

# Inspired Futures Heritage Activity Stage One Draft Report

## Christ Church, Shieldfield

Draft 1, Jo Scott

### 1 Introduction

The Grade II\* listed Christ Church stands in a prominent location in the Shieldfield area of Newcastle, adjacent to the Christ Church C of E Primary School and overlooking Shieldfield Green.

One of Shieldfield's claims to fame is that King Charles I was permitted to play golf there during the English Civil War whilst he was held prisoner in the city. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the village of Shieldfield became increasingly urbanised, with housing being built for the employees of many local factories. Today around two thirds of the residents in term time are Northumbria University students.

The distinctive Victorian Gothic church is part of an innovative partnership that helps share resources and bring together different parts of the community. The church shares its hall and facilities with the adjacent primary school and with Circus Central, a registered charity that aims to develop the youth, community and professional circus sectors in the North East of England.

### 2 Current activities

#### 2.1 Worship

There is a short morning prayer offered every day at Christ Church, as well as weekly Sunday morning and Thursday lunchtime services and a monthly Saturday evening compline. Church services attract a small but loyal congregation of between five and 15.

The church is also used quite regularly for special services, particularly funerals, which can draw up to 180 people.

#### 2.2 Community and other users

The church and adjacent church hall are used for a number of church and community activities and events, including:

- Community meetings in the church hall, attracting around 20 to 30 people per meeting
- Circus Clubs, which meet three times a week
- Gamers' Club, which meets twice a month to play board games, attracting 30-40
- Bangshees Drummers, who meet weekly
- A weekly Luncheon Club for older and disabled people, attracting 25-30
- A weekly African Church
- Coffee mornings and fayres in the church and/or hall about four times a year
- Circus Shows and school crossover events in the church hall

The church also hosts visits by school groups, averaging about one school visit per term and involving between 25 and 130 pupils.

### 2.3 Visitors

The church is not usually open outside of services, except for a couple of hours on Friday mornings and some Wednesday mornings and only if someone is available to steward. However, the team is about to implement an open church policy in accordance with the conditions of recent building grants.

It is not known how many visitors come to the church outside of services and events, but numbers are inevitably limited by the fact that the church is often closed. This is exacerbated by the church's rather dark façade and series of closed wooden doors, which make the building looked shut even when it is open and activities are going on inside. Circus Central has added a banner above the street-side door into the church hall, but its subtle colours mean it too is easy overlooked.

Access to the church hall, where the majority of on-site activity takes place, is from the car park at the rear. This is surrounded by metal railings and the gate is often locked.

## 3 Current heritage experience and offer

### 3.1 Access

As noted above, the church is not generally open and thus not always available to people looking for a place for quiet prayer or contemplation, wanting to enjoy its history or following family links or researching their own history outside of service times except by appointment.

The church is very visible but often looks closed even when events are on. Parking is available behind the church for church and school-related business; however, the small car park is usually kept locked to restrict its use by other vehicles.

Pedestrian access to the front of the church is through one of two solid wooden doors; there is a third into the church hall foyer. The doorways are not ideal for those with mobility issues, although once inside the main body of the church is largely open and level. The nave is surprisingly large and bright, with fixed pews and plenty of natural light. There is a small vestry and another room behind the organ; the vestry can be accessed via a door at the top of some steps at the rear of the church, currently part of the schoolyard.

Access to the church hall is primarily through the rear door, which is reached via the car park. There are three steps up to the door.

Moving between the church and church hall is not easy, with steps and narrow passageways in a dark internal foyer area. The toilets and kitchen facilities are also here, which is not ideal for all users (although there is an accessible toilet) and the facilities are in need of updating anyway. There is also an awkward doorway and steep steps down to the school hall from this foyer area.

### 3.2 Interpretation

The church offers a small number of ways to find out about its mission, special qualities and history, including:

- The church has a **facebook page**, [www.facebook.com/ChristChurchShieldfield](https://www.facebook.com/ChristChurchShieldfield), which includes a very brief overview of the history of the church (which is now out of

date<sup>1</sup>) and is primarily used to give access to the weekly parish newsletter and promote events. It does not include general service times, except via the newsletter, nor obvious links with any partners or to other clubs or activities on site

- The church features on **A Church Near You website** ([www.achurchnearyou.com/newcastle-christ-church/](http://www.achurchnearyou.com/newcastle-christ-church/)), which gives a more comprehensive overview of the church, its mission and the area's history, as well as practical information about worship, along with links to Circus Central
- A **noticeboard** outside, used to share information and promote events

### 3.3 Facilities

The church offers a good level of supporting facilities, although they would benefit from some updating. They include:

- The church hall, used for a range of meetings and activities and houses circus gear for their activities and events. There is also a reasonable amount of storage off here
- Toilets, including one suitable for disabled people
- Kitchen / catering facilities
- Direct access between the hall, church and adjacent school hall

There is a reasonable amount of parking behind the church, although this is largely kept locked following some unauthorised use of the parking spaces.

## 4 Current and potential users

### 4.1 The congregation

A small and dwindling attendance of about five to 15 for weekly services, with larger numbers for seasonal and special services. It is used primarily for funerals, drawing in up to 180, as well as occasional weddings and baptisms. There is an excellent relationship with the adjacent Church of England primary school, who use the church for their seasonal services and events, and there is sharing of other resources such as the church and school halls.

### 4.2 The community and other users

Shieldfield is close to the University of Northumbria and a significant proportion of the residents are students and therefore very transient and usually only around during term times. The area is also ethnically very diverse and has high levels of deprivation, with low income and unemployment as key issues.

Church services and activities are already geared towards welcoming and supporting this mixed and mobile community, such as a recent barbecue for new students, providing a luncheon club and being a venue for a weekly African Church. There are also regular community activities in the church hall, including drummers and computer gamers. Indeed, the church hall is about at capacity for events and activities, given its central location and easy transport links.

The team is aware that they could do much more to make the church itself a hub for the community and that it has the potential to become a home for core community facilities and activities.

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<sup>1</sup> The short text makes reference to 'developing a circus school in the future'

Circus Central is also actively aiming to engage with local people at its base in the church. It offers clubs, activities and performances aimed at developing skills and confidence for all ages and has just announced that it can now offer a BTEC qualification in Circus Arts. Again, it is somewhat constrained by what can be achieved in the church hall and there are already plans in place to make use of the church itself for training and performances.

### 4.3 Visitors

As noted earlier, the numbers and nature of visitors to the church is uncertain beyond services and events and are likely to be very few in number. It is likely that some visitors will be drawn by an interest in the building, its distinctive Victorian Gothic style and period stained glass, by family connections and the site's links with the Circus School.

The team has identified the following as the three key stories they would like to share with visitors and other users:

- The church's significance as one of the very best examples of Victorian Gothic buildings in the region
- Its attractive period stained glass, depicting biblical scenes
- The church's place as a quiet space for worship and as a hub serving the ever-changing community of Shieldfield, from its village origins, densely populated industrial past to its post-industrial role as a home for students and long term and multi-ethnic residents

The church team is also very aware that, despite many changes, Shieldfield has a strong sense of identity and community, particularly amongst its longer term residents, as a village on the edge of the city. This is perhaps typified by the recent work with the community to enhance Shieldfield Green.

The team would like to develop the church as a community hub and sharing and celebrating the church's story and area's heritage offers opportunities to engage with, and bring together, long term residents, recent arrivals, students and visitors to the city.

With regard to the heritage, members of the team have already been busy doing research on the stained glass and other key features in the church. There are also members of the local community who are interested in the history, and there are particularly strong wartime stories from this area. There is an aspiration to document the archives and collect building and local history, and occasional exhibitions held here in the past have provoked interest.

The heritage offer could be developed at Christ Church with appropriate and inclusive projects, partnership working and effective promotion. Opportunities include:

- Establishing or facilitating **a local history group** to gather and share local history
- **Continuing to work with key on-site partners** of the Circus School and primary school to identify activities and events that bring the community's adults, young people and children together to develop skills, raise confidence, provide formal and informal learning opportunities and have fun
- **Continuing to work with other key partners**, including Ouseburn Learning Trust and Caring Hands, to identify opportunities to facilitate activities and provide suitable

facilities that will benefit the community. Look at opportunities to use the church and community's history and heritage for broader benefits with e.g. local schools and care homes. Opportunities exist to e.g. create reminiscence boxes for dementia sufferers as part of the outreach work with local care homes and/or develop church resources for visiting schools and other groups; potential partners might be the museum, library, theatre and/or local heritage groups

- **Taking advantage of the church's location** close to the university and city, including Newcastle's active museums and galleries, to explore the potential for joint projects, hosting activities and exhibitions, sharing and showcasing the area's history and heritage

#### 4.4 Volunteers

The dedicated and loyal core church team is small and stretched, focusing currently on building repairs and practical issues such as heating as well as improving the church hall and school gym in partnership.

As noted earlier, making the church open and accessible is a challenge currently, as a presence is required in the building whenever it is open. Rather than relying on volunteer stewards, the team would like to set up office space in the church so that there is a regular presence. Circus Central have already expressed a wish for office space and other opportunities include becoming a hub for the university chaplaincy. The team would also like to offer a regular drop-in / community café facility.

#### 4.5 Target audiences for heritage activity

Based on this brief assessment of the mix of current audiences at the church, the Shieldfield community and context, and the team's successes to date, the suggested target audiences for heritage engagement in the short to medium term are:

- **Local people and visitors interested in history**, including special interest groups and general interest visitors to the town and area; local history and heritage may also be a useful tool for engaging with **local older people** through activities at the church and in its outreach work
- **Students and young people**, through greater engagement with the universities and local schools and by offering and facilitating inclusive and enjoyable formal and informal learning, skills development and confidence building
- **Local people interested in using and developing their skills**, by developing and promoting broader opportunities to get involved and by delivering projects that develop new skills for all ages

## 5 Heritage engagement opportunities

### 5.1 Review of aspirations

The team's priorities are currently on the practical issues of consolidating the building and upgrading supporting facilities, such as heating, toilets and catering, to enhance the experience for all church and church hall users from congregation to community and visitors. In particular it would like to become a community hub with drop in and café facilities, office space and plenty of room for a variety of activities and events.

The team has also identified some potential heritage projects and activities as part of its vision, including documenting archives and collecting local history and sharing these perhaps via a new website and guidebook and hosting occasional exhibitions.

## **5.2 Key recommendations**

While the church's longer term aspirations to improve its welcome and enhance its facilities are to be welcomed, we recommend the team aims to undertake some modest, quick win activities as well. These can be used to test the impact and efficacy of different actions on target audiences and assess likely demand for other projects and activities.

Taking small and achievable steps will help raise the profile of the church and its activities and events, demonstrate to local people and visitors that change is afoot and hopefully stimulate new interest in getting involved with the life of the church (whether as a visitor, participant or a volunteer). Importantly it will also provide valuable feedback to inform likely demand for new or different facilities and activities.

## **5.3 Opportunities for engaging with the church's heritage**

These opportunities build upon existing successes and new ideas identified by the church team and during discussion with the Inspired Futures consultants. The short term proposals here are a suggested list from which the team can cherry-pick, in order to test different approaches to engagement with the church mission, building and heritage. Inviting comment and feedback at every stage, and evaluating each project against clear targets, will provide robust guidance on how best to target effort, resources and funds in the future.

The short term activities recommended here are designed to raise the profile of the church and test sample events. It is hoped that this will encourage new volunteers who might help, for example, to steward the church and enable it to open more often, as well as potentially attracting other folk who would be interested in taking on the development and delivery of some of these new activities in the medium and longer term.

The medium and longer term projects suggested here will be dependent upon the successes or otherwise in the short term, and the team should remain open to developing and adapting its vision to respond to findings and feedback. All these elements are suggestions only and should be explored and reviewed at each stage within the parameters of the church mission, other projects and activities and the overall vision for the site.

### **Suggestions for short term actions and activities:**

- **An activity and interpretation plan** – the church team’s main priority is maintaining and reordering the building but there is a range of opportunities for complementing this work and engaging more and different users through the church’s rich heritage and unique partnerships. It is therefore strongly recommended that the team prepares a robust plan for activities and interpretation to identify appropriate heritage projects, phase the work and plot the necessary aims, actions and outcomes
- **Welcome signage** – take up the opportunity to display ‘welcome, we are open’ signage, such as a banner on the railings or A-boards at the church door(s), whenever the church is open
- **Making visitors welcome** – in the short term, i.e. until the café concept can be developed, consider offering free / donation refreshments and some comfortable seats for anyone calling in when the church is open e.g. passing students, someone seeking a quiet space for reflection or wrestling with a personal issue. Ensure practical information and interpretation are on hand to add value to their visit
- **Community consultation** – the church needs to continue to find simple and cost-effective ways to identify the community’s particular needs and to attract new worshippers, volunteers and users of all ages. Active engagement with the community and users on what people like, dislike and would like to see in future brings considerable benefits in identifying priorities, testing activities and directing future resources and effort and will always be welcomed by funders. Opportunities include:
  - Developing a simple online questionnaire that asks how people use the building and site currently and invites feedback on various potential future activities and events; this could be circulated widely and well promoted, perhaps with an incentive to take part, such as a prize draw (sites such as SurveyMonkey are easy to use and offer up to ten questions for free)
  - A small display of ideas and opportunities in the church, church hall and school, with an invitation to leave comments and vote on preferred ideas
  - Some ‘Find out what we’re up to’ events, offering free refreshments, at the church and elsewhere locally e.g. the primary school, ideally when people are gathering there anyway; take along some archive material and things to look at and do, for participants to browse through, and a simple display of proposals to discuss and invite comments on
  - Encourage feedback and support during and after all activities and events; provide very short questionnaires for people to complete before they leave (give out cards and pencils at the end); consider a supermarket style voting system to keep it even simpler (some Perspex or plastic boxes with simple options showing development options, different activities or asking simple questions, then give each person a token to vote with)
  - Continue to talk to special interest groups, local charities and organisations and other potential partners to tell them what you’re planning and invite their input on needs and expectations; garner their support and respond to their suggestions

### **Suggestions for medium term actions and activities:**

- **Consider developing a church website** – the team feels it doesn't have the resources to develop a new website but it is strongly recommended that a search goes out to find some volunteers who would be able to develop and maintain a site that provides a warm welcome, practical information about worship and visiting, the church mission, access to history, heritage and associated archives, and links to all project partners. This might be a project that would attract the interest of local students. The site should be lively, engaging, informative and up-to-date, and complement the church's Facebook page (NB although the Facebook page is kept up to date with event notices and newsletters, it is recommended that these are interspersed with other more informal snippets and stories whenever possible to provide variety and extend appeal)
- **Guided tours** – the potential exists to offer guided tours on an occasional basis and/or as part of an events programme. New volunteers may be attracted by opportunities for relevant training, such as welcome host, tour guiding and archive research; the team should promote the skills development and social aspects of being part of the volunteer team
- **Events in the church and on the green** – look at opportunities for events and activities that bring the church, green and community together, moving beyond the obvious circus-related events. These could be simply facilitated by the church or be developed in partnership with church, school, students and other local groups. This might include a **performance walk**, telling the story of the church and area while on the move; a **play written by local young people** about the circus in the church or Shieldfield in wartime; a **storytelling festival** inside and out; a **community food event** providing opportunities to showcase food traditions from the different cultures living locally, try different foods and share food stories<sup>2</sup>

### **Suggestions for longer term actions and activities:**

The following projects are likely to be interlinked, enabling the church to be part of a community history project and be able to showcase its own story and the local heritage. It is also hoped that new and different volunteers would be inspired to take part and that sharing and developing new skills would be at the heart of this work.

It is therefore recommended that the church consider drawing in specialist skills to help lead and develop the project, and that the team looks for someone with experience of working with community groups and specialises in developing heritage-related skills and initiatives

- **The Circus Story** – to celebrate the unique collaboration of church, school and circus, work together to create resources and exhibition material specifically relating to the circus story, particularly to give church visitors a taste of the 'circus in the church experience' when there are no circus activities going on.

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<sup>2</sup> Check out the 2011 Margate 'Pie Days & Holidays' project for inspiration on engaging communities through food <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b010lyy6>

This could link to or build on the circus youth troupe's successful project in 2013 to research the local history of circuses<sup>3</sup>, with the aim of creating something colourful, exciting and engaging for the church that enables local people and visitors to get a sense of what happens in the church and on the green when the performers are here. This could include displays of costume, accessories and equipment (for example, creating photo opportunities to 'see' yourself in costume or performing a circus skill), images and footage of performances, hearing or reading the words of people of all ages talking about their experiences of performing or watching the circus, showcasing material generated by schools and local groups in response to circus activities.

Consider working with a reputable interpretive design company who can help create a sensitive and appropriate exhibition that is designed to be closed down, packed away or otherwise disguised so that it does not impact adversely on worship or other activities in the body of the church

- **Community history project;** this might involve the universities, library and Tyne & Wear Museums. Aim to make use of all the exciting research about the church already being gathered and invite others to contribute to the church, community heritage and social history. The first step might be to establish a local history group with the aim of gathering material on a particular topic; alternatively it might be more effective to establish an initial project and see if a local history group grows from it.

A starting point could be looking at the history of the green or local wartime stories, for example, and, if successful, could be developed to include a broader record of the church and community past and present. Aim to create a catalogue of historic resources that tell these stories, thus creating a shared community archive, gathering objects, photos and stories, including photographs and oral history of the current community.

The church could host **training events** as part of the project – perhaps delivered by or with the help of students – so that local people could learn new skills, such as creating archives, scanning historic documents, gathering oral history and photography, to help extend knowledge, catalogue and develop the archive and share it on line. These resources could form the basis of temporary or permanent displays in the church and elsewhere in the community. Acquire good **quality temporary exhibition resources** to enable these new resources to be displayed, and to encourage other local groups, schools, students etc. to hold their own temporary exhibitions here.

Consider developing **reminiscence boxes** – in conjunction with the above activities, gather resources such as photographs, objects and natural materials relating to church and life in this part of the city, which could be used to stimulate discussion as part of any oral history work. These boxes can also be used by e.g. the existing lunch club or a new regular or occasional coffee morning for residents and/or be loaned out or used for outreach work with care homes and hospitals in the area (a partnership opportunity with Caring Hands charity?)

- **Resources for schools and families** – the church could work with the school, Ouseburn Learning Trust and students to provide a series of resources suitable for schools, groups and families. These resources could encourage local families to make

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<sup>3</sup> Information about the project and the colourful legacy archive are available on line at <http://www.labonche.net/> and <http://www.circuscentral.co.uk/research-networks-eu-uk/north-east-circus-history/>

more use of the church and could be linked to e.g. a new mums and toddlers group; school holiday 'play days'. These activities and resources could be trialled in the short term to test their potential and to see if it attracts new volunteers willing to help with delivery:

- **Activity packs** for the church to appeal to a range of ages e.g. bags of different blocks for smaller children so they can look for these shapes in the church; magnifying glasses, binoculars, mirrors for older children to encourage searching for details and looking at spaces in different ways; inspiration bags that include copies of artworks, poetry, stories and music to encourage creativity
- **Discovery trails** for exploring inside and outside the church and on the green

**Appendix – Supporting information and useful contacts  
(to follow)**