

# The Conservation Management Plan on Totnes St Mary

## A Pilot Project for National Guidance

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*Conservation management and planning are increasingly understood to be crucial to the beneficial use and guardianship of important historic structures and estates. The idea of written 'Conservation Plans' for historic sites was effectively introduced to England only in 1998 and has developed and changed in the short period since, notably with the publication of Conservation Plans for cathedrals (2002) and the development of the idea of Conservation Management Plans (CMPs) by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Specific guidance for parish churches has now been published by the Council for the Care of Churches (CCC), following a long consultation process during 2006. St Mary the Virgin, Totnes, was selected as a pilot study to inform future conservation management and planning for ecclesiastic buildings.*

### *St Mary the Virgin, Totnes*

The medieval parish and priory church of St Mary the Virgin, Totnes, Devon was chosen to pilot the guidance and provide an example of what the CCC feels these should do and look like. Why Totnes? The parochial church council (PCC) was considering a major reordering scheme in order to revitalise the life of the church and to make it the hub of community life it had traditionally been, and was intending to seek major grant aid towards this aim. It was clear there would be an impact on the church building and site, and English Heritage, the local authority, the Diocesan Advisory Committee and the CCC agreed that a CMP would enable them to help the PCC achieve their goals.

The history of the church and site is complex. The church building is Grade I listed, and part of the site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is set in a prominent position on the ridge of the hill within the old town of Totnes, which is one of the best preserved medieval and post-medieval towns in Devon, and indeed England. Totnes originated in the early 10th century as a Saxon royal burh, part of a chain of defended settlements and the site of a royal mint.

The existence of a church from the beginning in this settlement cannot be doubted, but the first hard evidence for such on this site is a Charter of the Breton noble Judhael of Totnes in the 1080s, granting the

(clearly already existing) church to the Abbey of SS Sergius and Bacchus in Angers, France. This established an alien priory in Totnes on the site of the present church, whereby its function as a parish church was apparently maintained, a fairly typical sharing arrangement (but see below).

The church and site as it appears today is however substantially a product of four later phases, the first in the mid-15th century, when the still substantially Norman priory church was demolished and rebuilt by the town corporation. The exceptionally fine stone

*Fig 1 – Engraving of St Mary's Totnes c1800 by W H Bartlett, © The Totnes Image Bank*



Fig 2 – View of the church from the north-east, with the old priory buildings on the right

rood and parclose screens installed in 1460 are of national importance and are the pride of the church. The visually dominant tower of red sandstone has a central stair turret on its south ‘show’ side, with three carved figures within canopies set into this and the sheer flanking buttresses. The interpretation of these is a matter of debate, and the central carving appears to be a bust, with the accompanying inscription ‘*I made this fote*’, traditionally considered to be Bishop Edmund Lacy, a major benefactor of the church.

The second phase was the Reformation, with the dissolution of the priory and the demolition of some of its buildings. However, the old Guildhall and Grammar School along the north side of the churchyard preserve the footprint and much of the fabric of the north range, including loops, blocked windows and the probable stairway from the kitchen to the refectory. Considerable archaeological potential must also be assumed for the churchyard in this respect, reflected in the scheduling of the northern half, which may also preserve part of the north defences of the Saxon burh. The interior of the church was substantially reordered to adapt it to the new style of worship and role, with box pews, galleries (even on the rood loft), and a huge tester added to the medieval pulpit.

The third phase was the late 19th-century when the church was heavily restored under the direction of George Gilbert Scott. This means that the church is almost a textbook example of the Devon style, whereby many features, such as the window tracery, represents ‘correct’ Devon Perpendicular according to Scott, rather than what was originally there. He also removed the rood loft, an action opposed at the time by his assistant, Herbert Baker-King. The interior that Scott created, however, has been much changed in the years since.

The fourth phase in the 1950s has been almost overlooked. This was a major reordering by Randolph Blacking, which removed some of the pews, installed the Willis organ in an impressive case in the tower arch, and substantially refurbished and redecorated the church interior. Stained glass by Christopher Webb in the north chapel and chancel following war damage also contributes to the work done at this time, while the eastern part of the churchyard was cleared of monuments, dramatically altering the vista. Archaeologists should be wary of uncritically ascribing the present appearance of many parish churches to ‘the Victorians’.

The proposed reordering has therefore presented the PCC with a classic dilemma, repeated countless times across the country: how do we develop this nationally significant building and site to satisfy our current needs, and get the necessary facilities in here? What about all those fixed pews? How can we get the community involved, and attract the necessary funds? The PCC was acutely aware of the significance of the church and site, and the need for consultation and an informed approach to these questions; the CMP provided a framework to begin this difficult process.

### *Conservation Management Plan*

So what is a Conservation Management Plan, and what should it do? A CMP aims to help the PCC and all other interested parties to:

**Understand the church building and site and its use by the community** by drawing together information including documents and physical evidence in order to present an overall description of the place through time. This includes a description of the church and site today, and how it is used and perceived.

**Assess its significance** both generally and for its principal components.

**Define vulnerability** by identifying issues affecting the significance of the site and building remains, or which have the potential to affect them in the future.

**Develop management policies** to ensure that the significance of the church and site is retained in any future management, use or alteration. If possible this significance should be enhanced through implementation of these policies.



*Fig 3 – View of the rood stair and medieval doorway from the priory in the chancel*

The structure necessary to create a CMP consists of three elements. A **Project Manager**, preferably from within the PCC's own membership, to take responsibility for managing the process and ensuring that timetables and budgets are adhered to. A **Steering Group** will be set up, comprising members of the PCC, DAC and agreed representatives of relevant partners and interested parties. The role of this group is to draw up a short list of possible candidates for the role of **Facilitator** and to produce a short and concise **Brief** which defines the scope, parameters and cost of the CMP, and to monitor and validate the process of its production. The Brief should contain milestones at which progress can be monitored and reviewed by the Project Manager and Steering Group.

The Steering Group should then present the short list for the role of Facilitator to the PCC and recommend a candidate or candidates for its approval. The Facilitator may be a single person or a practice.

A CMP should be a straightforward document and its compilation achievable within a reasonable budget and time span. If the process becomes so complex or so expensive that the CMP cannot be completed, it becomes self-defeating. Detailed information can be put into appendices but the CMP itself must be clear, concise, accurate, well illustrated, well sign-posted and intelligible if it is to meet its purposes. This means that the job of the Facilitator will be to collate, collaborate, consult and, above all, to edit.

The Facilitator should therefore not bury his/himself for months in archives or in the detail of the fabric, furnishings or tracery, emerging with their Lord-of-the-Rings size *magnum opus*, tempting though this may be. An example: there was an issue at Totnes regarding the nature of the dual function of the priory and parish church, particularly in the late medieval period, which can be summarised into the question of whether a separate priory church existed or whether the chancel of the parish church fulfilled this function. It is very easy to get bogged down with such arguments, and to forget the prime purposes of the CMP, which is to aid the management, conservation and development of the building and site.

The author found that the best solution in this case was to summarise the arguments in an appendix, and to point out that this was an area where future research might usefully be directed particularly in the light of the proposed developments, which include underfloor heating, allowing evaluation of the underground remains within the church. An article is planned for a future edition of Church Archaeology.

The compilation of the Totnes CMP demonstrated clearly the necessity of discipline, and the difficulty of finding the right balance between scholarship, readability and usefulness, impartiality, and of

achieving a consensus regarding the significance of what is there and what needs to be done. Interested readers can judge for themselves if this balance has been achieved.

The guidance and the completed CMP on Totnes St Mary can be downloaded at [www.churchcare.co.uk/atoz](http://www.churchcare.co.uk/atoz)

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### ***Acknowledgment***

Grateful thanks to the Totnes Image Bank for permission to use their engraving of the church of St Mary.