

The Friends of St Leonard's Church, Sheepstor

Welcome to our inaugural meeting. I'm very pleased to see that we have a wide representation from the village and others who have family ties with our church, as well as representatives from the Sarawak Association.

As well as those present today I have had expressions of support and apologies for their absence from – Claire and Hugh Twiss, Marion Bennett, Lord and Lady Tanlaw, Asia Brooke Trotter (secretary of the Rajah of Sarawak Fund),

The purpose of today's meeting is to outline the present problems in maintaining this church building and to seek support for a secular society to be formed to seek a wider interest in and use of this ancient building. While the Church of England still wants to maintain a place of worship in Sheepstor, the management and maintenance of the church will remain the responsibility of the PCC. What this Society will do is to assist exclusively with the maintenance and preservation of this building without funding the wider needs of the Church of England in this benefice or the diocese of Exeter.

At present, the building is only used for about 2 ½ hours each week – for worship and bell ringing. In order to raise interest in this endeavour it is our intention to try to promote a wider use of the building for purposes other than Christian worship. In doing so, we are following in the footsteps of many West Country churches that are seeing their use and support from their worshipping communities decline. We are also following the directive from the Bishop of Plymouth to seek to use our churches more widely.

We have already had a successful concert in the church and we will aim to have more such events.

We are also hoping to mount a historic record of the village, if we can get assistance from educational funds such as Heritage Lottery funding.

Lord Tanlaw, who is the grandson of the third Rajah of Sarawak, is very concerned to see that the church continues to provide a permanently open focus for the many foreign visitors who come to visit the tombs and memorials to his family and their government officers which are already in the church. He would like to see those ties enhanced with further records included in any historic display that we may mount. It is for this reason that he has agreed to be the patron of this society, should it materialise, and he has agreed to appoint one member of the committee and a trustee for our society from his family's educational charity, the Rajah of Sarawak Fund. One thing that Paul, our new neighbour, has commented on is the number of people asking them about the rajah's tombs.

At present the people who worship in this church have to raise about £7000 each year to run the church, of which about £4000 is spent on the needs of the clergy and the wider diocese, the remaining £3000 is spent on the running costs of this building. With a regular congregation of only 8, that means we have to find about £18 for each person attending one church service every week just to meet running costs, major repairs to a 600 year old Grade I listed building come as extras! This is why we have got to find a way to widen the appeal and use of this building if it is to remain open. This proposed society is not intended to support the Church of England or its priesthood, what we want to do is to help to meet the £3000/yr running costs of the building, its major repairs and any modifications required to enable the building to achieve a wider use by visitors and the local community.

You have a proposed constitution for the society on the back of the agenda – it has been modified from the one circulated with the invitation to include a committee member/trustee appointed by the Rajah of Sarawak Fund (rules 4 & 5) and a bit of tidying of the English. I copied it from one used by another church and they had drifted arbitrarily between 'shall' and 'will', I hope I have now got it right.

I would like to see the committee with a only a minority membership of regular weekly worshippers, if that can be achieved, to emphasise our intent to widen the interest in the society.

If we now open the meeting to the floor for any comments on the proposed society and any comment on the constitution.....