

SAVE OUR PARSONAGES

Record of CONFERENCE held on

27th APRIL 2016

at St. Mary Abbots Centre,
Vicarage Gate, London W8 4HN,
to celebrate twenty years of SOP
and to look forward



Present: Revd Prebendary Gillean Craig, Vicar of St Mary Abbots with Christ Church and St Philip, Kensington (host), Revd Gerard Moate (facilitator and SOP member),
SOP Committee Members: Anthony Jennings (Director), Naomi Bowen, Revd Jeremy Hummerstone, Jennifer Jennings, Noël Riley, Valerie Robinson, Elizabeth Simon, Anne Toms, Revd Mervyn Wilson *and*
SOP members and supporters: Revd Julian Barker, William Blakeney, Gary Codd, Catherine Croft, Ven Norman Russell, David Shacklock, Robert van Mesdag,
[18 people]

Welcome to St Mary Abbots

Fr Gillean Craig welcomed members to St Mary Abbots Centre. He had been a priest in London for thirty-seven years and had valued so much having houses which could be used traditionally as both a home and a centre for the community. He thought the name 'The Old Vicarage' was so sad, as it indicated one house fewer where clergy could live and minister in their parish. He was grateful to serve in London Diocese where the Bishop of London was patron of SOP and which had the resources to afford to be long-sighted and hold on to property. He believed that most clergy knew that theirs was a public office and many were sorry to lose the historic parsonages.

Welcome and Introduction to the Day

Anthony Jennings (Director of SOP) welcomed members to the conference and introduced the facilitator, Revd Gerard Moate, a longstanding member of SOP, formerly Vicar of Dedham in Suffolk (and a generous host to the SOP AGM in 2005), now Chaplain and history master at Bloxham School, Oxfordshire. He outlined the programme for the day.

What is SOP?

AJ set out the objects of SOP: to save traditional parsonages which contribute to a variety of clergy housing because these are central to the church's mission to their communities. Diocesan officials saw parsonages as just a house and their sale as a useful source of income. But we saw them as a symbol of Church that anchors Church to community. We supported and advised parishes which come to us when the future of the parsonage is challenged. Dealing with Dioceses could be a daunting prospect for PCCs and we helped them navigate the legal framework. This was a core activity but we also research, study, write and promote the role of parsonages to facilitate mission in the church; we liaise with bodies like the Church Commissioners; the Committee meets regularly and we hold an Annual Meeting with Members in a historic parsonage plus occasional conferences, visits to historic parsonages and other events. Our administration is low-key, appropriate to our resources. We have roughly equal numbers of lay and clergy members, plus corporate supporters. New members often come via the website.

Review of twenty years of SOP – *part I* – the first ten years – 1994 to 2004

Noël Riley, founder and first Director of SOP, described the origin and early history of SOP. She herself had a background in the church as one grandfather was a clergyman, the other being Athelstan Riley, a well-known Anglo Catholic layman. In October 1994 the Archdeacon of Colchester announced that the local benefice of three parishes would be amalgamated with another benefice and the vicarage of Belchamp Otten (Essex) would be sold. She and other local parishioners were angry and energised. They joined forces with a nearby parish, Clare (Suffolk), which was also fighting a vicarage disposal. By December they had raised pledges of £10,000 to maintain Belchamp Otten Rectory but the diocese would not accept this offer of support. In a joint meeting with Clare they set up Save Our Parsonages, recognising that their experience was replicated across the country. She obtained publicity from Dixie Nichols, Giles Worsley, *Country Life* and *Save Britain's Heritage*, among others. On 21 December, she was contacted by Rachel Kelly, a journalist, which resulted in a half page article in *The Times*. This created a huge amount of interest – and work. She was interviewed on the *Sunday Programme* (both sides in the argument were featured), which she felt went well and was broadly supportive. SOP began to gather members, including Revd Bill Hurdman of King's Lynn, Revd Mervyn Wilson of Bulwick, Revd Tony Hodgson of the *Rural Theology Association*, academic Leslie Francis of Bangor University, Revd John Hawthorne of Tetbury, Revd Anthony Footitt of Norfolk, Revd Julian Barker of Repton, Roger France – an architectural historian, Anthea Jones, also a historian. Significant early supporters, as distinct from members, included the author Ronald Blythe.

Noël said that SOP could not save parsonages – only parishes could do that, but we could help. Mainly we were not successful – Belchamp Otten was lost and another notable example was Pinchbeck (Lincolnshire). We learned that the process was weighted towards dioceses and Church Commissioners, who got more time than parishioners to make their case. There were some successes, including New Milton (Hampshire) with its large much-used garden, where the same incumbent was still in post, though this house is likely to be sold when the incumbent retires.

SOP had conducted a survey to find out how many old (pre 1939) parsonages there were. Because many of the dioceses contacted were unhelpful, we could not do a full survey but the information which was gained was very useful. We collected information on how the vicarages were used and found a wide range of uses from bell ringer groups to gardening groups. It was clear that dioceses were often leaving these older houses to deteriorate, with the inevitable effect that when they were sold, mainly just to balance diocesan accounts in a particular year, they fetched only a minimum sale price. Senior church leadership, lay and clerical, were too often financially illiterate, not least on property matters.

In the early years the SOP Committee met annually at Cambridge, which always gave Noël a renewed sense of purpose. There was an annual Members' AGM, the first one being held in Mervyn Wilson's Rectory at Bulwick (Northants.) In 1999, SOP had held a residential conference at Glenfall House in the Diocese of Gloucester. This brought together all the different interests: Church Commissioners, diocesan secretaries and surveyors, lay and clergy members of SOP, and had been very energising. SOP had drawn up a suggested Code of Practice for all parties to follow when a parsonage disposal was proposed but dioceses would not co-operate. Too often they simply felt they had a right to hand down edicts to be obeyed.

There were successes: Noël listed Marlesford (Suffolk), Dedham (Essex), Trent (Dorset), Lastingham (North Yorkshire), Repton (Derbyshire), St Endellion (Cornwall), Great Torrington (Devon).

Noël finished by thanking AJ for taking on the Directorship and contributing so effectively to SOP's continuing activity.

Review of twenty years of SOP – part II – 2004 to the present

Anthony Jennings became Director of SOP in 2004 and spoke about the past ten years under his direction.

In 2005 we updated the Code of Practice, to which we advocated all parties involved should adhere when considering the future of a parsonage, and sent copies to all Bishops, Archdeacons, Diocesan Secretaries and Surveyors, Parsonage Board Chairs and Church Commissioners. We received 21 responses from 19 dioceses (about 40% of the total). Not one accepted that there was a problem with current practice; 75% thought their practice was fine and 35% thought the Code was unnecessary or misguided. Nobody suggested 'improvements', though three Diocesan Secretaries did send helpful comments. The general reaction was negative – there was no need for change. In 2005 when the new Clergy Terms of Service were being debated we submitted a position paper on our opposition to the **abolition of the clergy freehold**, which had always been fundamental to clergy status. The abolition would enable parsonages to be transferred to the dioceses to be sold off at any time, without waiting for a vacancy.

In 2007 we distributed a leaflet to General Synod members expressing our views with regard to the freehold of property. General Synod decided not to change the legislation which gave freehold of the parsonage to the incumbent. The battle for the freehold of property had been won in Synod. Our role in helping to retain the freehold of property was perhaps SOP's greatest success. In 2007 the Church Commissioners issued accounts which showed that dioceses were balancing their books only by selling off parsonages. We obtained publicity in *The Telegraph* for our comments on that. We met the Third Church Estates Commissioner to make representations about the CC appeals proposals. We challenged the extent to which the appeals process was actually independent.

In 2008 we wrote to forty-one diocesan secretaries asking for information about their 'vulnerable parsonages' *i.e.* parsonages identified by them as old, too large and expensive, or otherwise suitable to be disposed of. Twenty replied but only five provided information. Others said that the information was 'not readily available', 'confidential', 'commercially sensitive', 'pastorally sensitive'. We asked for reasoning but got no helpful comments. During this period we also lobbied General Synod and in **2010** we held a Fringe Event at Church House during General Synod, facilitated by Anne Toms as a General Synod member (2005-10), to explain and advocate our case. We joined the Georgian Group in organising tours of historic working parsonages: in Suffolk (2008) and Dorset (2009). Finally, in **2009** we revised our Code of Practice to focus on dioceses.

In 2011 we worked on developing a set of principles that a diocese ought to consider when the future of a parsonage was in question. **In 2012** we sent these Parsonage Retention Principles to all Diocesan Secretaries, Archdeacons, Chairs of Parsonage Boards and Diocesan Surveyors (nearly 200 in mailing). We received five replies. Lincoln said that they broadly agreed with our views and Blackburn raised issues as to what their aims with regard to parsonages should be. Also in **2012** the Princes Regeneration Trust suggested an award for the diocese with the best-preserved traditional parsonage. Only one diocese (London) showed interest and they later withdrew.

We organised further visits to historic parsonages: **in 2013** to Suffolk (another joint tour with the Georgian Group); **in 2014** a SOP tour in the Oundle area and **in 2015** to Devizes. We hope to visit Oxfordshire parsonages this summer.

Summing up, AJ said that we have continued to meet the Church Commissioners(CC) over issues, most recently over the Ashwell (St Albans) case where a PCC member suggested that the CC had intervened to influence the PCC before the appeal hearing. When we meet relationships are cordial but the CC have made no concessions when we have suggested changes to their process. We have supported the churches' environmental campaign, *Shrinking the Footprint*, and emphasised the sustainability inherent in the construction of traditional parsonages and their retention. We have good relationships with other bodies and amenity groups and, for example, the Church of England Environmental Officer. We continue to comment where appropriate on proposals, for example most recently the Archbishops' Council *Reform and Renewal* programme. AJ noted that the simplification proposals all seemed to favour dioceses over parishes. The website was valuable.

Casework continued, an average of ten cases open at any one time, though recently the numbers were diminishing; he did not know why this should be. But in all our activity there was one constant, namely the lack of engagement by dioceses.

Comments from Members

Members thanked the past and present Directors and the Committee of SOP for all their hard work and activity.

AJ was asked about the effect for SOP of his book *The Old Rectory*, published in 2009. AJ said it was impossible to know: he had included the SOP campaign but had consciously aimed to be objective. The first edition (some 2000 copies) had sold out but the publishers had not reprinted. There might be a reprint with a new publisher.

Julian Barker thought it would be a huge benefit to the Church of England if the care of parsonages was transferred from Dioceses to parishes. Diocesan surveyors use contractors who often charge more than necessary and certainly more than the local builders parishes are likely to use. He noted that PCCs are responsible for the maintenance of churches although they often had no expertise on medieval buildings. But PCCs do know about houses and many are well-equipped to organise their maintenance. Dioceses would still levy repair contributions from PCCs, held in a protected account, and if PCCs want to spend more they could raise this locally. *Jeremy Hummerstone* commented that Church of Ireland parishes had glebe wardens to do just this job – be responsible for the land and buildings belonging to the parish.

Talk by the Director: Where are we now? SOP's successes and failures.

Among achievements were:-

- Research undertaken by Angela Cook, until recently a member of the Committee, showed that we had saved about 50 parsonages (of which 40 have been reported in Newsletters). Most of these were saved by the Diocese agreeing to outside funding, for example from dedicated Trusts or Friends groups. SOP had helped by supporting parishes, scrutinising diocesan claims *etc.*
- We had made Bishops aware of SOP policies and issues;
- We constituted a useful network, including patrons and allies in other amenity societies;
- We provided the strongest available single source of expertise on parsonage issues;
- We had maintained healthy finances;
- We had published an annual Newsletter;
- We had established the Litten Archive based on member Julian Litten's collection since 1984 of all advertisements in *Country Life* featuring parsonages/former parsonages.

But there had been significant failures:

- A lot more parsonages had been lost than saved – probably some 120 to 150, judging by case files;
- We had not changed Diocesan policy or altered their mindset;
- We had not reached all potential supporters; we needed more members;
- We had failed to get sufficient staff or volunteers to enable us to act effectively, for example in reaching the media;

Did this catalogue of failure suggest that SOP had reached the end of the road, and should retire?

AJ said that there were also external factors which affected our ability to succeed:-

- These included the growth of centralised power in the church, which was institutionally unreceptive to parish views. PCCs were culturally inclined to believe that the diocese knows best and church bureaucracy regarded bodies like SOP as outsiders, with whom it was unnecessary to engage;
- Parsonages were not regarded, and therefore valued, as ‘church buildings’;
- Where parsonages were concerned there was an unenlightened attitude to history and heritage; the buildings were seen as old and out of date and problems to be sold or otherwise disposed of; the recent focus on environmental and sustainability issues had been misused to reinforce this, failing to recognise the significant environmentally positive features of older buildings;
- The policy of treating parsonages as purely private dwellings and discouraging their social and community use had resulted in vicars being distanced from the centre of the community, symbolically and often also in practice when centrally placed parsonages had been sold; this development has had a negative effect on congregations;
- Movements like ‘fresh expressions’ were contributing to uncertainty about the future of the parish system;
- Most dioceses were managing decline, an exception being London Diocese with Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). AJ noted that HTB was a strong supporter of SOP because it needed larger parsonages to meet its ministry needs.

The above suggested that the tide was against us but it could be argued that sentiment was with us. It was widely accepted that dioceses had not managed their finances well. Evidence from surveys suggested that most clergy wanted to keep the parish system. Parishes were often alienated from dioceses. Fewer historic parsonages were being sold (although perhaps this was just because most had gone). Politicians were advocating local communities having more say in decisions that affected them (localism).

In **comments** which followed, Members commented that a success rate of 50 out of 200 was not a bad record and should not be discounted. It was noted that General Synod had voted for the retention of the clergy freehold of parsonages. But it was also the case that dioceses were advised to include the value of parsonages in their accounts as capital assets.

Taking into account the issues raised above, and looking ahead, AJ suggested that perhaps we needed to widen our remit from parsonages to include parishes. Should we be about

‘Saving Our Parishes’? Should we link more closely with others campaigning for change, for example HTB? What other church trends might have an impact on our future?

SOP Goals

AJ said that our immediate goals were to persuade dioceses to keep parsonages for mission and community life in parishes and to make the best use of them financially by retaining them in church ownership and, if they were not immediately needed by the church, using them to earn income from letting them out. Our secondary goals were to convince the Church that it needs symbolic buildings prominent in the community to survive and prosper, and to promote the parish system, and to get rid of bureaucracy by devolving power and responsibility to local communities. Underlying all this was the aim to support the increase in congregations and halt decline and to promote spirituality and counter secularism.

Gerard Moate then contributed his thoughts on SOP goals. He quoted Ronnie Corbett “the drain on Britain’s gold reserves has finally stopped – they’ve all gone!” Perhaps there was a similar reason for the decline in parsonage sales. We needed to widen our aims and appeal. How did we move from complaining as a method of campaigning to constructive engagement with the bureaucracy. We needed humour and we needed truth, that is, to keep on exposing facts. We needed to find the arguments which would appeal to bureaucrats so that they adopted our preferred policy as their line of least resistance.

Julian Barker repeated his view that giving parishes responsibility for parsonage maintenance was the answer. Others pointed out that this could be complicated in multi-parish benefices and that the recent *Review of Church Buildings* Report had pointed out that many congregations were so small that they were no longer able to find funds for church repairs, so it was unrealistic to think they could take on parsonages. *David Shacklock* suggested that the policy could be piloted in a few areas. *Norman Russell* said that we needed to be realistic about the changes in Church culture and in incumbents. These days partners were likely both to be working and many younger clergy could not cope with a large house and garden. This was accepted but it was still the case that others would welcome the opportunity for using a more spacious and flexible parsonage for mission. We needed variety.

After lunch the conference resumed and focussed on discussion of the future. Among issues raised and points made were:

Gary Codd expressed the view that we should play to our strengths and expertise, and continue to concentrate on what we are good at, namely saving parsonages, without being deflected by other considerations.

SOP members’ average age was fairly high. While this might just reflect the fact that this was the age group which was concerned about SOP issues, we needed to consider how SOP could continue if it did not attract younger people. GM mentioned that when Bloxham School (where he now serves as Chaplain) was considering how to get more former pupils

to attend alumni events it concluded that it needed to:-

- Organise events in the early evening when people were finishing work;
- Hold them centrally in London;
- Hold them in venues which people would be curious to see.

Various suggestions were made in discussion of this. If SOP were able to attract some younger people we could build on this to attract more, for example by finding someone who would do a regular blog. We could try inviting young people (under 45 years) via *Church Times* or HTB. Fr Gillean Craig might help with advice. We might focus on university towns, perhaps advertising in seminaries, and emphasise SOP aims as a tool for mission. We should highlight our concern that the disposal of historic parsonages was depriving rural areas of yet another community resource. An occasional flyer to theological colleges for their annual magazine was suggested. Venues suggested for possible events included St Paul's Cathedral (the crypt facilities), Christ Church Spitalfields, St Michael and All Angels in Bedford Park, Holy Trinity Brompton(HTB). GM suggested we contact Dean John Hall at Westminster Abbey. Garden parties might be a good idea.

Who might move this thinking forward? It was agreed that the Committee should begin the process while seeking contributions and ideas from others. AJ confirmed that he would not retire from the Directorship until a successor was available.

We should not lose sight of the earlier suggestion that the responsibility for parsonage maintenance should be returned to parishes, which should be free to enlist outside support. This could be tried on a pilot basis in selected areas.

Gerard Moate summed up that we seemed to have reached a common mind that SOP had a future. But it needed to change, to find new people to take on the task, to partner with new people and organisations and be prepared for different ways of working and for youthful enthusiasm and even ignorance. Our goal was to help the Church to respect every member and be organic. In this way we could help the church be more effective and serve its greater purpose.

The meeting closed with thanks to Gerard for his facilitation, to St Mary Abbots for hosting, to the Committee for organising and to everyone who had taken part. It was followed by Evening Prayer in St Mary Abbots Church; the liturgy included a special prayer for SOP.

Elizabeth Simon
17 June, 2016