

St. Peters Church, Sandwich: Tower Project



Client: The Churches Conservation Trust

Construction Cost: £297K (Phase 1), £44K (phase 2)

Completed: July 2016

St Peter's Church, Sandwich is a magnificent Grade I listed church in the heart of the Sandwich Walled Town. One of the town's three surviving mediaeval churches, it is believed to have been established in the 11th century.

While it is thought that large-scale construction concluded for the most part by the 15th century, the most significant impact to the current structure occurred in October 1661 when the upper part of the tower and steeple collapsed, destroying the south aisle. The tower was rebuilt with the addition of the present cupola, but the south aisle was never reconstructed. Despite this, the church enjoys landmark status; its iconic onion dome is the most easily recognised building on the Sandwich skyline, and its fabric provides physical evidence of the town's historical evolution and the influence of the foreign communities it embraced.

St Peter's Church was vested in the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) in October 1974 and remains consecrated, though services are only held occasionally. The Church currently experiences visitor numbers in excess of 50,000 per annum, ranking in the top ten of the entire CCT estate in visitation and first in its South East region.

In order to strengthen its tourism role and offer, the CCT appointed Malcolm Fryer Architects to prepare proposals that seek to enhance visitor experience and develop the church's commercial programme. The proposals have included the creation of a substantial timber access stair to a viewing platform on the tower, taking advantage of unrestricted views over Sandwich and the English Channel. The journey up the stair through the clock chamber and bell frame provide an equally powerful experience.

Creative, efficient and cost effective solutions were sought from the outset to deliver the fast track project. Utilising 3D modelling technology of the historic tower and bell frame structures, and load spreading techniques for the new stair structure enabled it to require very little structural interventions into the historic fabric (the central bell only was removed to a display position).

Fire egress and load capacities were important design considerations for the stair design in order to make the stair commercially viable for a substantial number of visitors. The design team worked with a specialist stair manufacturer to fabricate the stair off site from the digital model. Prefabrication of the roof level balustrade elements and close work with a steeple-jack and structural engineer enabled creative, cost effective solutions to the works at tower roof level also. MFA and the Design team worked closely alongside the CCT Project Manager as well as their interpretation and signage consultants.

The project for the CCT was delivered within 10 months of MFA being appointed. This including a substantial number of community stakeholder meetings with the Friend of St. Peter's, who partially funded the work. Statutory support for the project was established in principle from the outset.

A second phase of work within the South churchyard project involved working closely with the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and local volunteers to excavate the South Churchyard in order to re-open a blocked mediaeval door, and greatly improve access to the church and enjoyment of the fire gardens. The project also included some careful conservative repair of the heavily weathered historic masonry, drainage improvements to the churchyard and for the planning of a future WC facility around the known archaeological elements.

The tower project was completed in July 2016 and visitor numbers, dwell times and income levels at the church have been encouraging since. The churchyard was completed in early 2017 and has been well received. Malcolm Fryer is now the Sexennial Inspecting Architect for the Church.

St. Peters Church, Sandwich: Tower Project (cont'd)

