

**In the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Ely**

**In the Matter of a Faculty Petition**

**The Church of St Andrew West Wratting**

**PRELIMINARY MATTERS**

1. On 29<sup>th</sup> November 2019 a faculty was granted to the Petitioners for the rendering of the external walls of the chancel and the east wall of the nave subject to the following conditions:
  - (1) If not already done, a sample panel of rendering of at least two square metres is prepared and approved by the Diocesan Advisory Committee before a final specification of works is submitted to the Diocesan Advisory Committee for recommendations.
  - (2) All surviving historic rendering is retained where it is sound and it is practical do so.
2. Three sample panels were produced, marked Options A, B and C. Options A and B consisted of different thicknesses of full lime rendering and Option C showed the effect of a light “wash” of render over the flints and rubble and which allowed the flints to peep through. The petitioners and the Diocesan Advisory Committee (“DAC”) could not agree on the rendering and in those circumstances the matter returned to me to determine. On 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020 I was able to visit St Andrew’s Church and was able to see for myself the state of the walls and the three panels of render.
3. On the following day I gave my ruling in favour of Option A but with the following conditions:
  - (a) The rendering shall be of the thickness provided for in Option A but allowing the church architect supervising the work, Ashley Courtney, to vary to a thinner rendering on those parts of the wall where it is expedient to do so.
  - (b) Where the render meets the stone of windows, doors, buttresses etc, the render is to be feathered down to meet the stonework.
  - (c) Accepting that it may be impractical to retain surviving rendering because it is so thin and fragile, such areas should be preserved where possible or covered with a thinner layer of new render.
  - (d) A detailed historic analysis and recording mentioned in the conclusion to the archaeologist's report, if not already completed, is first undertaken to ensure that nothing of the historic story is lost.

4. For the work to be finished before the winter it was important to provide my decision as quickly as possible to allow the work to proceed. Whilst there is no party opponent, I have decided to provide my reasons why I favoured Option A because it is against the advice of the DAC and because the use of this type of rendering to preserve the fabric of historic churches may be of wider interest.

#### **THE CHURCH OF ST ANDREW**

5. St Andrew's is a Grade II\* listed building. The present church was built on the site of a Saxon and a Norman church. The fabric of the present building dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The clerestories, nave roof and south porch are likely to be 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1737 St Andrew's underwent a radical transformation in the classical style and in 1875 the classical scheme was in part removed and the church was re-Gothicised.
6. Alison Dickens BA MCIfA of Granta Heritage conducted a survey of the remaining area of rendering. She concluded that probably the whole of the church was rendered in the past
7. The chancel and tower walls are comprised of rubble with field and flint stones with earth consolidated mortar which is very soft. The nave also has areas of dressed clunch to the internal corners of the buttresses and doorways. Although the DAC were at first doubtful as to whether the church had been rendered, or at least as to the extent of it, with the benefit of further examination, it is accepted that the church was very largely if not completely rendered.
8. Fragments of the original render are so widely dispersed over the building that it is reasonable to assume that the whole building was rendered. It is difficult to judge whether the rendering fell away through the process of weathering or whether the Victorian renovations included removing the lime render, or whether a combination of the two.
9. An engraving of the exterior of the church dated 1850 and a Victorian photograph (undated) show that it was rendered. In his Statement of Support for re-rendering, Ashley Courtney points to the deterioration of the rubble walls which could never have been expected to survive without a render coat. He describes the condition of the walls as very poor and that they will continue to deteriorate. In contrast he points to those small areas where the historic render remains in place where the walls are in a reasonable condition. The earth consolidated mortar is very soft and is at risk. The rubble walls are

likely to have a number of cavities and water will be getting deep into the walls. There is evidence of this both on the exterior and interior walls.

10. From my examination, I agree that the exterior fabric of the church is in a poor state; whilst the flint remains in good condition (although many have fallen out of the walls), the rubble has worn away to a significant extent as has the earth consolidated mortar. Mr Courtney submits that there was never an intention that the flint should show through the render because of the random way in which they are placed. At ¶12.1 of his Technical Notes on Flint Walls at St Andrew's, Dr Wiggins describes the function of the longer flint nodules as bonding stones used to bind the two parallel leaves/skins of flint masonry containing a rough rubble core/hearding of flint rubble, chalk etc. It follows that the flints were included in the walling for a practical rather than cosmetic purpose.

#### **BENEFITS OF LIME RENDERING AT ST ANDREW'S CHURCH**

11. Research over recent years has established the benefits to be obtained from lime rendering.
12. Dr Wiggins undertook doctoral research into the functional behaviour and technical conservation of heritage masonry. He considers that the lime rendering would have been the authentic surface finish for a building of this age and form of construction.
13. He describes water as the engine of decay of masonry because it mobilises the agents of decay. He identified how traditional lime mortars grapple with the engine of decay by actively drying out the fabric, while washing it free of salt contaminants. The real significance of a traditional lime mortar, he contends, is not the material itself but its effect on the masonry around it.
14. The unrendered walls which have allowed the ingress of water is in his view highly detrimental to the integrity of the flint rubble wall as it disrupts the bond between masonry unit and the mortar which in turn leads to the loosening of flint units and, as a result, to deterioration of the wider wall.
15. It follows that not only would a lime render preserve the walls from further deterioration but it would provide the mechanism by which the water now within the fabric of the walls would, by capillary action and drying with the benefit of the wind, over the surface of the render allow the water to disperse. Research has shown that a lime rendered surface dries out more efficiently than an open body of water under the same environmental

conditions because the surface area available to exploit favourable evaporation conditions is greater.

16. Dr Wiggins concluded that in terms of protecting the fragile walls from further deterioration together with the benefits of a full render in drying out the walls pointed strongly in favour of the application of a hot-mixed surface coating finished with thick hot-mixed limewash.

#### **THE STATUTORY CONSULTEES**

17. A response was received on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. In principle, the Committee was content with the proposal to re-render the external elevations of the chancel and east wall of the nave but felt it important to conserve the remaining remnants of the historic render, rather than stripping them beforehand. It was suggested that the new render should not be too thick. The existing copingstones appear to overhang by only small margins so a thin render will help ensure that rainwater is thrown clear rather than risk it saturating the wall and increasing frost damage.
18. They thought that full, flush pointing with a few flints 'grinning' through, may be better at least in some places than total render.
19. Historic England concurred with the view that the condition of the substrate was very vulnerable/friable and was in places constructed with very porous clunch stone. Exceptionally, and given the vulnerability of the fabric and their desire to retain as much historic fabric as possible whilst providing protection against the elements, they were happy to support the proposals to re-render.

#### **VIEWS OF THE DAC**

20. David Grech was asked to look at the options on behalf of the DAC. He did not agree with Ashley Courtney that all flint and rubble churches were rendered but accepted that some, including St Andrew's, were. He suggested that, whilst the Victorians rightly gained a reputation for 'scraping' everything, and in context that included rendering, he feared that Ashley Courtney was in danger of gaining a reputation for wanting to render everything. He felt that each case must be judged on its own merits.
21. Mr Grech accepted the argument put forward by the archaeologist that the Chancel at West Wrating was once rendered, and the case put forward by the engineer that, for this building, re-rendering the Chancel may be best for the long term conservation of the structure and was prepared to support the case for re-rendering of the Chancel but only on condition that the detailed historic

analysis and recording mentioned in the conclusion to the archaeologist's report was first undertaken.

22. He was concerned that agreement to rendering the Chancel might be seen as a green light for blanket rendering of all flint and fieldstone churches; each application should be carefully considered on their individual merits.
23. In a second document Mr Grech dealt with the issue of the thickness of the rendering and was concerned that Option A was most often found in the Highlands of Scotland, Upland England and Wales where the risk of wind driven rain was much more of an issue than in lowland east of England. It was not a case of 'one size fits all' but more a case of what is most appropriate to each building given its location and history.
24. It was his view that a thin render coat that would allow stones to 'grin' through, and then limewashing would provide a very significant degree of protection to the walls and the limewash would help in drying the wall. He acknowledged the case put forward by the archaeologist that the Chancel at West Wrattling was once rendered.
25. There seemed to be some difference of opinion amongst the members of the DAC about the way forward and, together with a number of his colleagues, he suggested they stuck to their guns and left it to the Chancellor to determine.
26. Neil Birdsall also commented on the application on behalf of the DAC. He was concerned that the discussions on St Andrew's could, and threatened to, go on for ever. He preferred the course of leaving the eventual decision to the Chancellor. He, too, thought it unlikely that one would encounter rendering of the thickness of Option A in rural Cambridgeshire.
27. The DAC decided not to recommend the works or proposals for approval by the court. They did not disagree that the walls require repair but had concerns about a thick render coat being the right solution. Cases cited in Scotland and Dartmoor relate to sites that are far wetter and far windier than West Wrattling. The DAC maintained its view that a thinner render would be a more appropriate and a less intrusive means of repairing the walls, if like-for-like re-pointing is not considered adequate.
28. Archaeological examination of the surviving render on the walls does not identify that a thick render coat of the type proposed was ever present before. Indeed, the surface relationship between the flint rubble and surrounding dressed stone suggests that a thin render coat, clearly showing the texture of the underlying stones, was the more likely historical finish.

Awkward junctions at the east gable coping and other places such as window stonework could result in water getting behind any new render coat, shortening its life considerably.

#### **CONCLUSION**

29. In my judgment, looking at the evidence overall, St Andrew's was, until Victorian renovations were undertaken, fully rendered. The number of areas where small amounts of unstable render remain, together with an early drawing and photograph of the church, supports that.
30. There is no reliable evidence to support that the render originally applied was a thin render coat that allowed the stones to 'grin' through, which was then limewashed. Had that been the case it is unlikely that any of the render would have remained so many hundreds of years later. Where there is render still attached it would appear to be thicker than would be expected of a thin render which would have allowed the stones to 'grin' through.
31. Whether the thickness of the render was closer to Option A or Option B is hard to discern. The effect on the final look of the rendered church will be negligible if apparent at all. The only place where it might show is where the render meets the stonework at corners, doors and windows.
32. As to the arguments that the use of this thickness of render may only be appropriate in the Highlands of Scotland, Upland England and Wales, I remind myself that St Andrew's is situated in a raised position and is as subject to wind and driving rain as many higher places. It is obvious from the deterioration in the rubble with field and flint stones with earth consolidated mortar that a great deal of erosion has taken place even at this lowland site.
33. I have concluded that the walls should be rendered in accordance with Option A, although the supervising architect will have a discretion to vary the thickness of the rendering where it is appropriate to do so, which he concedes may include areas where the render would be such that some of the stonework may 'grin' through. In particular I have made it a condition of the faculty that where the render meets the stone of windows, doors, buttresses etc, the render is to be feathered down to meet the stonework. This should prevent what might otherwise be an unsightly stepping between the stonework and the render and should prevent the creation of areas where water could collect.
34. As to the suggestion that the original render be left exposed and the new render placed round it, in my judgment the result of such a scheme may

create a patchwork effect on the building overall. Those areas of render which remain are themselves very fragile and need to be fixed which can be done by allowing a thin layer of mortar or limewash to cover them where necessary. However, they should be preserved where possible.

35. I judge that this finish is likely to provide a long-lasting solution to the deterioration of the exterior of the church and should make a substantial difference to the interior of the church as the stonework dries out over time. The full benefits will only become apparent if the entire church is restored to its original rendered condition.
  
36. The DAC is rightly concerned that allowing the rendering of this church may give a green light to other churches in a similar condition. They can be reassured that each case will need to be looked at on its merits. In any event the costs of re-rendering will prevent many churches from contemplating undertaking the work. Nothing in this judgment should be taken as supporting like schemes without considering the merits of any individual application.

His Honour Judge Leonard QC  
Chancellor of the Diocese of Ely  
28<sup>th</sup> July 2020