**‘ACCESS 4 ACLE’**

**RAISING THE FLOOR!**

**A project to make St Edmund King & Martyr Church step free and accessible**

**Background**

St Edmund’s church is a mediaeval jewel situated in the heart of Acle inside the National Park at the gateway to the Broads. St. Edmund’s church and the village are mentioned in the Doomsday Book.

The population of the village is expanding with several new housing developments, and more are planned. The increase in population has brought a diverse group of people to the area. There are two Assisted Living Complexes and a Residential home which house several residents using a wheelchair. A Clarion ‘Live Smart’ complex of bungalows is situated close to the village centre where many residents use rollators.

The church is opened in the morning and closed at night 365 days of the year including Boxing Day when the gates to the drive on the North side are closed according to law to protect its private status. The Roman Catholic congregation in the area use the church weekly on a Saturday for evening Mass.

**History**

The church floor was lowered in the 16th century and again by the Victorians. This resulted in steep steps to all of the doors in the West end of the Nave. There is plenty of evidence for this as observed by our architect, Nicholas Warns, and the archaeologist Matthew Champion.

In the past the PCC decided to provide a portable ramp which was installed after the law dictating ramp design was passed in 1991. This is indicated by the date on the rear of the ramp 17/4/2003.

Rev’d Martin Greenland realised the steps were a problem for some of his less able congregation and installed a removable wrought iron handrail in the centre of the steps descending into the Nave from the North Porch. When the ramp was in use this handrail had to be removed, and the ramp was without handrails which is now a requirement by law.

The North Porch has been used for many years as the busy Norwich Road runs in front of the South entrance gateway. Cars were unable to park on this road or discharge passengers therefore the North entrance was preferred.

**Problems**

The ramp required two people to seat it on the stairs after removing the metal handrail and opening both inner doors to the North side of the Nave. The North porch also needed a wooden ramp on the outer doorstep to enter.

There were various minor incidents with the sharply inclined ramp, however, it was only when my husband used an electrically powered wheelchair to enter the church the danger was highlighted. Push wheelchairs controlled by the carer were easier to manage and were of a lighter weight.

The potential danger was finally realised on 19th May 2024 at the Pentecost service combined with a baptism. There was crowd of people around the font which is situated in the centre of the West end and only allows a small area to one side to enter the church on the ramp. David stopped to warn the crowd he was descending but he tilted forwards over the lip at the end of the ramp. The wheelchair weight approximately 120kgs fell on him as he was still strapped into the chair.

Recovery from a fractured left foot, leg and thumb resulted in a four week stay in James Page Hospital, two weeks in Carlton Court and six weeks at home in a hospital bed with carers four times a day. His first trip out was to Norwich on the bus with his wife on 6th December 2024. A claim is being made against the PCC insurers for liability.

Inspection of the ramp and the wheelchair by the NHS and the wheelchair company determined the ramp should be condemned as unsafe owing to the acute angle of descent. A letter was received from Matthew Winn, CEO of the NHS Norfolk Community Health and Care Trust, outlining their findings. The unlawful and dangerous nature of the ramp was also emphasised in a report from our architect Nicholas Warns.

**Solution**

In November 2023 David and I knew the church needed to be step free as it was very difficult using the ramp at such a steep angle and to avoid the font at the bottom unless the ramp was placed to one side.

Several ideas were put forward to address the issue, but none were really viable. The pathway to the North Porch needed to be improved as wheels get stuck in the pebbles. I had a large pile of used stones suitable for improving the path. I contacted our architect Christopher Codling for advice about laying these stones as our builder questioned the drainage in that area. Christopher was not able to solve the problem as he had retired but he did email me with information and some plans of the area.

We now had to appoint a new architect. On investigation we found other churches in the Benefice used and recommended Nicholas Warns.

Nicholas visited the church for a site visit on 23 June 2023. During our initial meeting I told Nicholas Warns of our concerns about access to St. Edmund’s church. He agreed as he had attempted to enter from the South porch where the signage is very poor, and he mentioned this would part of looking at proper access for all. We then went on to discuss the possibility of making the church step free and fully accessible. Nicholas agreed to provide a quotation\* for ‘A Feasibility Study’ and with PCC approval agreed to be our architect. *\* A copy of this is attached.*

**Funding of the Feasibility study** [The cost was £4,095 plus VAT.]

I founded and have run a charity for 22 years and so I was accustomed to fund raising, however I was sadly surprised to discover most funders, including church related ones, would not fund a feasibility study. No work or building can ever be done without plans; therefore, we had to raise the funds to complete the study before any further discussions could take place.

Our first approach was to Acle Parish Council who immediately agreed to provide some of the funds. Further funds were raised by holding an event every month in the church, afternoon tea and quiz at the Vault Bistro, a grant from the Bishop of Norwich Fabric Fund, The Snelling Foundation, Geoffrey Watling Trust and several personal donations from the congregation and non-church going friends in the village.

**Other options for physical access**

This was investigated by the architect without success. Our handyman finally provided some access in December 2024 using a temporary/permanent wooden ramp to the South Porch to allow wheelchair users to enter the South Porch to listen to the service from that area and receive communion brought to them by the Rector.

**Next step**

The Feasibility study was done on 22 August 2024 and the plans sent to the PCC for perusal. A vote at the PCC meeting in December 2024 agreed to have the floor raised with one abstention.

Raising the floor will be an act of restoration of the church to its original design and should not be considered as a dramatic change to the building.

Raising the floor is the main objective to provide step free access to the church, however there are other items on the ‘shopping list’ that many of the congregation would like to have in the church.

The kitchen area drop-down covers over the sink are dangerous, and many attempts have been made to provide a safer method of opening and closing the heavy lids, sadly, without success. Proper drainage must also be provided for the sink as it currently runs into a plastic tank and then onto the path on the South side of the church.

Pathways around the church are difficult to access even for the ambulant and impossible for a wheelchair user including that to St. Edmund’s church hall where there are toilets. Access to these toilets is not possible without assistance for a wheelchair user because even when the door is unlocked both doors then need to be unlocked and opened.

Our Roman Catholic friends support us with our fundraising and an interesting point to note is The Roman Church is currently conducting a survey of all of its facilities for access.

**Future**

Currently we are waiting for the DAC to confirm a date for their visit to assess the situation and give their guidance.

Fundraising events continue to be organised monthly for when the final plans are agreed, and work can begin. When the plans are finally approved National and local Funders will be approached again with the hope our project will meet their criteria. The ‘Access 4 Acle’ fund is currently increasing but it would take many years to reach the sums needed to complete this project. So, it will be imperative to have assistance from the Diocese and those with sufficient interest in the ability for the less able in society to attend church.

**Benefits of a step free church**

The church receives many visitors during the year from the UK and around the World. We have no way of knowing who has been unable to enter owing to lack of easy access. We know of at least one wheelchair user in the village who would attend church if it were step free but currently attends Sunday Zoom sessions from Lingwood church.

Our church is half thatched and has a unique heritage with its charcoal graffiti on the wall in the choir stalls written in Latin dating from the plague. The font is also rare with its original colours still visible. More unusual is the figure of the Holy Trinity depicted as God the Father sitting on a throne, holding the crucified Christ between his knees while the dove of the Holy Spirit descends in the front portion facing the altar.

The other great treasure of the building Is a large graffito scrawled on to the north wall. It was written during a time of pestilence, and reveals something of the human misery that is often hidden from us in history books. It is written in charcoal and in Latin.

Churches are a valuable asset to our country especially in an area of natural beauty and a popular holiday area and our churches are an attraction to a vast percentage of the population of all abilities.

St. Edmund’s could be a hub for music events, exhibitions and lectures giving another income stream to support the church in the long term.

Sadly, the Round Tower churches Society refused our request for donation to our Feasibility study but the Round Tower Churches of Europe made a final comment on their website after the description of St. Edmunds’ church -

**“Conclusion: A church well worth a visit, always open and welcoming.”**

Finally, my further ambition once the church is step-free, is to make some of the other buildings in Acle Village step free as well!!