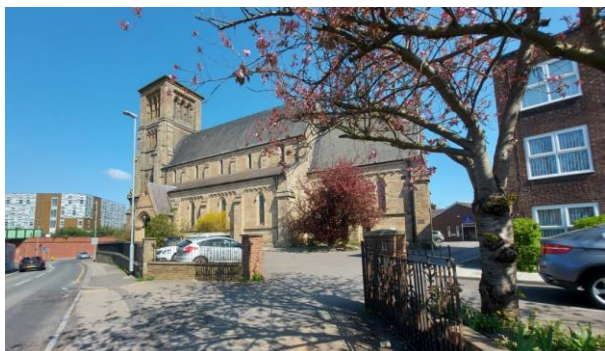


Closed church of Darlington St John:

Design and Access and Heritage Statement - Internal works to stabilise collapsing tower roof

Statement of Significance – The Closed Church:

The closed church of St Darlington St John is grade II listed ([1322932](#)) and lies within the [Parkgate Conservation Area](#). The 2022 CBC report (**PM 2591**) assesses the church's significance:



Church Description (CBC Report PM 2455): *“Parish church, founded by Darlington, St Cuthbert 1845 as district church... Built 1847-9 to designs by John Middleton of Darlington; Early English style; consecrated 1853; vestries 1900 by W S Hicks, partly rebuilt and extended to W 1960s and 2005 for a kitchen...of moderate significance overall.”* The Parkgate Conservation Area Character Appraisal highlights: *“Landmark features and important views, including the striking St John’s Church above the double railway bridge which reflects the railway development and history of the area...”*



Historic England Grade II listing (1322932): *“A well-proportioned church in a severe Early English style. At the W end there is a tall five-stage tower with a projecting SE stair turret to the lowest stage. The tower has big set-back buttresses. There are lancet windows in the lowest stages. The penultimate stage has blind arcading and slit windows; the belfry stage has richly moulded belfry windows with shaft rings, recessed below a corbel cornice to the parapet which has a cornice. The visually abrupt termination of tower is due to the fact that the intended broach spire was never built.”*

CBC Report 2455 on townscape setting: *“The church was founded to serve [a] rapidly expanding industrial workforce. Indeed it was known as the railwaymen’s church... The impetus and finance for a permanent church building came from none other than the financier George Hudson, the ‘Railway King’. The church was intended to dominate its surroundings and dominate it does, even though the planned spire was never built. It occupies a prominent site at a roundabout junction of arterial roads, the B6280 Yarm Road, Neasham Road and Parkgate, which runs due W towards the town centre. The setting is of Low - Moderate significance but the church’s contribution to streetscape and wider townscape is Moderate or Moderate - High.”*

The church has enjoyed a long association with the Darlington railway and with the Traveller Community, and its architectural setting speaks of this heritage. The church occupies a prominent position on Bank Top opposite the rail station redevelopment and next to the Darlington Central business district. The church and tower are highly visible by approach from street level, road and rail. It is also situated in a ward which ranks highly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and the closed building suffers major fabric and security issues.



Closure of the church: Due to pastoral redundancy, the church was closed for worship on 1st August 2023 through a scheme made by the Church Commissioners under the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011. The property is unoccupied and on the market for sale, with potential to be put to a number of new uses. Closure for worship and the loss of its principal ecclesiastical and missional use have inevitably caused substantial impact to the building's significance. Putting the building to a sustainable and appropriate new use will inevitably require alteration of the property with further change and impact upon significance, the extent of which will depend on the requirements of that new use. This LBC application **does not seek** to set out proposals for any new use but seeks to ensure **critical and minimal intervention internal** building works undertaken to prevent the failure of the tower roof and what would amount to the certain loss of fabric and harm to significance.

The Tower – Area of Low Significance: The internal floors of the tower are entirely bare and basic in their architectural detail. All areas are of low architectural and aesthetic significance. The levels set out as follows:

Ground Floor – West end of church with high doorway arch. Sandstone floor and walls (unplastered)

First floor - via stone spiral stair. Wooden suspended floor with bell hatch. Plastered walls painted with modern emulsion – (ghastly green). Access to w. end Nave balcony. This floor houses the church's electrical mains switch board and meter which is a concern for both access and in case of water damage.

Second Floor Ringing Chamber – Accessed by wooden stairs. Wooden suspended floor with bell hatch. Plastered walls painted with modern emulsion.

Third Floor – Possible originally intended as clock floor? Accessed via ladders. Wooden suspended floor with bell hatch. Sandstone walls (unplastered).

Fourth Floor Bell chamber – steel beam and sandstone flags. Accessed via ladders up through steel bellframe. Sandstone walls (unplastered).

Tower Flat Roof – timber beams and joists with lead finish. (At least half of which previously replaced.)

Church Bells: On a steel bellframe (replaced the timber bellframe in 1914) are a peal of 8 bells. Six were cast by Charles and George Mears of the Whitechapel bell. In 1893, Mears & Stainbank also of the Whitechapel foundry, recast the tenor and added two trebles. Please refer to the Bells Advisor's two reports, including the May 2023 assessment: *"As a ring of bells they do not offer any particular qualities that would make them important. If they were transferred elsewhere it is likely that the tenor would be recast. Currently the seven lightest bells (assuming that the roof has not collapsed) would be ringable. The tenor however should not be rung as its headstock is rotted by water ingress."* It has since been stated that, due to rain water ingress and lack of use, it is likely all bells may need some degree of restoration and mechanical retuning prior to any potential future re-use.

Statement of Needs – Internal tower roof support beams and internal access for inspection:

The tower roof is failing with substantial rain water ingress from the central gutter causing deterioration to the tower roof deck, the headstock of the tenor bell and all internal floors below and is now affecting the walls. The level of defect and the ingress have steadily increased over several years, starting prior to the period when the church was largely unoccupied with limited inspections during the Covid pandemic. Following the pandemic, the church failed to reopen for services on a regular basis and, despite the best efforts of a committed team of parishioners, it became clear the church was headed for closure and there was no quinquennial inspection undertaken and no resources spent upon maintenance of the tower fabric. Since August 2023 the building has been in the ownership of the Durham Diocesan Board of Finance. The building was mothballed and remains in a state of permanent closure and at greater risk.

As with any church building which has been closed for worship and is unoccupied, there is a need to meet the requirements of insurers and the fabric of the building and its remaining contents, fittings and fixtures are at severe risk of deterioration whilst the church remains closed and in the 'use-seeking' period. Whilst the building is in overall fair condition, it is the tower roof itself which is critical. The attached 2023 Condition Survey Report commissioned by the Diocese states the urgency of this proposed intervention:



“The central gutter is broken with rainwater leaking to the ground floor of the tower. The plywood forming the base of the lead gutter and the main timber beam supporting the western half of the roof are decayed due to this water ingress. The collapse of the lead gutter and western support beam could be imminent - the existing roof structure should be propped asap. Structural failure of the western beam would lead to the collapse of the western timber roof (joists, timber decking, heavy lead covering) onto the bell frame. Damage to the bells would be inevitable. Structural damage to the bell frame and lower sandstone floor is possible. Considerably more water ingress would follow.”

The internal tower and its bell chamber provide areas of low architectural significance and it is around the steel bellframe (not original to the Victorian church) and to the underside of the flat roof (which has in the past been substantially rebuilt and replaced) where a single steel beam and new timber trimmers are proposed to prop the roof to prevent a collapse and a far greater loss of fabric and significance. The work is all internal and the minor structural alterations will not be possible to view externally. There is no external scaffold proposed and no impact on the visual amenity value or the church’s architectural form.

The tower first floor houses the church’s electrical mains switch board and meter and with water starting to impact the walls of the tower, this is a concern for water damage to the electrical system in addition to the more rapid deterioration of the masonry walls and corrosion of the steel bellframe above..

The scaffold to be erected inside the bellchamber and from the bellframe will have temporary fixings into the internal church wall masonry mortar beds, (not into the face of stone) which will then have appropriate repair with lime mortar following dismantling and removal of the scaffold. These works will allow for safe access and inspection of the roof so that a suitable and immediate repair of the gutter and its internal water outlet can be made.

Long term future of the church:

Following these minimal works, the condition of the roof itself can then be assessed and a more long-term proposal for repair of the tower roof can also then be considered. Whilst it is not proposed to remove the steel beam and timber joists in the short term, these works will essentially form a reversible alteration. The tenor bell can be moved back into position once a more long term repair has been proposed and undertaken and the steel beam itself would provide for a hoist to accommodate this and would ensure an easier replacement of the headstock, if this was to be pursued.

The Diocese of Durham and Church Commissioners for England have been seeking to put the closed church of Darlington St John to an appropriate new use. Under the provisions of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011, a pastoral (disposal) scheme will be drafted and put up for public consultation by the Church Commissioners, proposing to put the property to an agreed and appropriate new use, following a marketing process and professional advice being taken from agents. However the grade II property will only have possibility of a sustainable future new use if it can be guaranteed that the existing fabric of the tower does not deteriorate in a catastrophic way.

Summary: This repair is critical but we are fortunate the proposal is one which is largely reversible and presents minimal internal intervention in an area of low significance. The benefit that this intervention will provide to the fabric of the grade II church vastly outweighs any low potential for impact or harm that it might cause.

Please refer to the attached supporting documents:

- i. O&P Bell Maintenance St John Darlington QT
- ii. Blackburn Marshall E3547 - ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST
- iii. St Johns Church - Roof Support Sketch
- iv. Architect summary on tower roof_ 22 Sep 2023;
- v. Diocesan Bells Advisor Bells Reports_ May 2023 & 8th Aug 2023
- vi. Tower Roof Defect Photographs;
- vii. Darlington St John's Church_DS Photographs
- viii. St John's Closed Church Condition Survey Report

07 August 2024
Dan Spraggon
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