



## **Wymondham Abbey**

### **Response to Bishop of Norwich All Saint's day Directions**

17<sup>th</sup> January 2022

The Wymondham PCC and the worshipping community have been surprised and disappointed in the Bishop of Norwich Graham Usher, Bishop of Thetford Alan Winton, the registrar Stuart Jones, the Norwich DBF and Archdeacon Steven Betts in relation to their behaviour relating to Wymondham.

We have quietly and through the proper channels sought honesty, transparency and justice in the matter of our vicarage which was taken from us for a Bishop without consultation or agreement and in breach of the law. There was never any intention on the part of the PCC to be confrontational or in any way embarrass Bishop Alan Winton and his wife who moved into the property that was taken illegally. We hoped by agreement, with kindness and propriety all round to quietly have our vicarage restored to the town.

This natural reticence may have been a mistake as it provided an opportunity for the Diocese to launch various sorts of attacks on the vicar, wardens and PCC. There have been false allegations, delays and threats and unremitting criticism of a church community doing it's best in very difficult times and widely appreciated by other groups.

We have been harassed. For three years the pressure here has been unrelenting. We believe the intention has been to break the vicar, break the PCC people and to break the worshipping community: all this for the preferences of Bishop Graham Usher and Bishop Alan Winton to the detriment of the whole of the parish and indeed to the whole of the town.

The vicar, wardens and PCC hope for constructive respectful open and transparent discussion of the deceptions and lies that have been advanced. We hope that at the end of this gruelling process the parish and the town will recover the assets of their Vicarage and that we can focus all our attention on serving the people of Wymondham and Spooner Row in God, with kindness and compassion.

On All Saints Day 2021 the Bishop of Norwich Graham Usher publicly issued directions to the Vicar, wardens and PCC of Wymondham Abbey.

This has been the most recent of a long line of abusive Church of England processes used by the Bishops against the Vicar and Wardens. These include an extensive and protracted Clergy Discipline Measure process, humiliation of the vicar in the national press, an episcopal visitation, publishing inaccurate and disingenuous directions, and a spurious



safeguarding assessment. These are abuses of power. It is not new for the Church of England to pursue priests who fall foul of Bishops agenda's even to death<sup>1</sup>.

The Bishop of Norwich has revealed the same unkindness that he decried in others when Caroline Flack took her own life – his comment on twitter “May this light illuminate and change the dark forces of cruelty that hound people and make their life a misery. More caring, less judging.” And yet he has hounded the vicar and this parish relentlessly and publically by misusing his position of power to silence voices asking difficult questions.

The Diocese are now dropping all these allegations and complaints, so what has this abusive process been about? We have been unwilling to expose the Diocese and Bishops to public criticism, but due to the wide publication of the Bishop of Norwich's Graham Usher directions it is important the public are aware of the background which instigated this barrage of abuse and harassment and the gaslighting which is being carried out by the Norwich Diocese.

During the interregnum period at Wymondham Abbey – Norwich Diocese misappropriated the Wymondham Vicarage for the Bishop of Thetford - Alan Winton to live in. The Rural Dean at the time raised concerns about the legalities of the process – he was forced to resign his position, he has since been subjected to harassment by Bishop Graham Usher and has recently been threatened with the intimidating Clergy Discipline Measure process due to writing about this matter in a letter to the Church Times.

Catherine Relf- Pennington was appointed Incumbent of Wymondham Abbey in 2017. She is the first woman vicar in 900 years. She raised the same concerns that the Wymondham Vicarage had been obtained by fraudulent actions. Shortly after this the Archdeacon Steven Betts encouraged parishioners to submit complaints against her -there is documented and recorded evidence of this. The “complainants” were people opposed to women's ministry, disgruntled past employees and people vehemently opposed to changes which opened up the church to the wider community and modern ways of thinking. Complainants included people who wrote poison pen letters and made death threats and someone with stalking behaviour which required police involvement.

Due to the number of petty allegations and complaints, the Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) process was started. 3 years later this has still not been fully resolved. The CDM process has been widely criticised and recognised as not fit for purpose<sup>2</sup>, has resulted in many members of the clergy having mental health breakdowns, with some committing suicide, yet it still continues to be used by Bishops. It is never recognised by the church how damaging this process is to so many - it does not just impact on the accused, but their

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-57780729>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-july/news/uk/toxic-cdm-leaves-clergy-suicidal-research-finds>



families, other church officers as well as parishioners, and in the wider picture the reputation of the church.

In 2020, during the pandemic Bishop Graham Usher ordered an Episcopal Visitation requiring a huge compilation of paperwork to be put together over the Christmas period. He rejected the PCC request for an extension, which was only granted after legal involvement.

The Visitation team included retired Bishop Graeme Knowles<sup>3</sup>. He is known to be a Bishop who supports the status quo of the Church of England.

The visitation team met with complainants and *some* members who supported the vicar but they refused to meet all who requested an interview. Despite agreeing to meet with the PCC, this never happened.

Wymondham Abbey compiled nearly 1000 pages of documentation for the visitation, but the disingenuous directions issued by Bishop Graham Usher suggest these have not been fully read or have been ignored.

Bishop Alan Winton and Bishop Graham Usher's behaviour in relation to Wymondham Abbey is unethical, immoral and self-serving. They have caused a huge amount of damage to the Church of England's reputation, to people in Wymondham and in particular to the members of the church council, worshipers, vicar and Wardens. To understand the directions it is important to understand what lies behind this.

Throughout all these processes the Diocese has listened much more to some individuals – in particular a small circle of white, wealthy, strongly interconnected men, all hostile to the vicar, who have a huge influence over the matters at Wymondham Abbey and in the leadership of the Diocese. It is time to call this to account and ask for the Church of England to make their position on Freemasons within the church open and transparent.

Our response to these directions are published here.

## **FINANCE**

### **ACCOUNTING**

- 1 This direction implies that the accounts of Wymondham Abbey are not in order. There are clear responses provided in the visitation paperwork (article 1). There has been no deliberate lack of transparency of finances. This has been addressed in the visitation paperwork but will be explained again here. When the vicar became Incumbent, there was no proper handover of finances. They were in a disorganised and confused state with a treasurer clearly out of his depth. He

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/oct/31/st-pauls-dean-resigns-occupy>



resigned before finalising the closing out of the multi million HLF project. The management of the HLF accounts lacked transparency with the PCC accounts being used to loan money or top up for the HLF work.

The Abbey was fortunate to have a warden who was a forensic accountant, and he gave over 100 hours of his time to make sense of the financial history and to bring the accounts in line with charity law. At this time it became apparent how much money had been drained from the PCC reserve funds to pay the parish share over the past decade - making the financial position of the parish unsustainable. For many years, the Parish share of over £100,000 per annum has been a huge burden and only achieved by topping up using Wymondham Abbey reserves which were left in legacy by people of Wymondham for the use of the Parish. On average this has been £30-40,000 per year from the reserves for the past 10 years. These reserves are now empty and the PCC had limited funds to sustain the church and people of Wymondham and Spooner Row over the pandemic.

Raising the money for the parish share involves time, love and generosity - increasingly parishioners are unwilling to donate their time or money when it is taken by central church, and this very lengthy and protracted process initiated by the Diocese has drained people of good will to support the Church of England.

Management accounts are presented to the PCC at least quarterly. As in line with other churches, the accounts are available to the members of the electoral roll prior to the APCM. Wymondham Abbey accounts are audited yearly and available to the public on the Charity Commission website.

- 2 A chartered accountant was the next treasurer appointed in 2017. He alerted the vicar and wardens that the Abbey had multiple bank accounts which did not conform with charity law. Along with others the accounts for Spooner Row and Abbey Hall needed to come under proper governance of the PCC as trustees of the charity. The details of income and expenditure attributable to Abbey Hall and Spooner Row are available from the management accounts.
- 3 As is documented in the visitation paperwork this is already in place and has always been. This implication of financial misappropriation is inappropriate and misleading to parishioners and those who read the directions.
- 4 This is already available, and this direction appears to suggest the Diocese intend to oversee the financial matters of the Abbey. Their reasoning explained in the directions is 'to ensure the parish share is not unreasonably withheld by the benefice'. As explained in point 1, there is no money for the Parish Share and to imply it is being withheld is misleading and offensive. The PCC is an independent charity governed by charity law as well as ecclesiastical law. The Bishop has no



power to supervise the PCC with a motive of ensuring a flow of parish share to it. The members of the PCC must make their own determination of financial priorities in the years of scarcity that the pandemic and the diocesan sanctions have brought about, in line with their fiduciary responsibilities in charity law. The Bishop Graham Usher risks overstepping his legal authority if he were to make such an intervention.

The parish share was paid in full up until the pandemic. As described there are no reserves left – as they have already been paid to the Diocese. The parish's first priority is maintaining worship, living out the Gospels to do all we can to help the people of Wymondham at this difficult time. The PCC continue to look for ways to raise funds for use in Wymondham and the parish share. But to ask from Wymondham Abbey for over £107,000 pa is like Pharoah asking for bricks without straw.

### **Clergy Discipline Measure**

- 1 It is the Diocese that has deliberately delayed the resolution of these matters. It has been over 3 years of a deliberately and deeply humiliating process and insurmountable stress for the vicar as well as all those at the Abbey. This is fully documented in the visitation paperwork (article 2). The vicar was willing to engage in conciliation, but this was untimely halted by the diocese - but no report was ever released to explain why. The Diocese continues to lay blame with the vicar.

The visitation team recommended the matters should be dropped, the vicar has repeatedly requested for the CDM's to be referred to a tribunal for a fair hearing and to put this matter to bed. The delays have been unnecessary and damaging. After 3 years the Bishop now proposes no further action except for two matters – see our response to these below. The only conclusion to be drawn is that this has been a tool of stress and intimidation to remove the vicar from her post.

- 2 2.1 The vicar has always been very willing to take this matter to tribunal and can see no reason not to have the opportunity to settle this vexatious claim. This claim has not been brought directly by Mr. Pointer and it is unclear who this man is. The complaint was made by a man who does not live in the parish, who has made death threats against the vicar and there has been police involvement in relation to these threats.

2.2 The parish would welcome representatives of the DAC to review the Abbey church. Due to an unresolved safeguarding matter relating to Archdeacon



Steven Betts displaying aggression to the Vicar, a different Archdeacon would need to attend.

- 3 These directions could have been dropped 3 years ago as they were never evidenced. It has been a malicious and vexatious process. Should the complainants wish to insist on a tribunal this would be welcomed by the vicar as finally the matter would be looked at objectively by a qualified, impartial professional .
- 4 The CDM process offers no opportunity for a fair and balanced hearing except at tribunal. It is very well documented that this process is misused within the Church of England, using trivial matters to intimidate and control vicars. It is almost impossible to clear your name once a CDM has been raised.

For the Bishop to order the vicar to apologise unreservedly to all complainants – including those whose complaints did not meet the bar- is not acceptable. To offer an apology implies that there is reason to apologise, and this in itself incriminates the vicar. It is yet another attempt to humiliate the vicar who had in fact done nothing wrong. This is a misuse of Bishop Graham Usher’s position of power.

#### **SPOONER ROW**

- 1 During the pandemic and when the churches were forced to close, the worshipping community at Spooner Row were offered the same care as worshippers at the Abbey. Restoration of public worship at Spooner Row was delayed due to antipathy towards the necessary covid risk assessment and provisions. This was resolved and public worship was reinstated many months ago.
- 2 This is at the discretion of the Diocese with consultation of residents of Spooner Row and the Wymondham PCC.

#### **FABRIC**

- 1 As recorded above, the parish would welcome representatives of the DAC to review the Abbey church. Due to an unresolved safeguarding matter relating to Archdeacon Steven Betts displaying aggression to the Vicar, a different Archdeacon would need to attend.

The visitation team did not identify problems relating to faculties on their visits to the Abbey. There has been misinformation made about a shop fitting needing a faculty when it was not a fixed or historical item.



- 2 The faculties are up to date and in good order.
- 3 The process of the historic records held at the Abbey to be moved to the County Records Office is underway. The HLF are likely to have serious misgivings about this.

## **CHORAL MUSIC**

- 1 This controverts Canon law and the pastoral care of the local community. Prior to the lockdown there were regular diary conflicts with a parishioner who took it upon themselves to organise concerts representing only a narrow style of music. They booked dates and musicians without agreement of the PCC. Previous bookings included Gilad Atzmon – a musician who is an antisemitic writer (this was cancelled by the PCC). The number of concert bookings left very little space for weddings. The PCC attempted many times over 2 years to engage this parishioner to consult the PCC before booking concerts, but there was a lack of cooperation. Moving forward as concerts become more possible in light of covid, the PCC will consider concerts which suit the people of Wymondham. To date there has been live music performed outside by bands at the Abbey fairs.
- 2 As has been described in the visitation paperwork, the Abbey intends to provide a variety of music styles to support worship, in line with changing preferences and demographics of Wymondham.
- 3 The information in this direction is inaccurate. There has not been restricted access to music groups and the choir has not been excluded. Those members of the choir who have returned have led music in services, and the abbey band have reformed.

## **LEGAL MATTERS**

- 1 As the owners of Applegarth, we agree the DBF should undertake the repairs and maintenance and have not understood the delay.
- 2 The legal advice to the PCC is not to hand over this property until a suitable vicarage has been found.
- 3 As is documented in the visitation paperwork (article 6) there is a vast amount of legal opinion that the DBF have misappropriated properties, for the benefit of their members. The Wymondham Vicarage - 5 Vicar Street was misappropriated to be lived in by Bishop Alan and his wife. Processes were not followed properly and obfuscated by the Diocese. These legal matters stand unresolved. There is an



ongoing legal dispute between the PCC, the Bishop and the DBF. The incumbent's 'obedience' to the Bishop only relates to matters lawful and honest. As noted in the introduction, this matter has given rise to the Diocese's continued and unrelenting harassment of the vicar, wardens, PCC and other members of the congregation as well as other whistleblowing clergy within this diocese.

- 4 The DBF has failed to identify suitable properties. It has also failed to consider properties proposed by the PCC. To imply the incumbent or PCC has been uncooperative is deliberately misleading. And follow the rest of this document in gas lighting the truth of the matter.
- 5 This matter is answered in above responses. The PCC acts with honesty and within the law.

#### **PCC**

- 1 After the Diocesan Registrar Stuart Jones threatened the former clerk to the PCC it has been hard to appoint to this position. 3 months ago a new clerk/secretary to the PCC was appointed. This will make the publication of minutes within 21 days achievable.
- 2 The secretary is not a churchwarden but the direction implies there has been undue influence which is inaccurate.
- 3 Again this implies the churchwarden has 'managed' the electoral roll. This is an offensive implication with no basis of fact and deeply disrespectful of the commitment and time of voluntary role.
- 4 There are traditionally 4 wardens at Wymondham Abbey. The nomenclature of senior warden is a title carried by the longest standing warden and is synonymous with other many large churches and cathedrals. The title brings no advantage to the position but is simply a mark of respect. It should be noted this has only been raised as an issue since a woman has held the title of senior warden.
- 5 As provided in the visitation documents (article 7) all Standing Committee meetings were minuted even with the challenges of zoom meetings. The PCC have always been informed verbally of standing committee matters and minutes are available to PCC members.



## **SAFEGUARDING**

- 1 This direction is gaslighting and implies the parish does not take safeguarding matters seriously. It should be noted at the meeting to discuss the directions, the Registrar Stuart Jones indicated this direction would not be included. As evidenced in Article 8 of the visitation documents, (and this information should also be held within the diocesan safeguarding records), the Incumbent, churchwardens, PCC and volunteers and staff have up to date safeguarding training. As you must be aware over the past 2 years the Diocesan safeguarding team have provided very limited level 2 training and attempts by the parish to book on this level of training has been unsuccessful. With the appointment of a new safeguarding trainer, hopefully courses will be more readily available.

The incumbent has level 4 training which is the same level as the Bishop is required to have. To dictate the parish must comply with training within 3 months places unnecessary pressure on volunteers as well as the diocesan own staff.

It is well evidenced that the vicar takes the matters of safeguarding and the welfare of vulnerable people and children extremely seriously. On her appointment she dealt with poor safeguarding practices within the choir. This was a matter of contention with some choir members and the music director which resulted in hostility towards the vicar.

- 2 The vicar, wardens and PCC comply with the CoE safeguarding handbook and the working practices recommended by the diocesan safeguarding team when they are safe. However, a former DSO provided unsafe advice in relation to a vulnerable parishioner. Despite attempts to gain sensible advice, this was not forthcoming and police involvement was required to protect the vicar.

## **CORONAVIRUS**

- 1 The weekly pattern of public worship has never ceased. As soon as possible after Archbishop Welby closed the churches a livestream eucharist was held at the Abbey every Sunday morning. As restrictions lifted, people have been able to attend in person.
- 2 The Abbey church is open for private prayer at designated times published on the website and Facebook as well as on the Abbey door. Opening the Abbey relies on the availability of volunteers. The Ecclesiastical Insurance company will not fully insure the contents of the Abbey when opened unsupervised. An assessor from the insurance company is visiting to offer further advice.



Prayer stations and outdoor safe seating have been available in the abbey grounds throughout the pandemic. This has reached the wider community of Wymondham and continues to be well used. Spooner Row is open when the key holder is available.

## **PASTORAL CARE AND MINISTRY**

- 1 Before covid, morning and evening prayer were said at the abbey daily. Although open to all parishioners, for many years this was only attended by members of the ministry team. During the pandemic evening prayer was replaced with compline online.

Prayer is a central part of abbey life. Morning prayer is said daily at the Abbey - currently at 9am but the times have changed over the pandemic. Contemplative prayer is also offered earlier in the morning.

Evening prayer is said at the Abbey at the end of the working day.

- 2 This is an unnecessary directive as this has never happened but implies a difficulty in this area.
- 3 This is an unnecessary directive which implies there is a problem when there is not – there is information in article 9 & 11 of the visitation paperwork. A huge amount of time, care, love and thought is made by the Vicar and those involved in ministry to the pastoral care of all. The care for the elderly, sick, the dying, the bereaved, those suffering mental health problems, the poor and those at nursing homes was of high priority throughout the pandemic. Letters, gifts, prayer support was offered and important links built between generations with children writing to older parishioners. The Happiness Project provided wellbeing support for young people throughout the pandemic. There were multiple whatsapp group for parishioners to engage with and the website was updated several times a week with materials designed to be accessible for the whole town. This included ideas for prayer, talks, godly play, craft ideas, videos for children. This material was also placed on the facebook page and was well used by the wider community. The prayer stations, outdoor lighting and seating provided in the Abbey grounds provided a place of welcome, encouragement and peace for the town.

At all times pastoral care was, and is available to all. We refute that there has been any lack of public confidence wider than the very vocal complainants . This is an attempt to gaslight the incumbent and others involved in the pastoral ministry.

- 4 As has been documented in the visitation paperwork (article 12) the PCC has considered in detail the future of the Abbey Hall and its financial viability. The



hall became a difficulty before the pandemic as the PCC wished it to be used more as a community facility particularly focused on mental health and wellbeing, rather than for small, closed groups. The Abbey Hall committee did not provide suitable accounts and wouldn't engage with safeguarding practices. Their accounts were in breach of charity law. The Abbey hall committee had become a clique and did not cooperate with the PCC and were in breach of their own constitution. There was only a small net income (documented in article 7) generated by occasional hire.

The PCC continues to look at robust solutions to safely open this facility for the community. As clearly shown in the visitation documents, the informants were mis-informing the visitation team.

- 5 The PCC has addressed this issue and will appoint a new sub committee which is transparent and cooperative with the PCC aims and objective's in serving the wider community.
- 6 For the Bishop to direct the PCC not to pursue this is a complete misuse of his position of power.
- 7 As as been explained in the visitation responses (article 12) the Papillon Trust are trustees of land, the school room and money left for the religious education of the children of Wymondham. The trustees are all wealthy gentlemen of over 70 years and express hostility to the vicar – this has been witnessed by independent observers. The request for access to the meadow was made to enable the Abbey to provide space for the children and teenagers of Wymondham to explore nature and to experience peace away from technology and the pressures of education.

Bishop Graham Usher is well aware of this and has seen correspondence on this matter. He is the Church of England lead on Ecology. There is a crisis in the mental health and well-being of our children following the pandemic. And the unanswered question is why he lets the voice of this demographic of men override the care of our children? The trustees told us in a meeting they don't want 'damaged children' on their land. They are not fulfilling their duty to the children of Wymondham and yet have the support of the Bishop Graham Usher.

## **SUMMARY**

Neither the Incumbent nor the PCC wishes to engage in ongoing hostile communications with the Bishop of Norwich - Graham Usher and the Diocese. It is counter-productive and causes stress and upset on all sides. However, it is necessary for a response to the Episcopal directions to be published so that the local and wider community are properly informed rather than relying on the



disengenoues and misleading version of events that has been publicised and which has played out in the press. The hope is that the concerns and irrefutable evidence will be taken seriously by Bishop Graham Usher and the Diocese.

The Incumbent and the PCC are committed to the Abbey as the thriving heart of the Wymondham community and a leading church within the Diocese. We need the support of the Bishop and Diocese rather than the ceaseless attack and antagonism. Does the Bishop realise how utterly distressing this has been to faithful, committed worshipers – far, far outnumbering the ‘complainants’?

The PCC have patiently and firmly waited for years for the Bishops to honestly address the misappropriation of an over million pound property and to restore to the Abbey and the people of Wymondham an asset of the town. The PCC and many other people have been deeply shocked by the unrelenting attacks on the vicar, wardens, PCC and the worshipping community.

Something needs to be done.

Faithfully

Vicar and Wardens

Wymondham Abbey

17<sup>th</sup> January 2022