**Consultation on the Parish Council’s proposals for the Parish Green**

**November 2021**

**Comments – submitted by the Trustees of the Friends of Droxford Church**

**General**

It is welcome that the Parish Council has decided to move forward with plans to improve the grassed area between the village square and the churchyard, and to consult with residents. Below are comments on the diagram circulated with the Bridge magazine on 26th November.

**Overall location**

The site is a small area located at the heart of the Droxford conservation area, and forms the principal access to the churchyard and its Grade-1 listed Noman church, the most important heritage building in the Meon Valley between Titchfield and East Meon. Any proposal for landscaping this area should respect its proximity and the fact that it is the main pedestrian and vehicular access to our village’s most important and historic building. In this respect it is disappointing that the location of the church and churchyard are not marked on the consultative drawing. As a starting principle it would be desirable for any new landscaping to draw visitors through the parish green and reveal the magnificent view of the church tower as they progress.

**Transition from the Square**

The village square is used for parking by a variety of users (Village Hall, Church, residents and visitors) and is frequently oversubscribed particularly when events are happening. Vehicular access to the church is only via the Parish Green, and the current gateway is too narrow for large vehicles (including emergency vehicles and hearses) to enter without risking damage, and is frequently blocked by parked cars. This has long been a cause for concern to the PCC and Friends, and proposed widening of the gateway is to be welcomed. However the location of this gateway, closely abutting the Manor House wall and its own gated entrance, means that a large ‘no parking’ area in the eastern corner of the square must be enforced to ensure emergency access. Consideration should be given to moving the vehicular access point towards the centre (near to the current temporary access) for safer access and to reduce the potential loss of car park spaces. A separate pedestrian entrance (with or without a gate) could be retained on the existing path which forms part of the Wayfarer’s Walk, a national long-distance path, and this solution would have the additional safety benefit of separating walkers from the vehicular entrance.

**Boundary with the Square**

This is a challenging transition from the vehicle dominated square to the pedestrianised entrance to the green leading beyond to the church. The current proposal is to plant a beech hedge and rebuild at least one of the pillars with a descending wall to adjoin the hedge. This would provide a dense horizontal barrier across the end of the square which might be considered a discouragement to visitors who are looking for the church. Beech is an interesting choice as the optimal height would normally be 4 to 8 feet, which is significantly more than the existing low wall. There are no dimensions on the plan, but if the hedge is planned to less than 3 feet, then an alternative planting should be considered. Examples might be yew (perhaps an appropriate reference to the churchyard beyond), privet or box, all of which are evergreen, and small leaved so can easily be trimmed to a low height. Other alternatives might be flowering or berry-carrying plants – perhaps the Garden club could advise – or simply an improvement of the existing low brick wall. A further concern would be the cost of maintenance of a hedge particularly one composed of vigorous broadleaved trees.

The proposed new gate for the vehicular entrance with its heavy vertical lines and increased height is a sharp contrast with the existing light, scroll-worked, gate. Given that the gate is likely to be closed most of the time, the current design presents an intimidating barrier to both walkers and visitors. Alternative designs more appropriate to an approach to a church should be sought – including wooden ones.

Finally there is the issue of the War memorial currently sited on the Manor house wall above the gateway. Is there a plan to re-site this or to leave it in place?

**Central Lay-out**

The orientation of the central design appears counter-intuitive. The benches are set with a view towards the Manor House wall or back towards the cars parked in the square – and two of them actually have their backs to the stunning view of our magnificent church and clock tower. A fundamental re-think of the orientation and focus of this area is needed.

The schematic trees on the plan are also very misleading in that actually 60% (rather than 10%) of the site is actually shaded by the overhang of two large sycamores in the Old Rectory garden. Professional advice and discussion with the owner is needed to consider some reduction in the canopy of these trees, which would also have the benefit of opening up the view of the church as you approach from the Square. Even so the area will remain heavily shaded which limit the variety of planting.

**Churchyard Boundary**

The choice of another transverse beech hedge across the emerging vista of the Norman church tower seems out of place on this boundary. At this point in the visitor’s approach, the view of our most important heritage should be opening up and drawing the visitor forward. It almost seems as though the designer is unaware of the proximity of the church. On a practical level the churchyard boundary could indeed benefit from more definition than is currently provided, and a low ‘post and chain’ fence might be visually appropriate with clearer responsibility (and lower cost) for maintenance. An alternative solution could be to copy the fence proposed for the eastern boundary the churchyard, and so provide consistency around the east and west sides. In the next few weeks an official noticeboard announcing the Church of St Mary and All Saints and Wilfrid’s Cafe is due to be erected with Diocesan approval at the entrance to the churchyard and will be clearly visible from the square. A solution for this boundary which respects the unique heritage importance of this site and its increasing footfall, can only be done through collaboration between the PC, the PCC (owners of the churchyard), and Wilfrid’s Café, the destination of many of the visitors.

**Collaboration**

Going beyond the boundary issues there are two areas of collaboration which would significantly enhance the experience of visiting or walking through this important site.

1. **Garden design**

There is a wide variety of planting options which could be considered for this area and there is a wealth of expertise locally in garden design, architecture and landscaping, and wildlife management. Planting options could include establishing native species and wildflowers as well as planting spring bulbs e.g. bluebells, daffodils, primroses, hellebores etc. For consistency and maximum impact this should be a joint collaboration between the management of the Churchyard and the Parish Green. It would be a wonderful opportunity to tap into the pool of local talent and invite ideas for both spaces, perhaps with a view to an exhibition of options at the Country Fair or in Wilfrid’s Café with prize for the popular choice.

1. **Lighting**

There is very poor lighting from the Square (which is unlit) and along the path to the church. The current solitary lantern halfway along is powered from the church with a cable along the Manor House Wall. A joint plan for lighting is needed to provide a safe and welcoming approach to the Church and Café in the winter months and summer evenings.

**Conclusion**

The design proposed for the consultation meeting on 8th December is a helpful start for the discussion around the special nature of this site and how it can be improved for the benefit of both residents and visitors whilst respecting its unique heritage. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance the centre of our village and we should look for the greatest possible participation to tap local expertise for suggestions on the options.

Friends of Droxford Church

1 December 2021