the PCC at the time to take this route, but it has definitely been vindicated. The 1970's parish centre in the former vicarage garden has been re-purposed by leasing it to Devizes Open Doors to meet the needs of those struggling with homelessness – again taking advantage of opportunities that fit within our mission of loving God and serving the community when they arise.

We look at our neighbours on a wide basis – some of our members were very concerned about climate change affecting the livelihoods of those in far less fortunate situations, so we were given money to install a solar array on the south-facing roof of the SJC, now up and functioning to reduce our carbon footprint.

The secret behind all this, if it is a secret, is not seeing these things as a building project, but as loving God and loving our neighbours – in practice and through the week, not just meeting on a Sunday in a church building.