

SAVE OUR PARSONAGES

NEWSLETTER



CONTENTS

Director's Review.....	4
Membership News.....	7
Casework.....	9
Letters.....	12
<i>Anne Atkins, St. Dionis' Vicarage, Parson's Green.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Mervyn Wilson, The Place of the Parsonage in Parochial Ministry.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Naomi Bowen, Was Peter's House the First Parsonage?.....</i>	<i>23</i>
Parsonage Retention Principles.....	26
Code of Practice.....	28

The **PATRONS** of Save Our Parsonages are:

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The Rt. Revd. and Rt. Hon. Richard Chartres DD FSA, Bishop of London

The Rt. Hon. Frank Field, MP

The Very Revd. Dr. Michael Higgins OBE

Terry Waite CBE

The **COMMITTEE** of Save Our Parsonages currently comprises:

Anthony Jennings (Director)

Anne Toms (Treasurer)

Mervyn Wilson (Secretary)

Naomi Bowen

Jeremy Hummerstone

Jennifer Jennings

Noël Riley

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Our **CONSULTANTS** are:

Jonathan Farnsworth (preservation trusts); The Revd. John Masding (clergy affairs).

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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

This year marks the 20th anniversary of SOP as a membership organisation and the 21st anniversary of its foundation. We are delighted that our founder and Director for ten years, Noel Riley, remains a committee member.

Church Commissioners

We are in continuing dialogue with the Church Commissioners on our concerns about their written guidance about their role as appeal body for parsonage sales. Pre-appeal discussion by Commissioners' staff with appellants proved contentious in the Ashwell case (see earlier newsletters for details). We have had the benefit of legal advice from two eminent lawyers who advised that if there is any such contact with the parish by Commissioners' staff, it must be divulged to the appeal panel before the hearing, and fully minuted and agreed by all parties. We had another meeting with the Commissioners to discuss this advice, and, predictably, it was rejected, as were our suggested amendments to the written guidance. Our lawyers have repeated their concerns, and we propose to request a meeting with the Third Estates Commissioner.

Environmental matters

SOP shares many of the aims of the Church 'Shrinking the Footprint' campaign, so we continue to try to make the dioceses understand that traditionally built (pre-1919) houses are often more environmentally friendly than modern ones, because of their better quality of construction and their more natural materials, to say nothing of the huge amounts of energy that need to be expended in the process of construction of new houses. The Church's Environmental Policy Officer is working with the Department of Energy and Climate Change to create a better understanding of traditional houses. It is encouraging to see the Church involved in this, though the message is not always understood by dioceses intent on replacing traditional buildings.

SOP Events, Meetings and Publications

Our summer event last year was another of our popular tours, this time of parsonages in the Oundle area of the delightfully rural but lesser known county of Northamptonshire, in late August. In the morning we visited Polebrook, a small pleasant vernacular house, said to be early c. 18, though one wing looks older, with its blocked windows and irregular wooden lintels. The house has a typical informal vicarage garden. Inside, its two ranges give a surprisingly wide hall and generous landing with Regency-style staircase and two spacious ground floor rooms, one with Georgian sashes.

After a good lunch at the delightful Kings Arms in Polebrook, we went off to

the fine stone town of Oundle, to see the fascinating upper room priest's house at the church so familiar to us from our 2009 AGM. This time we were also able to see inside the 'former Rectory' now owned by Oundle School, an interesting late c.17 house, Georgianised with sash windows, with later Victorian additions, including a neo-Queen Anne wing.

Then off to Brigstock, where we visited the Georgian parsonage with a Victorian ground floor front extension, and Victorian encaustic floor tiles in the spacious central hall with its wide staircase. The ground floor back rooms have much lower door heights than the front ones, though set close together and not divided off, presumably for servants' quarters where the vicar rarely strayed, Its pleasant setting includes the parish room on the other side of the drive, and behind it, a spacious garden with greenhouse, shrubs, orchard and paddock, with the river beyond, used for village events. Just as a rural vicarage should be. A most pleasant and successful day, with many thanks to all our hosts.

At a meeting with the Beckfords Group, set up in Salisbury Diocese with the objective of achieving 'radical cost and efficiency improvements within the Church of England', I learnt that they had succeeded in meeting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby after they had presented their proposals for a radical reorganisation of the Church. However, the meeting had proved to be disappointing.

Last October I also had useful meetings with two of the Church's principal environmental officers, David Shreeve and Ruth Knight, on the merits of traditional parsonages and their gardens.

Our letter in the last Rectory Society newsletter pointed out that, contrary to popular misconception, it is not the Church Commissioners, but the dioceses, in other words the bishops, that sell off parsonages. We also once again have been kindly mentioned in the current issue of the Ancient Monuments Society's always fascinating Newsletter, which refers to our casework, and features our photo of the former vicarage at Sleaford (see Casework last year). Also, we had a letter in The Spectator about the poor economics of selling off over 8,000 parsonages since 1945 that would now be worth £8 billion, explaining our policy that, even when redundant, parsonages should be kept and leased out. It drew an answer in the following issue by a correspondent who had misunderstood our policy, enabling us to follow up with a correction that was also published.

Code of Practice

As always, our Code of Practice, with its core principle that the dioceses should formally consult the parish as soon as any suggestion arises that a parsonage is marked out for sale, is set out at the end of this newsletter.

Rectories and Vicarages Trust – Update

The Rectories and Vicarages Trust was set up to facilitate the retention and use of 'redundant' church houses by the Church (see earlier newsletters for details), and unlike SOP is not a membership or campaigning body. The RVT committee continues to explore possible uses for ex-parsonages, and is preparing a position paper recommending that dioceses retain these valuable houses and let them out, rather than selling them off. It has been having discussions with third parties including Frank Field MP and Lord Cormack about these plans.

Legal Advice

Sadly we have lost our barrister, Gabrielle Higgins, who has deserted us to become a gatekeeper in her role as Diocesan Secretary at Chichester! Nevertheless, we wish her all the best for the future and thank her for the advice she has most kindly been giving us on an entirely pro bono basis. It means however that we need a new legal expert. Could you all please help us to find one.

Media Relations

We have been fortunate in finding Marcus Stanton of Marcus Stanton Communications, a media relations expert, thanks to the National Churches Trust. He is helping us with our publicity and in particular our current programme of networking with enlightened clergy who properly value their parsonages, aided by Noel Riley. He has made a number of useful suggestions and has good contacts.

Despite that, our need for someone to help us with the regular handling of press briefings and releases, local radio discussions and so on, is as pressing as ever. Please let us know of anyone thought suitable for this extremely interesting task. It could be a retired person wanting an interesting job or someone wanting to gain valuable experience in this popular field. Could it be you?

AJSJ

MEMBERSHIP NEWS AND AGM

AGM

Last year's AGM was held at the fine Victorian vicarage in the Abbey Close at Sherborne, by courtesy of Canon Eric Woods. As usual the occasion was a great success in wonderful surroundings and after a fine lunch we had a tour of the abbey.



Sherborne

This year's AGM is by kind invitation of the Revd. Ben Phillips and Ms Sarah Meyrick of the Vicarage, Towcester, Northants, in the choir vestry of St Lawrence Church, with lunch in the ancient chantry house, and a tour of the vicarage as usual. The invitation, together with the minutes of the 2012 AGM, is on a separate sheet enclosed with this newsletter. Please reply whether or not you can come and then your apologies will be recorded.

‘Supporters’ and Standing Orders – Update

Could we ask the few members to whom we have to send annual subscription reminders to consider paying by standing order, which is enormously helpful for Jennifer, our Membership Secretary. Please note that the subscription has been £15 for some years now.

CAF Cheques

Just a reminder that SOP is not a registered charity. CAF cheques **cannot be banked by SOP**. If we get them we have to return them.

Address Updates Please

Could you all please check that we have your current email address and let us know any changes. We can only notify members of our events by email. We do appreciate that not all members have email accounts, and can only apologise, but we simply lack the resources to correspond by post on such occasions. If you have an email address and did not receive our message about last year's event, please give us updated details.

Please also notify all changes of postal address; we rely on the postal service for our newsletters which it is our policy to continue to send out only in hard copy. Every year some are returned to us marked 'not at this address.' We do try to trace members through their parish but it is very difficult and usually impossible to do so.

Website

We are having temporary problems with our website, administered for us by the Revd Jeremy Hummerstone, which we are taking urgent steps to resolve. The site has many interesting features.

Back Issues

We still have back issues of the newsletter. Some complete sets from 1995 to date are still available. We offer a full set (18 issues) for £25, a full set minus the scarce 1998 issue for £20, or any single issue for £2.

New Members

We need new members. Could you all please download the ‘subscription and standing order’ form from our website and give it to friends and colleagues.

CASEWORK

Fulham, All Saints, London

One of our 2007 cases has resurfaced. A more ambitious scheme was aborted, but we are told that the diocese still has plans for development of the attractive little enclave off Fulham High Street which contains the vicarage and church hall. This little oasis contains the vicarage with its large and delightful garden abutting Fulham Palace, and a substantial paddock. It is rumoured that the vicarage and church hall would be destroyed and upmarket houses built. Perhaps the garden and paddock may also be under threat. Our member in the parish is investigating.

Heyshott, Chichester

There is a scheme to unite this parish with others, putting the Victorian rectory, built in 1890, at risk. However the enlightened deanery is trying to find a use for the house, as a centre to build up a Church network inclusive of visitors in this village in the South Downs National Park. We have said we are interested in this project.

Martham, Norwich

The diocese has sold this early 16th century listed vicarage, pictured in our 2013 newsletter, apparently for £450,000. The incumbent, in agreement with the diocese, had served the statutory notice of sale on the PCC, even though she had already given notice of resignation, which seemed to us an abuse of process. The new priest in charge lives in an anonymous house in the village, for which the asking price was £345,000. The diocese spent money adapting one of the garages for a study. When a new vicarage is built, under a longer term plan, it will have to be sold, with all the associated costs and expenses.

Lastingham, York

There is finally very good news in this long running saga. The future of the delightful vicarage has been uncertain, the archdeacon wanting to sell it off. The house has a special significance for Church and community alike, St. Cedd having founded the church here as a monastery in AD 654. We now hear the good news that it has been saved. The diocese seems to have understood the importance of Lastingham as a place of pilgrimage.

The vicarage is to be divided, with half allocated to living quarters for the vicar/priest-in-charge and the other for use as a pilgrim centre, something the previous incumbent had dreamed of for the long term. The great efforts made by the Friends of Lastingham Church and the vision of the Archbishop of York have been vital. The Friends will play an important role in supporting the new centre.



Lastingham

Ludlow, Hereford

The rectory for the church of St Laurence was created from the hall of the College of Priests, and dates from about 1320. It was used regularly as the rectory from the Middle Ages until Georgian times, then again from the beginning of the 20th century. In December 2009, the diocese bought the team rector a new house in an estate on the outskirts of town, to which many parishioners were opposed. It let out the rectory for a while and then quite recently put it on the market. Some of the PCCs appealed to the Church Commissioners' pastoral division, whose decision, needless to say, supported the diocese against the PCCs; but in the end the opposition was focussed on the new house rather than the retention of the old. Sadly, its sale is no doubt under way. It has been badly maintained, so, as ever, will not achieve the proper price.

Marlesford Rectory is an attractive house having a Queen Anne core with Regency additions, including a bow front and fine pedimented doorcase with pilasters and fanlight, built on the site of an even earlier building. It has been the venue for an SOP AGM as well as one of our recent parsonage tour

events, but we have been concerned about its eventual fate for some time. It is therefore good news to hear that the Church will not be selling it off.



Marlesford

Sleaford, Lincoln

This fine house, which featured in the editor's 2009 book *The Old Rectory, the Story of the English Parsonage* (Bloomsbury), was occupied by an incumbent for hundreds of years. It is a complex building, medieval, with a large Victorian wing. It was sold off last year, as reported in last year's Newsletter (20, 2014) where it was also pictured. The guide price was low enough at a mere £280,000, and we are told it went for even less, a mere £250,000. Again, the diocese had failed to maintain it properly.

LETTERS

We are grateful to our members and supporters for writing to us. The following are extracts from letters we have received this year:

From the Archbishop of York:

I repeat here my thanks for all your hard work that you are doing to preserve our built heritage.

As far as the particular situation at Lastingham is concerned there are a number of possibilities being considered about how best the vicarage might be used, not least given the wonderful heritage of pilgrimage associated with that site.

Thank you again for your work and concern. I do pray that you will be encouraged by seeing the mission of the Kingdom of God being furthered through your efforts. With every blessing.

From Fr. John Potter, St. Luke's Vicarage, Newton Abbot:

Belatedly, I came upon your letter about the 'Wells Decision' in the Church Times (6 June). The Commissioners' decisions about accommodation for clergy will always be subject to criticism especially when there has been limited or no consultation with prospective occupants.

I am currently living in a 1950s vicarage. It has been double glazed and has an adequate layer of insulation in the loft, but it cannot have cavity wall insulation. At the last count my total annual energy bill exceeded £2,500, which represents 10.5% of my gross stipend. One young priest in this area living in a large Victorian vicarage 6 years ago spent £3,000 on keeping the building adequately heated for family.

I am more than happy for the C of E to retain its large Georgian or Victorian vicarages, as long as today's clergy are not expected to occupy them. I fully endorse the idea that they should be retained as valuable assets and made available to be let. The Diocese of Exeter has let empty vicarages (awaiting new incumbents) for a number of years netting around £300,000 per annum.

I trust that your organisation will continue to press the point of retention and letting of old vicarages, given that so many which have been sold are now occupied by the very well-heeled.

From Dr. Anna Keay, Director, The Landmark Trust:

Thank you very much for your letter of 15 September and for the photo of the watercolour which we are very grateful to have and which we will put into our history album for Methwold Old Vicarage.



Methwold Old Vicarage in a 19th Century watercolour

From the Revd Paul Williamson, Hanworth, Feltham:

Some years ago the founder of SOP and I corresponded concerning the location of our endowment. I am still hoping to trace this. For instance we have £47,000 pre-war India Stock Certificates.

Also, the Rectory was built by the Rector at his own expense in 1802 and given to the parish. What redress is available as the diocese has 'stolen' it and sold it?

From Julian Barker, Framlingham:

This letter is pure pedantry but there is a common little mistake at the bottom of page 4 of the Newsletter (2014). The initial meeting which kicked off the Oxford Movement did indeed take place at Hadleigh Deanery but Newman wasn't present. Lots of books say he was because in his History of the Oxford

Movement Dean Church (who was there) says he remembered seeing Newman and (I think) Pewsey, walking arm in arm down the garden path. In fact Newman could not have been there as he was on his way back from Sicily as the dates on his letters show.

It is an interesting little example of the way in which even the memories of people of high intelligence and complete integrity can let them down.

Thank you for all you do. Having witnessed the disgraceful process leading to the sale of Thurlton Rectory in which I lived in Norfolk, I am a strong supporter.

From William Blakeney, South Lambeth:

The vicarage in the Market Place at Sleaford was marketed with a guide price of £280,000 and the buyers paid £250,000, which was more than ten per cent below the guide price. The new vicar of Sleaford lives in what was the Archdeacon's house, built in the 1990s, at Quarrington, which is in the next benefice. New houses there cost about £250,000. Archdeacon Barker has achieved his aim, without great financial advantage, and has himself moved to Lincoln.

From The Revd. Harry Edwards, Marlesford:

All I can say about the Rectory at Marlesford is that it is not going to be sold, but will be retained by the Diocese. This is great news. Best wishes.

From the Revd. Martin Weymont, Warminster:

Can you change your brief to include any good/large vicarage and not just old or historic or 'lovely' ones. Because, not to do so undermines a little the principles of our case in putting forward the keeping of the older ones which we see as our business. Surprisingly there are good post-war vicarages and rectories, themselves now being sold off with a view to being replaced by ever smaller guidelines. I would like SOP to stick up for those as well.

I have advised our member that although we have indeed been broadly concerned with pre-1939 parsonages we also support the retention of good post-war ones - Ed.

From Martin Vander Weyer, Helmsley:

Thank you very much for sending me the copy of your newsletter with Jeremy Hummerstone's article about Helmsley's parsonages. Please pass my congratulations to him for a thorough and informative piece of research.

You might also like to pass on a couple of points on his account of the fate of Canons Garth. Revd David Wilbourne was not so much 'self-conscious about living in such a distinguished old house' as fed up of living in such a

damp and cold house which the Diocese did so little to maintain. And it is not true that the parishioners offered no resistance to the sale of Canons Garth: I certainly offered resistance on behalf of the PCC, but the Diocese was determined to sell (as David Wilbourne had urged them to do) so the argument swiftly turned to the division of the sale proceeds, in which a satisfactory settlement was eventually reached.

Perhaps worth mentioning also, the schoolroom created by Revd Senior in an outhouse of Canons Garth which may once have been a slaughterhouse, and which was modernised in the Wilbourne era as the 'Hope Room', named after Archbishop David Hope. It too was sold to the new owners of Canons Garth, who have carried out a meticulous restoration of the whole property.



Canons Garth

ARTICLES

ST DIONIS VICARAGE

Anne Atkins

I was interested to hear that Anthony Jennings had visited my old house, St. Dionis' Vicarage in Parsons Green, West London, by kind courtesy of the current incumbent, the Revd. Tim Stillwell. It is a fine Victorian house of London stock brick with red brick dressings by the distinguished architect William White, known, like Butterfield and Street, for his churches and parsonages.

Anthony told me about his visit, and was interested in the original layout of the house. There is a central corridor hall with a cross passage behind the dining room and study, with the kitchen behind the cross passage. Rooms in parsonages inevitably undergo changes of use over the years and Anthony wondered if the current study (to the right of the entrance hall, as you go in through the front door) was originally the dining room, given that it is apparently the second largest room, and if the current kitchen might have been the study, though he noted there was a door direct from the entrance hall to the current study, suggesting this was for parishioner access without having to enter the main hall.

My husband Shaun is much better at discerning which bits of a house are what, and he worked out that, despite the access door, the current study was indeed the dining room, the room to the left was the study, and the upstairs bedroom above that, the drawing room. Several doors are not original: the door immediately to your right as you enter the hall (to the original dining room) is a later addition; as is the door at the foot of the stairs to the original study; also the current main kitchen door.

When we moved in the (small and pokey) modern kitchen was to the left, facing south, and what is now the kitchen (unless they've changed it) was a 60s-ish dining-cum-sitting room. This never worked, so we spent ten years waiting for the horrible modern kitchen the architect bought for us at great expense (and against our wishes) to fall to bits, so we could move the kitchen back where it was (and I hope still is), to its original location, which worked much better. We designed the kitchen as much as possible along the original Victorian lines, which is why it has no sink in it: we used the sink in the scullery beyond.

The little room facing south (the room that was the kitchen when we moved in) had originally been a corridor, with a doorway to the kitchen to its right, and two utility rooms to the left. To our great chagrin and distress, the church architect pulled out the original brick larder (which had stood for 100 years) from the corner when we moved in, because the mdf kitchen he bought had a

matching larder (which, as I say, lasted less than ten).

We put the conservatory on. It was a reject from a neighbour, so we collected it and stored it for a few years till we could work out how to make it fit. I gather ours fell to bits, but because it was there when the Stillwells moved in, the Diocese felt they had to replace it in perpetuum. So Shaun's ministry had some lasting good effect. Sadly the outside loo had to go, in order to make room for the conservatory. It was a lovely time-piece, with a tiled roof, but it did mean that the back of the house, where a modern family would spend a lot of time because we tend to live in kitchens more, was overshadowed and looking onto an ugly back yard which was never intended to be enjoyed, so it did give a lot more enjoyment and light, the way we left it.



When we were putting the kitchen in, we found marks on the walls which indicated that two large pine cupboards, which we had upstairs as toy cupboards (and another which sat in the church), had originally stood there as kitchen cupboards. We would have loved to have put them back, but it

wouldn't really have been practical in a modern kitchen because they wouldn't have given as much storage space as the cupboards we had made (at our own expense: or rather, a kind member of the church gave us some money to pay for this).

Shaun worked a lot of this out from the original plans.

It was a very practical, easy-to-live-in house. It was far better suited to parish ministry than anything the Church could buy if this glorious house was ever parted with, such as the “executive” homes they might think to replace it with. (Needless to say, we were asked several times during our fourteen years there if we wouldn't prefer a “normal” house in the parish. If we'd ever wavered, this wonderful working Vicarage would have been lost to the C of E for ever.) For instance, the porch was superb for feeding and sheltering tramps. They could come in out of the cold and public glare and enjoy a hot meal indoors, whilst we could keep the family safe because there was a huge, heavy door, with strong bobble glass and heavy duty Victorian bolts, between the porch and the rest of the house. No modern church architect I've ever met has understood how important this is, especially for a vicarage in such public view as this is.

At the bottom of the garden there is a door into the back of the church, so the congregation could spill into our garden for coffee after church on sunny mornings, and occasional church picnics and holiday clubs. I often thought how lovely it would be for a vicar's daughter's wedding, to come through after the ceremony into the vicarage garden (and friends in the congregation occasionally did this, using our house for their wedding receptions after Shaun had married them in the church) though sadly ours were not old enough by the time we left. Rather more trivially but extremely conveniently – given that our family ran most of the music, and we were often running against the clock – it was very easy for the vicarage family to get to the front of the church directly from the vicarage, through what we called our Secret Passage.

We often wondered if it was thanks to the Secret Passage – the fact that the house gives directly onto the vestry and thence to the church – which has saved this wonderful vicarage... so far. That, and because it was so public and so obviously a vicarage that many tramps used to call. We miss them all.

An early map in the study shows that this whole area of Fulham was still very rural at the time the house was built. We must all be very grateful that it is still as it should always be - a proper traditional working vicarage.

Anne Atkins is a novelist, writer and broadcaster, 'married to Shaun, Parson of Parson's Green for fourteen years'.

The Place of the Parsonage in Parochial Ministry Mervyn Wilson

This might sound rather a mouthful, but is there a better way to express one of SOP's primary concerns: that the parsonage can be a resource for mission. Going back to George Herbert (1593-1633), we find him writing "the parson is very exact in the governing of his house, making it a copy and a model for his parish.... The furniture of his house is very plain, but clean, whole and sweet as his garden can make. The poor, as well as those above alms, are welcome to his table...he sets them close by him, both for his own humility and their comfort; they are much cheered with such friendliness." Hospitality he sees as belonging to the man of God. His parsonage the place to exercise it.

In 1992 the Rural Theology Association organised a conference at Ecton House, Northampton, entitled *Public House or Private Convenience*. We spent some time discussing the title: it could equally have been *Private House or Public Convenience*. In his introduction the then Dean of Ely asked: "What is the appropriate style of house, what is the tool for the job in the country? Replacement with a tiny house can make a man's ministry much more difficult. The house should be appropriate to the job, to the Christian calling, to the family and to the life style". In this he was echoing George Herbert, but for the 20th century.

Now we come to 1995, when SOP was founded, which makes this its 20th anniversary. Noel Riley, shocked at the diocese's decision to sell Belchamp Otten rectory, gathered together concerned people and formed Save Our Parsonages. That was the sale of a commodious, not over large house, well sited, where successive incumbents had continued a tradition. The parsonage, writes A Tindal Hart, was the hub of village life. "We invited all the children of day or Sunday School, Richard Seymour of Kinwarton recorded in his diary on 1 Jan 1854".

There are accounts of similar gatherings elsewhere. Evidence of what went on is scrappy, found principally in diaries. Parson Woodforde describes the tithe dinners. In Victorian times the rectory garden party made its appearance. This I suppose was a forerunner of the fete. Before 1950 these were festive, without the need to make money. The clergy were paid, or earned their stipend, direct. Little money had to be found. I remember my grandfather, rector of Great Witley in Worcestershire, a living worth £6-800, chose to pay the diocesan quota himself in the 1930s. It was I think £35 and he was better off than most of his parishioners. From family photographs I know that village pageants were a feature there in the 1920s. Often the parson's wife organised them and they were held in the parsonage garden.

The parsonage was very much the home of the parsonage family – but having the space and convenience for confirmation classes and mothers'

meetings there. Some clergy took in young boarders and ran a school to supplement their income. It was a very different scene from today. Tindal Hart writes: “in every aspect of life the nineteenth-century rectory had become an oasis of cultured and gracious living in the midst of what was still only too often a savage or boorish village community..”

Moving on to the 20th century – 1914 marked a turning point. Less money, servants, disaffection with old Christian tradition. On the basis of what I have seen and heard, the social conscience of the clergy increased at that time and they had space. Some set aside a large room in the parsonage for parish use. In Bulwick (Northants) in the 1939 war there was a lending library and room for war effort activities, and the walled garden was used for a village pig club. At Brigstock a community hall was put up in the garden. At Lastingham a large room at the end of the house was set apart for parish activities.

After 1919 when Parochial Church Councils were set up in every parish, the parsonage was widely used for their meetings, in town and country. More recent years have revealed a marked division of belief and practice between those who look upon their parsonage as, in some way, a public house, in which they are privileged to live; and those who see it as a private place for the parson and his family. In Bermondsey in the 1970s people remembered Mrs Clive (not her real name) who met them at the door with a broom in her hand to sweep them out. My (our) practice was very different. One year we reckoned we gave out 2,000 cups of coffee and tea. The magazine was assembled on the dining room table; the children’s choir had its party in the rectory, PCC meetings, planning meetings and much else took place there. This in the inner city.

In the country I remember Leslie Francis, later Professor at Bangor and Warwick Universities and author of *Rural Anglicanism 1985*, took the view based on his experience as a rural NSM with house-for-duty, that he could run a youth club much more successfully in his house, than in a public hall. He used to say that it could be argued that the rectory was more useful than the church for its mission.

While I was rector of Bulwick 1978-2003, I ran a youth club for 9-14 year olds in the house. It was much more satisfactory than the village hall – with a large kitchen to toss pancakes; space in the house and garden to play games, and it was just right for the numbers - around 12 or so, being all the children in the village, with one or two others. In the summer the mothers & toddlers' group would hold their meetings in the garden.

The house was also large enough, when our five children were in their teens, to set up a room on the top floor for them, where they could make plenty of

noise and be unheard by a meeting below, and vice versa. In fact the rectory was the base for many meetings, as I was involved with many church activities, not all parochial. The house made an easy venue for them. We also had the space to make a refuge for a London boy who had got into trouble, and a local boy whose parents had moved to Scotland and he needed to finish his GCSEs. This larger parsonage made an excellent tool, as well as a family home, with its six bedrooms and two further rooms on the top floor, though only one bathroom.

At the Parsonage Today Conference 1993, it was reported that the function of a parsonage will depend on the incumbent and the expectations of the parish. To this end maximum flexibility is needed in design and adequate space. In particular it may provide the only adequate place for church and community meetings. A room which can hold 25 people would be a minimum requirement in most cases. There should be no rigid distinction between 'private' and 'public' side; many areas will need to be adaptable for both purposes.

At an SOP conference in 1999 *A House for all Seasons: The Parsonage Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* it was reported on Size of House: there is plenty of evidence to show that clergy families vary in size; that some spouses look for a place to work from home; that particularly in rural parishes the house provides the best meeting place for some parish activities and work with children, young persons and adults. But space is needed for all this and to allow different activities to go on at the same time without causing disruption and stress for the family. There should be an appropriate space, both for specific activities and for combinations of usages.

But there is another view and it is the one that the Church Commissioners hold, and which seems to be held by most dioceses at present. The parsonage is no more than a private house for the incumbent. I hope the other view with its long and beneficial history in the CofE is not set for extinction. It never was the view nor the practice of all clergy. And now even less. True, there is less need. Churches and halls are better fitted. Parishioners may well make their own houses available for meetings or confirmation groups or lent lunches and the like.

I am sad that the tradition may be lost of the house in which public and private are not distinct. I am sad because the private house view works against the place of the parson in the parish. But where now are the parsons? It has also allowed the dioceses to put their financial needs first and to the exclusion of the social and the pastoral, in effect to counter the very gospel it proclaims.

Yet many clergy now prefer to move away from the known house by the church to somewhere private and unrecognisable, and so separate their

public and private lives. We applaud those clergy who are happy to open themselves and their house, and offer a ministry that is all of one piece and based in one place, and we look for central church policies which support and make this possible.

The Revd. Mervyn Wilson is a founder member of The Rural Theology Association and a member of the SOP committee.

Was Peter's House the First Parsonage?

Naomi Bowen

According to the Biblical Archaeology Society, 'Italian excavators working in Capernaum may have actually uncovered the remnants of the humble house of Peter that Jesus called home while in Capernaum. Buried beneath the remains of an octagonal Byzantine martyrium church, excavators found the ruins of a rather mundane dwelling dating to the first century B.C.

'Although slightly larger than most, the house was simple, with coarse walls and a roof of earth and straw. Like most early Roman-period houses, it consisted of a few small rooms clustered around two open courtyards. Despite later proving to be one of the most exciting Biblical archaeology discoveries, the house appeared quite ordinary. According to the excavators, however, it is what happened to the house after the middle of the first century A.D. that marked it as exceptional and most likely the house of Peter, the home of Jesus in Capernaum.

'In the years immediately following Jesus' death, the function of the house changed dramatically. The house's main room was completely plastered over from floor to ceiling—a rarity for houses of the day. At about the same time, the house's pottery, which had previously been household cooking pots and bowls, now consisted entirely of large storage jars and oil lamps. Such radical alterations indicate that the house no longer functioned as a residence but instead had become a place for communal gatherings ... a key factor in how Christianity began'.

The fact that this building was later converted into a church suggests that it was known, or at least believed, to have strong links to the beginnings of Christianity. The house was certainly situated just a few yards away from the synagogue which saw so many crucial events of Jesus' ministry. It was in this synagogue, for instance, that he gave his famous "Bread of Life" discourse (John 6: 24-59). And it was also in this synagogue that he healed the man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1: 21-28).

Immediately after that miracle, according to Mark's account, Jesus entered into Peter's house, and healed the apostle's mother-in-law who had been confined to bed with a fever. The fact that she lived there, along with Peter and his wife, Peter's brother Andrew, and possibly other family members, suggests that the house was indeed 'slightly larger than most' as stated above.

However, a few days later, when Jesus was once again staying with Peter in Capernaum, the house, large as it was, could not begin to hold the crowds that came to hear his teaching. Thus the four men who'd brought their paralysed friend for healing found themselves having to break through the

roof in order to lay him down in front of Jesus. It must have been a relief to them that the roof was only made of 'earth and straw' as described in the BAS account.



Aerial View of St. Peter's House (top left) and the synagogue (bottom right). Note the proximity of Peter's house to the synagogue. (Biblical Archaeology Review, Sept/Oct 1993)

From the photograph it is clear that it would have taken only a few minutes to walk from the house to the place of worship, while yet being physically separated from it (as recommended in the Church Commissioners' *Design Guide for Parsonages*). The house was evidently built of 'traditional and proven materials' (another desirable feature), and the roof made of earth and straw would have provided some insulation from the heat in summer and the cold in winter. However, it was a flat roof, entirely appropriate for the local climate, and lending itself to a variety of uses – definitely not recommended for a parsonage in the UK!

It's also clear from the account of the healing of the paralysed man (Mark 2: 1-12) that the house had not been designed, as urged by the Church Commissioners, to keep the general public at bay – no 'strong, lockable gate' or 'hostile planting' (prickly shrubs) stood between the crowds and Jesus ministering inside the house. Even the roof was not impregnable. According to Wikipedia the roof was never properly repaired after this incursion, since it states that 'the hole in the roof is still visible from where the paralysed man

had been let through' – though I don't remember this being pointed out when I visited the site in 1999.

But of course the main reason for being interested in this house at all is the fact that Peter is thought to have lived in it, and Jesus to have stayed there, performing some of his most memorable miracles while he did so. Peter's transformation into the first pope lay ahead in the future, but Jesus was already at work laying the foundations of the Church which all members of the clergy, now as in the past, seek to serve to the best of their abilities, wherever – and in whatever type of house – they find themselves called to live and work.

Naomi Bowen is a member of the SOP committee

Parsonage Retention Principles

1. **General:** clergy vary in age, taste, style of ministry, capacity and size of family. It is wiser to retain some larger houses in every diocese.
 - The house can be a visible sign of the incumbent's presence and position as leader of the local church. In the 19th century church, hall and parsonage were often placed together as the focus for the local mission. Nowadays proximity to the church carries the advantage of security for the church building and a guaranteed sympathetic neighbour.
 - The house is both the clergy and family home, and the working base. It has been, and should still be, a strong symbol of the presence of the Church and a house in which the local church and community have an interest.
 - Hospitality has been and is seen as a sign of Christian welcome, to be exercised in palace and parsonage.

2. **Reasons given** for changing or selling an existing house:
 - Owing to pastoral reorganisation it is not wanted for an incumbent. But the parish will in some cases have a need for a Church house, for example to house a self-supporting minister. This should be encouraged and respected. In an enlarged benefice there may be a case for a larger rather than a smaller house to be retained.
 - Comfort of the parson and family. After the second world war this was a major reason. It rarely is today and most of the remaining older houses are very manageable, and often preferred by clergy even when more expensive to run (see below).
 - Running costs: some older houses can be expensive to maintain on the grounds of large size or dilapidation. Sensible investment will reduce these costs. There is no rule of thumb here. Some older houses cost no more than newer ones. Dilapidation may be due to lack of routine maintenance. As to the parson's running costs, newer is not necessarily cheaper. Clergy will also weigh any loss in warmth against the gains in use and attractive living.
 - Cost of replacement: When a house is replaced, historically there has been little gain and often even a net loss. Despite the popularity of old vicarages, the Church has not benefited as it should have and much of the gain, where houses have been sold,

has gone to private buyers. All new builds have an environmental impact which needs to be taken into account.

- Sale of houses not to be replaced: there will be an immediate cash gain. At the same time an appreciating asset has been lost for ever, so that over the years of parsonage sales the Church has now lost a huge capital sum, as well as a footprint in communities which it may never be able to replace in the future if needs change. Environmental audit: older houses are often better built with materials sourced locally. Today's building practice is less environmentally sustainable in terms of the 'embodied energy' involved in building and shorter length of life. The benefits of maintaining existing housing stock are underrated when conducting environmental audits.
3. **Gardens:** Many clergy see gardening as a chore, and have no inclination towards it. Older houses generally have gardens, which require some cost or effort to maintain. Against that parishes have often been able to make use of parsonage gardens for fetes, meetings, and other activities, which has helped them to meet the share of Church costs increasingly demanded of them, as well as keeping the Church at the heart of the community. There are even some clergy who find in gardening a healthful activity and a way of demonstrating care for God's world, a place to grow good food, vegetables, fruit and so on, even to point to the way in which heaven is found on earth.
4. **Questions** a diocese should look at without bias:
- Is the decision a result of any ideological agenda aimed at housing all clergy equally?
 - Is the pressure coming from just one individual priest? In our view a decision should never be taken in the interest of one incumbent, but for future incumbents and the community as a whole.
 - What is the view of the PCC?
 - What is the view of the congregation?
 - What is the view of the wider community?
 - Is the parish or local community willing to assist in maintenance costs of an older or larger parsonage?
 - What will be the impact on the local mission of the Church?
 - Can a replacement be bought or built which will satisfy the general requirements set out in paragraph 1?
 - Should a 'redundant' house be kept and let out?

SOP CODE OF PRACTICE

Little regard has been accorded to the heritage of the Church or its fine buildings. Some archdeacons and diocesan secretaries have even expressed hostility to the concepts of the conservation of, or even the community value of, traditional parsonages.

Dioceses have often made use of a vacancy in an incumbency in order to sell a parsonage, and little account has been taken of the fact that in many cases the parsonage was given by a benefactor, patron or previous incumbent expressly for the benefit of the parish in perpetuity.

Routine maintenance and repairs are often not carried out, the reason given being that funds are insufficient because of priorities elsewhere, and so the Church has been unable to get a good selling price of parsonages on disposal, or even market income from lettings during periods of vacancy. In some dioceses, parsonages have been left empty, wasting money.

These sales of parsonages have often been carried through in the teeth of opposition from churchwardens and PCCs, with little serious dialogue, and resultant damage to the relationship between the diocesan authorities and the parish, and parishes often secure no benefit from the proceeds of sales, which are usually taken away and placed in a central diocesan fund. By losing its parsonage, the parish has also lost a valuable facility for local fundraising.

Even if there is any consultation, there is a widespread perception that diocesan officials have already made the decision to sell, and thus the representations of the churchwardens, PCC, and other objectors will not be taken seriously. The Church Commissioners, the appeal body, are also thought not to be fully and transparently impartial, and this causes further discontent.

There is a fund of talent and local knowledge available to the Church through its vital workers at parish level, for which present policy has insufficient regard. Often, the local community at large, not just clergy and churchgoers, feels the loss of a vital amenity. This has led to loss of morale to the detriment of the mission of the Church.

The aim of the SOP Code of Practice is simply to allow for the consultation that is normally so sadly lacking, and its text is set out below.

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR PARSONAGES (revised October 2010)

This code of practice sets out a procedure to be adopted by the bishop, the archdeacon, other diocesan officers, the parish priest, the PCC, the churchwardens, any parishioners who wish to be represented and where appropriate the patron of the living (all below called 'the parties'), when considering the future of a parsonage.

Within the framework of practice and the law, the parties agree that it is important that the Church is seen to represent natural justice as well as to abide by ecclesiastical law in all dealings with parsonages.

Accordingly, whenever it is first contemplated that the role of a parsonage is to be changed, or the parsonage is to be altered, modified or sold:

1. The diocese shall call a meeting, prior to any action being taken, which all of the parties shall be invited to attend, to be held on a stated date, subject to agreement on a revised date if necessary.

2. The meeting shall consider:

(i) The house, its state of repair, its convenience and maintenance cost;

(ii) Pastoral gains or losses consequent on retention or disposal and/or replacement;

(iii) Economic losses as well as gains consequent on proposed disposal;

(iv) The value of the house as a symbol of Church in community and as a tool for mission;

(v) The historic and conservation value of the house and garden.

3. If disposal of the existing house is proposed by any party, retention or adaptation for alternative pastoral use must be considered first.

4. If there is disagreement on costings, the PCC and diocese must jointly obtain a second independent survey report, such report to have evidential value equal to any original survey.

5. Following the meeting, a report shall be prepared and agreed between all parties.

6. The parties must then seek to reach agreement on the appropriate course of action. An action plan must be drawn up and signed by the parties.

7. If the cost of ongoing maintenance of the existing parsonage is agreed to be significantly higher than the diocesan average, the PCC shall be given the opportunity to identify additional funds to assist the diocese in maintenance. A local trust fund may be the solution.
8. If unanimous agreement cannot be reached, the matter must be put to arbitration, either in agreed manner or under the appeal process to the Church Commissioners.
9. It is acknowledged that many parsonages were built or improved from local benefactions by patrons, incumbents or others, whose intent was that they should be held in perpetuity for the parish. It is further acknowledged that diocesan ownership of parsonages derives from Measures, not from acquisition by the diocese for financial consideration at market value. If, therefore, it is agreed or adjudged that the parsonage is to be sold, the diocese shall, before placing any proceeds from the disposal in a diocesan account, consult with the PCC to determine whether those proceeds should be 'ring fenced' for the benefit of the parish or benefice (for example, to be credited to a parish fund for maintenance and repair, and/or to compensate the parish for lost meeting facilities). If compensation is agreed, the proceeds shall, to the extent necessary, be so 'ring fenced'. It is recognised that the loss of a parsonage may reduce fundraising opportunities and mean potential increased costs to the parish.



