

PRESS RELEASE

Salvation for Salem

HCT Rescue Salem Chapel in East Devon

Salem Chapel in East Budleigh, Devon, has been rescued from dereliction by the Historic Chapels Trust in a completed £700,000 programme of acquisition, repair and upgrading. Salem Chapel is now available for bookings and for suitable community events such as concerts, exhibitions and meetings. Salem also retains its wedding licence. A separate small committee room is being created in the former school that has a small stage.

Salem Chapel dates from 1719 and is located in Vicarage Lane on the edge of East Budleigh village (famous as the birthplace of Sir Walter Raleigh), at the junction with B3178, close to Bicton Cross. Chapel worship was originally Presbyterian, later becoming congregational in character. During the 1980's the chapel was transferred to the ownership of the Assembly of God which sold the building to a private owner who failed to attract the necessary support for his proposals. By that time the chapel was in a desperate state of disrepair and was subject to periodic attacks, theft and vandalism.

Meanwhile, local campaigner Kathy Moyle was expressing her anxieties to the press and to the Ancient Monuments Society. A visit ensued in 1996. The central column in the chapel was clearly leaning and deflecting and threatening to carry the whole roof structure with it. A decision was quickly taken by HCT to acquire Salem if possible and to organise a programme of conservation minded repairs that would include the introduction of modern facilities. The chapel would thus be able to fulfil a much needed role at the centre of community life once again.

HCT achieved ownership in 1998 with the help of an acquisition grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Emergency repairs were immediately carried out and some temporary shoring was introduced.

The Historic Chapels Trust came into the picture because it had been established in 1993 to take into ownership redundant chapels of outstanding quality and historic interest. These are primarily Non conformist and RC churches but also include buildings of other faiths. The aim is to repair and regenerate these buildings for public benefit, retaining some capacity for worship, but encouraging a wide range of community activities.

HCT now has 17 chapels in its ownership, including two rescued from virtual dereliction – Salem Chapel and the Dissenters' Chapel in Kensal Green Cemetery London – and two vast buildings – Bethesda Methodist Chapel in Stoke-on-trent and Todmorden Unitarian Church in West Yorkshire.

The outstanding quality of Salem is not in question. It had long been recognised that Salem was a uniquely interesting building with a fascinating and intricate history (1). Gripping stories abounded locally of the various involvements of people in the past!

A Presbyterian society met here from 1709 but the present building dates from 1719. The building is square with a four-hipped roof. The walls are constructed largely of rubblestone with a little cob, rendered over in the 19th-century. Larger blocks of stone were used as dressings. The drawings by Anthony Rossi (2) indicate what is most likely to have been the 18th-century arrangement of the façade. High up on the main frontage is a date stone - 'Salem Chapel built 1719'; the sill is inscribed 'Enlarged in 1836'. This latter date marks the time when the seating capacity was augmented by the installation of two side galleries. Changes were made to the west windows which now featured delicate Y-tracery in the topmost lights. The moulded and bracketed cornice is original. The gallery across the roadside end probably dates from 1810 with seating to match. The later galleries are from 1836 and were supported on slender cast iron columns with moulded caps. In the centre, the vaulted ceiling rises from a new steel post which has just replaced the defective cast iron column of 1836. This cast iron column may in turn have replaced a substantial timber post with an elaborate Ionic.

This unique idiocynbratic roof structure was assessed by John Thorp in 2005, having been hidden from full view since 1719 by its coved plaster ceiling below and its slate covering above. The roof consists of four ranges, one along each side, hipped at the corners, with inner faces that descend and converge towards the central column. As the chapel is square in plan and over ten metres from wall to wall in both directions, the original builder chose to rest their roof on the central (timber) central post. The post thus bears considerable weight. It is not surprising that its 1836 cast iron replacement was giving trouble after 170 years. The main trusses are the diagonal ones from the outer corners to the central post. These hold 'a kind of timber cradle inside the middle which supports the inner principals of the trusses along each side. These pairs are flanked by half trusses built up against the diagonal main trusses. At each corner the wall plates are halved together. They do not rest directly on top of the walls but fit on a series of timbers laid horizontally across the wall tops and diagonally in each corner'. The use of both oak and pine is most unusual, the oak being felled locally, of a poorer kind, while the pine was almost certainly imported. There was once, it appears, a coved eaves cornice that was fashionable in the early 18th century. This got removed in the modernisation and reworkings of 1836.

It is remarkable that the whole structure was completed in the local vernacular tradition – the form of the basic A – frame truss is found in many buildings in Devon of the same period – but the demands of the site required sophisticated thinking and careful design, even a touch of daring! No similar roofs have yet been identified. A hatch has been made which would allow professionals good lit access to roof structures.

HCT's scheme embraced the chapel itself, its attached vestry, the chapel contents, the tiny burial ground and the detached schoolroom. This separate building may have started out as a stable which later became a school.

After initial professional reports and investigations, there followed an application to English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund and to a wide range of grant giving bodies for financial support (HCT having no funds of its own) so dire was the condition of Salem perceived to be that the works were split into two phases. The first phase was directed towards ascertaining the precise structure and condition of the unique roof and to quantifying the repair and upgrading costs overall. This task completed, main contract works commenced in October 2004, Ellis & Co being the building contractors with Paul Richold of Architecton acting as supervising architect.

New problems presented on site when the chapel galleries required extensive work to restore their structural integrity (which perhaps they have never formally possessed!). The galleries will now seek 78 people safely. The whole structure suffered from severe damp and water ingress owing to its situation at the bottom of the land sloping down on three sides. Footings for the detached schoolroom actually stood in a pool of water. All the floors were therefore well rotted.

Nevertheless, expenditure on Salem Chapel has been well worthwhile and demonstrates the value of English Heritage and Heritage Lottery support for the 'at risk' heritage. East Devon District Council contributed a welcome £94,000 to the scheme recognising the importance of the chapel in a national and local context and its potential for viable and beneficial use for the future. New heating and electrical systems are in place, together with disabled access and wcs, a kitchen and a security system. The historic colour scheme has been reintroduced, Salem's clock ticks merrily again on the gallery front. Outside, the cobbled paths have been cleaned and the stone and brick boundary walls are in good order once again. The iron gates, overthrow and lantern have been reinstated to the original designs. After 20 years of vulnerability, Salem is alive again and ready to welcome everyone in.

Following a public meeting in 1997, HCT established a local committee for Salem which has already held a limited number of activities and open days for the chapel. Many more are now being planned. The chapel is available for hire. For further information please contact Kathy Moyle on 01395 445236. For all other information contact Jenny Freeman, Director, Historic Chapels Trust. A guide book is in course of preparation.

HCT raised a total of £665,000 for the main contract (following acquisition and exploratory works) with £337,500 from Heritage Lottery Fund, £100,000 from English Heritage, £94,000 from East Devon District Council and £134,000 from a variety of grant giving trusts, small donors and HCT's own 'savings'.

- (1) Christopher Stell OBE, Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-houses in South-West England RCHME, 1991
- (2) Anthony Rossi is consultant architect to the Historic Chapels Trust.