

CHURCH OF ST MARY BLETSOE – RESTORATION OF CHANCEL AND VESTRY

Progress report 5

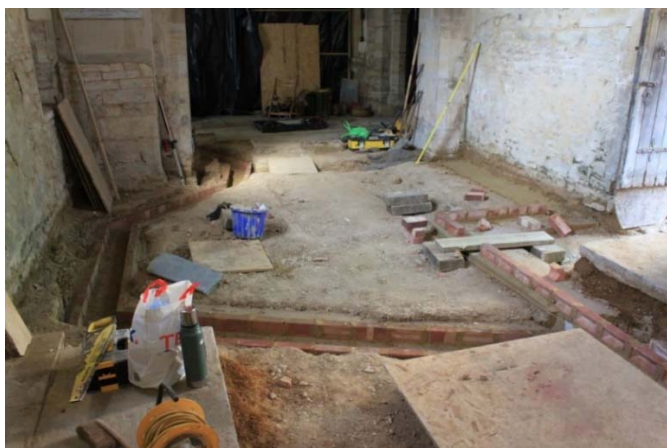
1 This **fifth** report covers the first four months of 2019. Main contractor progress has continued slow, but the overall project has significantly advanced. The need for further fund-raising noted in the last report was confirmed by calculations in January which showed that contingency sums built into the main contract at 10% had to meet eventualities just short of 25%. A start has been made in bridging the gap thanks to three generous second-grants from Trusts with particular Bedfordshire interests and some welcome further local support.

2 Removing the full scaffold from within the chancel has given us a positive view of our final objective, transforming the dusty cobwebbed and neglected space in which work began a year ago **A B**. The height of the chancel is accentuated by white-painted lining attached to the ceiling, replacing a rather gloomy emptiness. New lighting shows how enjoyment of the space need no longer depend upon meteorologically capricious external sunshine through the windows.



A B Chancel facing west (*left*) and east (*right*): scaffolding removed; lights in place

3 Down at floor level, back in 2018 we dug out the old damaged floor with archaeological care, and it is now time to build back up for its replacement. The first task was to complete the new service runs – water and electricity (carefully separated) – under the new floor **C**. That done, the 21st century replacement for the 1860s floor make-up was tamped down firmly **D** in order to avoid a repetition of later subsidence, making it ready for the next layer of a ‘limecrete’ under-floor foundation under the new tiles.



C Brick-lined services for the kitchenette site at left



D Chancel facing east: make-up for limecrete floor finish

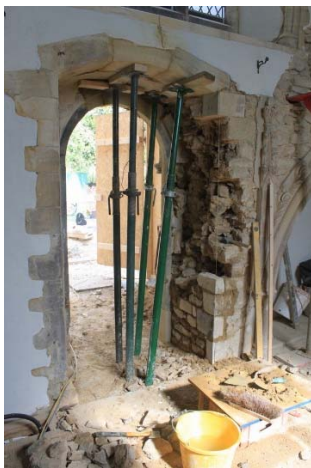
4 West of the chancel, in the crossing under the tower, Craig's stone-masonry skills have realised architect Mike Dales's cunning plan for disabled / wheelchair access from the nave up the steps to the reclaimed chancel. The 'standard' approach using a long ramp would have blocked needed space at the centre of the church and hindered access to the north and south transepts. The solution, approved by the Diocesan Disability Adviser, himself an architect and wheelchair user, has symmetrical curved accesses, a ramp on the north side and steps on the south side, combining quality of appearance and usefulness **E F**.



E F Steps and ramp access to chancel from crossing under tower: *left* steps facing north; *right* ramp facing east

5 The other main part of the reclamation project, converting the roofless 1860s vestry into a WC with disabled access facilities, has also advanced. It will be reached on foot from within the chancel by the narrow door on the north side towards the east end **K**, which has been provided with steps on both sides of the threshold. Wheelchair users can access it from outside through the door on the north side towards the west end. That door has been widened to wheelchair width like the west door of the old vestry itself, a technically delicate exercise given the alterations over the centuries to the wall above it **G H**. Neither this nor the crossing ramps provide absolute equality of access for all, which is the aim of disability legislation, but offer a reasonable and workable compromise which protects the historic character of the church.

6 The exterior of the old vestry is now largely unchanged from its appearance in its hey-day. It has now been re-roofed. On closer inspection the parapet over the north wall required complete replacement rather than selective stonework repair, at a much greater cost than expected. We decided to make essential savings by using skilful mortar repairs **I** that would stabilise matters for at least five years while further funds were raised as part of normal Friends activities. The interior of the old vestry is being radically altered by lining out **J** for insertion of the new WC facility with its required space standards.



G H Enlarging the 1860s north door into the chancel



I Re-roofed vestry with mortar repairs to parapet



J Lined-out interior of old vestry > DDA compliant WC



K Door to WC from chancel



L Vestry: enlarged west door

7 The Time Capsule project described in the last Progress report came to fruition on Mothering Sunday when it was deposited in the prepared hole under the floor in the reclaimed chancel. It contains pictures and information about the village and its inhabitants in 2019, to be retrieved in 2069 by today's children as they approach retirement. The new floor will be laid over the top and its location will be marked by a special set of replica medieval floor tiles. Thanks are due to Mary Laws, George Baxter and their working group for involving and enthusing the young folk of Bletsoe.



M Deposition of the Time Capsule at the west end of the chancel floor, 31 March 2019

8 Further progress has also been made with the community projects supported by the now renamed National Lottery Heritage Fund. The third site works tour (**below**) on 31 March after the Time Capsule ceremony, was the last before the formal rededication planned for Sunday 29 September 2019.



N Site tours after deposition of the time Capsule

9 'Hunting the headstones' has also made progress. We had hoped to rediscover and record all the stones before deciding which ones to re-erect. The south and west limits of the churchyard were explored in 2018, but the main contractor's compound prevents access to the rest. Grass growth in Spring 2019 required action to avoid churchyard maintenance problems. So, with permission from the diocese for the chosen locations, Team Headstones – Baxter, Gibbons, Pickering + mini-digger and Baker – spent an afternoon before Easter moving and re-erecting eight of the best on the east boundary of the churchyard. An exercise requiring care with the heavy weights created two rows (**below**). Individual decorations and lettering on the stones are well side-lit by the sun around 2 pm.



David Baker, for the Friends of St Mary Bletsoe

30 April 2019