

National Ringing Centre (NaRC) at the Old Black Lion, Marefair – Northampton
Update 20/12/22

As you will be aware there is a plan to develop a National Ringing Centre (NaRC), conveniently placed for incoming trainees just next to the railway station in Northampton, based around St Peters Church. As the church has been deconsecrated, the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) is now involved with maintaining the structure of St Peters and has developed a plan to restore the Old Black Lion (OBL) next door to its former glory as a 16th Century, and some say as early as the 15th Century, Public House. This venture would then provide the funds to preserve the Church through the years. As part of this venture the CCT asked Central Council of Church Bellringers (CCCBR) if they had a vision that could result in some use for the buildings whilst drinking some beer!!

2022 has seen much planning and activity from the CCT. Having received grants totalling £2.2m they have been able to do the following:

- Negotiate a 30 year lease on the building from West Northamptonshire District Council, the new owners. This lease has not yet been concluded, but all parties seem positive.
- Appoint Architects to develop the final plans.
- Achieve detailed planning permission for the scheme.
- Strip out from the building anything that may be of use elsewhere in the scheme, is dangerous or broken or is in the way of making the building safe and water tight. Then they stabilised the remaining elements
- Involved specialists in researching the bare building to understand any essential heritage elements that should be preserved and shown off.
- Appointed an operator to run the OBL following completion of the works. They are in advanced discussion on the tenant's input into the final version of the plans.
- Selected a main contractor for the works. They are due to start work on site on a 12 month contract from January 23.
- Consider the inflationary impact of the last 12 months on the project cost and reapply to the Heritage Lottery for further funds to meet the shortfall. I do not know the final result of that application, but again they seem positive.

The uncertainties of the project have meant that we have not been able to progress our detailed planning for the NaRC as far or fast as we would have liked. But following the above work we are now ready to take the brakes off.

Initially Chris FitzGerald, for the Guild, and Simon Linford, for CCCBR, were involved in keeping up to speed with the project. In autumn Giles Willson came on board to start connecting with the local Ringing School and recently Alistair Donaldson has become involved to bring his experience with training to bear. A business plan has been developed to consider the structure, marketing, financing, availability of trainers, facilities, courses and outreach for the NaRC.

A Company Limited by Guarantee has been established as the vehicle that will operate the National Ringing Centre to guarantee its financial independence from PDG, CCCBR and CCT.

With 12 months to go this team has developed a number of key actions to continue to take the project forward and these will be shared out amongst an ever increasing group so that we can share the load and start to make the dream a reality. They will be in touch, wait for the tap on the shoulder. They will also seek input from all interested parties as to how we can avoid mistakes and make the NaRC successful, please give us your thoughts – look out for an on-site briefing session for all PDG members in late March.

2023 will be the year when it needs to happen.

Chris FitzGerald.