

December 2010 Report on St John's Russian Orthodox Church, Colchester.

Introduction

St John's Orthodox Church stands just outside Colchester town centre, fifty minutes by train from Liverpool Street Station in London. On a site of nearly one acre and at the highest point in the town (33 metres), it is the largest wooden church in the UK. Originally Colchester Garrison Church, it opened in 1856 and was closed in April 2007. As such, St John's Orthodox Church, which used to have seating for 900, has an area of 650 square metres (6,500 square feet).

After a lengthy and complex process, in September 2008 we bought this disused Church for the Diocese of Great Britain and Ireland of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. This was thanks to the generous gift of £180,000 from the many benefactors who responded to our Internet appeal, which was launched in January 2008. Between September and November 2008 we had the 800 square metres of the Church, chapel, meeting room and office, and the separate St John's Hall, converted for Orthodox use, being entirely refurbished and equipped for Orthodox worship.

Many parishioners worked very hard on this, although the heavier and more complex work was carried out by several local enterprises. The cost of purchase and of all this work, together with the acquisition from Moldova of the widest iconostasis in this country (15 metres), came to approximately £157,500. The main Church was dedicated to St John of Shanghai, who was responsible for our Diocese between 1951 and 1963, and the chapel was dedicated to All the Saints of these Isles.

Over the next two years further improvements and other minor repairs, at the time not urgent or else not apparent, have been made. These have cost another £12,500. It can therefore be said that the Church was 'finished' only in November 2010, at a total cost of £170,000. These improvements have been as follows:

Improvements and Repairs

- a. In September 2009 six wooden icon-shrines which had been made for six large icons were mounted on pillars in the Church.
- b. In November 2009 fourteen large canvas frescoes were made and fixed to the walls.
- c. Also in November 2009 four oil radiators were bought.
- d. In January 2010 six different coloured sets of deacon's vestments were bought.
- e. On account of the weight of thawing snow sliding from the roof in January 2010, guttering came away from the side of the Church roof in two places. Also in early February, an attempt was made to steal lead ridging on top of the meeting-room. This failed because the lead had been sealed. Necessary repairs were carried out in February.
- f. In February 2010 the vents in the roof were covered with breathable membrane, allowing ventilation but now making sure that snow, rain, leaves and insects could never get in. The Church became much warmer as a result.

g. Also in February tree surgeons pruned the 105-foot high lime-tree in the Church gardens.

h. Following an enquiry we had made, in March 2010 EDF confirmed that our electricity supply was not up to standard. It was modernised, at no cost to ourselves, giving us a 100 amp supply.

i. Also in March the chapel door, which had been damaged in January, was repaired, the front Church doors were planed, making it easier to open them, and a rotten window-sill on the Hall repaired. Later the frame of the kitchen door of the Hall was repaired and four other repairs to rotted woodwork, two on the hall and two at the back of the Church, were made.

j. Also in March 2010 the three front Church windows (the only ones which were poor) were reputted and repainted.

k. In April 2010 we noticed problems with leaks of rainwater around the brackets on the guttering of the Church. All 44 brackets were sealed. Later a piece of the Church roof guttering which had cracked and fallen because of the recent snow was repaired and two drainpipes were unblocked.

l. In May 2010 the nine high-level smoke detectors in the roof which dated back to 1989 were renewed. This updated our fire alarm security.

m. In October 2010, the last four canvas frescoes were made and put up, giving us eighteen frescoes in all.

n. In November the ten-foot high Russian Orthodox Memorial Cross was erected in the Church gardens, where 469 soldiers were buried 200 years ago. (It had taken one year to obtain planning permission). The Cross also commemorates our parishioners' deceased, who nearly all lie abroad. On 8 May 2011 we hope to hold an inaugural ceremony and have invited the present Garrison Commander with a military delegation, the Mayor of Colchester and the local MP, Bob Russell. We have always had excellent relations with the local authorities, as also with our neighbours.

Church Finances and Parishioners

With the blessing of Archbishop Mark and the then Dean, since 2000 our Church has been governed by a Trust, 'Felixstowe Orthodox Church', which is registered with the Charity Commission (Reg. No. 1081707). The then Dean advised on the appointment of the trustees and pitfalls to avoid. The Church accounts are presented to the Charity Commission annually and are available online (www.charitycommission.gov.uk). Although much work has been done over the last two years, the Church is entirely self-financing and all bills are paid promptly. Income stems from donations, mainly made on Sundays, and rentals of St John's Hall to various weekly clubs.

This income covers not only one-off repairs and improvements like those listed above, but also regular servicing charges, heating, electricity, water, telephone, fire extinguisher and fire alarm service bills, gardening and general maintenance costs, as well as our main cost, which is the annual insurance. We have a reasonable reserve for the future, but, like virtually all Orthodox Churches outside London, the Church can still not afford to pay a priest even a small salary.

In October 2008, still patiently waiting in rented premises in Felixstowe after eleven years, we had fewer than 40 parishioners and regular attendance was just over 20. Leaving Felixstowe in November 2008, we were able to forge ahead and by October 2009 we had 196 parishioners and regular attendance was about 50. By March 2010, the figure was 229 and in December 2010 the number of regular parishioners had grown to 262, of seventeen different nationalities, especially Russian, Romanian and Greek.

This number is still growing, as Orthodox immigration, especially from Latvia, continues. We now have knowledge of over 1200 Orthodox in Colchester and a 30-mile radius. The increasing congregation can be seen from candle sales. For this year we have had to buy a quarter of a ton of candles, whereas last year we only used one eighth of a ton. Our parish newsletter has also expanded and we have to print more copies now, although several are sent out by e-mail (<http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/zchurchnews.htm>).

Publicity

Since 2008 we have received very good publicity on Russian Television (RT), BBC TV Look East and BBC local radio. Throughout 2008, 2009 and 2010 we have also had several very positive articles in the local press - The Essex County Standard and The Colchester Gazette. (<http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/zchurch.htm>). Recently we had a nice, though sometimes inaccurate, article in Saga magazine for December 2010. This has a circulation of over 600,000 and is the best-selling magazine nationally.

Future Projects

Six projects stand before us:

The first is to encourage parishioners to attend services more regularly. Even though there are 262 regular parishioners, average Sunday attendance is only between 50 and 100.

The second is to increase attendance at Saturday Vigil services, which are rarely attended by more than a dozen.

The third is, as our many small children grow up and when the rector is able to move to Colchester, to set up a permanent Church school.

The fourth is to ensure daily services, at least daily vespers and a weekly akathist.

The fifth is to hold a weekly meeting for parishioners, where adult catechism can be given and our scattered, multinational flock can socialise more. In this way parish and community life can be cultivated, building up a sense of belonging.

The sixth is to buy a peal of bells in the coming years.

Projects three, four and five are related to the difficulty of buying a house for the priest near the Church. This is frustrating, as three fine properties have come onto the market within 200 metres of the Church within the last two years. One of these, which is ideal, actually adjoins the Church and is still empty. However, £300,000 is the going price and the priest cannot buy it because all his personal money is tied up in his present house and there is no other source of money to purchase it. At the present time the property market is so poor that the priest is unable to sell his house. At the moment the old Garrison opposite the Church is being demolished and 250 homes are to be built there in 2011, together with a car park for our

Church. Perhaps it is God's Will for him to live there and that is why he has not been able to move until now.

Archpriest Andrew Phillips,
Chairman of the Trustees.

14 December 2010