



THE BEACON PROJECT

Statement of Needs

April 2023

1. Background

St Mary's is a medieval church at the heart of the historic centre of Brecon with an outstanding early C16th tower. Although it was originally built within the walls as a chapel-of-ease to Brecon Priory (now Brecon Cathedral), it functioned as the town's primary place of worship for much of its history. This explains the church's size, even though it has no church yard due to its historic subordinate status.

A grant from the town for the offering of mass dates the beginnings of the church to the late C12th. At first, a short aisled church was built, the only remaining physical evidence of which is a surviving pier in the nave. A second pier opposite is also circular but of a different design and likely dates to the early C13th. An octagonal pier at the west end of the south arcade is early C14th. During the C14th the building was enlarged and the aisles coupled to nave and chancel, this work is generally thought to be early C14th through to late C15th. The imposing Buckingham Tower was constructed in 1510-20 by Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham at the cost of £2000. Around 1690, part of the south aisle near the south door was partitioned off to form a room for the Ecclesiastical Consistory Church of the Archdeaconry of Brecon.

The architects Edward & William Gililbee Habershon undertook the first well-documented series of major reordering works from 1831 to 1857. A grant was made for the 'Enlargement' of the church, including the rebuilding of the north aisle, refurbishing the arcades, and providing a new tower screen and new west window in south aisle, along with new pews and general repairs. It is generally agreed that the restoration was unsympathetic to the building's heritage—multiple artefacts were lost at this time, though a few were later recovered, including the holy water stoop now positioned at the north entrance.

St Mary's acquired the status of parish church in 1923 following the Disestablishment of the Church in Wales. A second series of major reordering works was subsequently started in 1928 by the W.D. Caroe who was also the incumbent architect at Brecon Cathedral. Caroe (or possibly his son Alban) designed much of the fine oak joinery that exists in the building today, including the two altars, the reredos, choir stalls and parclose screen. Although Caroe had further plans for chancel panelling and a rood screen, these were never completed.

Two further failed attempts to improve the building were made in the 1960s by Sims of York and later by Blundell of Grosmont. These would have improved the liturgical space and provided meeting rooms, first-floor mezzanine area porches, and vestry. Despite these efforts, no reordering of the church occurred until the removal of the pews and introduction of a nave altar (formerly the Lady Chapel altar) in 2010-11. In 1989, John Petts replaced the east window with the 'Welcoming and Reigning Christ'.

In 2006, the PCC and congregation began an extended period of consultation and commissioned the architects Purcell LLP, who provided an Options Appraisal for major reordering in 2012. Subsequent changes in leadership and the need for major roof repair prevented the undertaking of much of the work proposed by the architects. At that time, St Mary's had a dwindling congregation that struggled to raise sufficient funds to pay the parish share.

Since 2012, circumstances at St Mary's have changed considerably. First, the church building has become a well-established and much-loved community space in the centre of Brecon that attracts as many as 2,500 people each week through its doors. Local businesses, organisations, and charities regularly hold meetings there and a weekly bible study attracts between 20-30 people. Second, the sale of Church House in 2022 has provided the church with considerable funds that can be used as the springboard for further fundraising. Finally, since the summer of 2022, the regular worshipping community has more than tripled in size and continues to grow. The need for aesthetic improvements, refurbishment, and more flexible-use space now has become a matter of urgency.

2. Significance

The 2012 Appraisal notes that St Mary's 'has few outstanding items of architectural items of interest that remain internally due to the history of reordering works.' It did, however, identify a number of noteworthy features:

- Medieval Buckingham Tower c. 1510-1520, which has been described as the most significant tower in Powys;
- East end five light perpendicular stained glass window depicting Christ in Majesty 1989 John Petts, Abergavenny (1914-1991);
- Coffin lid with a rude (foliate) cross embedded vertically in the east wall of the South Porch in 1857- a memorial to a local medieval knight;
- Duke of Wellington Statue located outside the church to the east on the plaza;
- 1888 Stained glass window in memory of John Kirk of Brecon (born Christmas day 1818 died 18th Oct 1888);
- 1925-1928 Chancel reredos designed by WD Caroe, carved by Nathaniel Hitch 1949;
- Parcose screen designed by WD Carne and made by Dart and Francis Ltd (Devon) at a cost of £41
- 1925 Caroe opens up South Entrance with nail studded oak door;
- 1925-1928 Caroe organ casing designed and made, organ relocated to North Aisle;
- 1925-1928 Caroe choir stalls;
- 1928-1930 South Aisle East window built at a cost of £400 by A K Nicholson (1872-1937);
- 1933 War Memorial;
- C14th/ Early C15th half octagonal holy water stoup with ogival arches and pinnacles carried on four corbel figures on a base of clustered shafts (removed 1857) returned 1927;
- Late C15th South Porch;
- 1889 North Entrance created (gable porch since removed);
- Mid C19th open truss wagon roof;
- C12th Norman broad scalloped capital supporting a square abacus circular pier - complete with aumbry for patron saint;

- One circular pier (opposite C12th pier) post 1200 - early C14th;
- Large west arch with Tudor mouldings (springers for a vault now dismantled);
- Late C14th / early C15th altar built into the west pilaster of the south arcade— a shallow slab with two blank trefoiled panels as reredos;
- Font possibly work of Thomas Henry Wyatt (1807-1880);
- Pulpit of eight colonnettes of coloured marble possibly work of Thomas Henry Wyatt (1807-1880);
- Dog door in south porch;
- Medieval Ting Tang bell - used to people to Mass.

Of these, the most significant are the prominent tower that is visible throughout Brecon and its approaches and the Petts window with its sister window in 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama: a gift from Wales to the congregation after it was firebombed during the Civil Rights Movement.

3. Usage

Thanks to the hard work and vision of the PCC and congregation during the past decade, St Mary's Church is now an active and thriving community centre throughout the week. The doors are open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 5pm with an average weekly footfall of 1,600 per week during the winter and close to 2,500 during the summer. The building is used for local business and organization meetings, rehearsal space for the Brecon Singers, a safe play area for young families, concerts and other large events, art exhibitions, and as a regular gathering place for informal groups. It is also one of the main venues for the Brecon Jazz Festival.

The transformation of St Mary's Church occurred after the PCC conducted an extensive community survey that indicated the need for the church to be open at a comfortable temperature and host a hospitable reception to residents and visitors alike. This prompted the trial opening of a coffee shop in July 2009, using voluntary help from the parishioners. The café proved so successful that by November 2010 it had become a non-profit, limited company with paid staff. All income after expenses returned to parish accounts. The café provides seating in the aisles for 50-70 people with another 20 in the garden during the summer. Fair-trade goods or locally sourced produce are used where possible.

St Mary's has three main times of worship during the week. The primary service is the 9.30am Sunday Eucharist, which has grown from an average attendance of 16 at the start of 2022 to its current average of 46. The Tuesday Eucharist, which is celebrated amidst customers at the café, attracts 20-25 people each week and has become an important time of fellowship for the faithful who attend. Finally, TimeOut worships in the church on late Sunday mornings. While they have no formal connection with the Diocese, they collaborate with St Mary's on mission and fellowship; two of their members sit as observers on the PCC.

Despite its parish status, St Mary's has historically continued its role as a chapel-of-ease with most baptisms, weddings, and funerals continuing to be conducted at the Cathedral. This looks now to change with the development of the Brecon

Ministry Area, which links together 22 churches in and around Brecon and allows for occasional offices to be shared among them.

4. Mission Planning

In 2022, St Mary's undertook a period of reflection about its identity and purpose in Brecon and the Ministry Area. This consisted of a PCC away day at Llangasty Retreat House, a congregational meeting, and a congregational survey as well as a number of one-on-one conversations with key people and organizations in Brecon. These consultations resulted in The Beacon Project, which seeks to transform St Mary's into *A Beacon of Faith, Hope, and Love in the Heart of Brecon*. We have subsequently been exploring what it means in practical terms to offer faith, hope, and love to the local community.

This initiative has given rise to four new initiatives: St Luke's Guild, St Martha's Guild, St Eluned's Guild, and the Friends of St Mary's Brecon. St Luke's Guild engages around a dozen laypeople in providing pastoral care and support for parishioners. St Martha's Guild has primary responsibility for organizing fellowship and hospitality while St Eluned's Guild will work with the clergy in ensuring a high standard of worship. It is hoped that the three guilds will provide the necessary foundation for further ministerial development in the coming years.

The Friends of St Mary's Brecon is awaiting approval for its proposed constitution but hopes to launch formally later this year. Its three objectives are:

1. To raise funds to help to preserve and improve the fabric of St Mary's Church, Brecon including the 16th Century Buckingham Tower.
2. To encourage and maintain the use of the building by the local community, while maintaining its primary role as a place of worship.
3. To be 'goodwill' ambassadors for St Mary's Church, Brecon - promoting its life and work as integral to the wellbeing of Brecon.

They have identified replacing the degraded, polycarbonate protectors covering the exterior of the east windows as their first potential project.

In the development of The Beacon Project, the congregation aims ultimately to achieve three main goals: 1) develop a range of enduring and inspiring ministries, 2) ensure that St Mary's continues to be a welcoming place for community gathering and support, and 3) resource and support the wider Ministry Area.

5. Long-term Needs

The guiding principle for attaining The Beacon Project is *A Beacon of Faith, Hope, and Love in the Heart of Brecon*. It has consequently been agreed that design proposals must ensure that St Mary's remains chiefly and obviously a holy space dedicated to the worship of God within the Anglican tradition while also maximizing how that space can be used to support the local community and ministry area. Designs must be sympathetic to the building's heritage and liturgical purposes.

Within these limits, we have identified the following needs (in order of priority):

- **Reordering and refurbishing the worship space:** while the last reordering of the church, which replaced pews with chairs and installed a nave altar, has done much to bring the congregation more fully into the worship, it had the unintended consequence of making the chancel obsolete. We want to explore how best to reclaim the chancel for worship and/or prayer while also maximizing seating space for a growing congregation and concerts. This includes determining the feasibility of restoring or removing the pipe organ. We also plan to look into improving the seating, lighting, and décor.
- **Improving the café's capacity and customer experience:** Although the Tower Café has been an enormous success, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. The kitchen needs to be brought more securely in line with health and safety recommendations and laid out for better customer service. It also lacks proper cooking facilities, which limits both its provision and its usefulness for church fellowship. We plan also to explore ways to tie the café and worship space more aesthetically together in a way that creates a unique experience for customers.
- **Reviewing and improving accessibility:** At the moment, wheelchair access is through the south porch, where there are automatic doors and a ramp. Additionally, seating in the café is deliberately spaced to allow for easy movement through the building by wheelchair and mobility scooters. The 2012 Appraisal, however, suggested that work be done to the north entrance to make that entrance more accessible and this needs to be further explored.
- **Expanding storage space:** The storage situation at St Mary's is unsatisfactory. Stacked plastic chairs are difficult to move from where they are stored, there is nowhere to store the wooden chairs, café stock is increasingly filling the offices, and other items (like tables, projectors, and screens) are kept in the choir stalls. We therefore need to find a way to create one or more easily accessible storage areas.
- **Moving as far as practical towards Net Zero:** The Church in Wales now has an official policy of moving towards Net Zero. It has, however, been recognized by the Diocese that because St Mary's lacks a churchyard there is little capacity for installing energy efficient heating systems. But the building does have a long expanse of southward facing roofing that is hidden from view and, therefore, would seem ideal for solar panels (if permission could be obtained from BBNP). While the lighting along the aisle has been updated the LEDs, we need to install new, energy efficient lighting in the nave and chancel. Improvements also need to be made to the south entrance to prevent cold drafts when the automatic doors open.
- **Creating flexible spaces for meetings and other activities:** The building has a lot of unused space that could be used for small meetings, classes, and other activities. The 2012 Appraisal recommended installing a large gallery in the tower and above the kitchen and (if the organ can be removed) additional space by the old vestry.
- **Creating an office for church staff and workspace for café manager:** The current arrangement of a combined church and café office is unsatisfactory and will likely

prove more so if St Mary's becomes the administrative base for the new Ministry Area. We plan to explore how to create separate offices that will meet the needs of both church and café.

- **Creating a secure sacristy:** At the moment, the sacristy is located in the tower with the offices. There is no wardrobe for hanging vestments, limited cabinet space, and no security. We need to explore how to create a secure sacristy that can meet the needs of the growing congregation.
- **General Upgrades and Maintenance:** The 2018 quinquennial report noted a number of items in need of repair and maintenance amounting to around £6500. We would seek to address outstanding issues (plus any that a more thorough inspection might reveal). We are also aware that the electrics need updating and that a more secure WiFi system ought to be installed.

We recognize that meeting all our needs is probably impossible and certainly costly. A heritage architect will help us to prioritize and balance the competing needs so that they can be sufficiently met to benefit the life and ministry of St Mary's.

6. Process:

In January, the PCC authorized the formation of The Beacon Project Committee, chaired by the vicar, The Revd Canon Dr Mark Clavier, and consisting of the Warden, Treasurer, and seven other members drawn from the congregation and local community. The Committee is responsible for interviewing potential architects, ensuring transparency and good communication, and undertaking congregational / community consultation for the development of an achievable and affordable project.

7. Funding:

The financial basis for The Beacon Project will be a significant portion of the income from the sale of Church House. Ideally, this will be used as potential match funding to generate grants from external funders such as the NLHF, the Diocese, Cadw, and the Brecon Beacons National Park.

8. Delivery:

Ideally, a project can be developed that meets most or all of our needs at an affordable cost within five years. If need be, the project could be phased over a longer period.