



St. John's Place, Wiltshire



Location

Lower Bemerton, Wiltshire

Purchased

October 2015, 100-year lease

Legal structure

Owned by Bemerton Community Ltd, a registered charity

Description of activity

Provision and maintenance of community facilities. The space is used weekly by the local village school and hosts a range of community activities including film nights, a Sunday brunch club, talks and a range of fitness classes.

Staff and volunteers

Part-time centre manager and caretaker, seven trustees, and an average of 68 volunteer hours provided a week

Overview

In 2007, the heating system in St John's Church, Lower Bemerton, broke down and needed replacing. The estimated cost of replacing it was in the region of £40,000. At the time, the regular congregation was only between 20 and 30 people, and there was no money in the bank. As such, it was very unlikely that the cost of a new heating system could be met. After much discussion, the Parish Council decided that it would have to close the church for regular worship. The church itself was one of three in the parish, therefore regular worshippers did have other options. However, the future of the building was very uncertain.

In early 2009, the Parish Council communicated its decision to close the church to the local community. Around 120 people attended the meeting and it was made very clear that, if they wanted the building to continue to serve the community, it would need people to get involved. So, a group of 10 local residents started to meet to discuss the building's future. With some help from the local infrastructure organisation, in December 2009 the steering group officially registered as a charity – Bemerton Community Limited – with the mission to provide and maintain community facilities at St John's for use by the inhabitants of Bemerton and the surrounding areas.

From this point onwards, the charity had a number of things to consider. How could the space best be reconfigured to meet the different needs of the community? What would be possible given that the church is a Grade II* listed building? What would be the associated renovation costs? And how could they raise sufficient funds to meet these?



Over the next seven years, Bemerton Community Ltd worked incredibly hard to get St John's Place to the point that it could be opened to the community. This included negotiating with planners, the Diocese, conservation authorities and the community to come up with a plan that would meet everyone's needs, and to then raise the funds to put that plan into action. For example, it was decided that the Diocese would retain the Chancel as a consecrated part of the building so that religious ceremonies, such as weddings, baptisms and funerals, could still be performed. The nave, and the north and south aisles, would be deconsecrated and opened up to accommodate a range of community activities, including parties, fitness classes and wedding receptions.

Initially, it was thought that the costs would be in the region of £250,000. However, given the planning regulations and the fact that the design needed to be in keeping with the building's original features and purpose, and also having to install a kitchen and toilets, the costs escalated to over £500,000.

Fundraising efforts included cake sales, open gardens, film evenings, concerts, carol services, and grant applications. However, it was described as very hard work: *"it was small beer ... we got lots of rejection letters; however ... we weren't ready to give up."*

In 2013 the Diocese Education Board decided to put in £200,000. This money was donated to support the local primary school opposite the church, which was a successful school but was running out of space. It was felt that St. John's Place could be a valuable space for the school to use on a regular basis. This support was a *"significant changing point"* for the charity and spurred on a large amount of additional fundraising activity. This included 19 other successful grant applications, ranging from £250 to £123,645 from other trusts, foundations and public authority bodies, as well as donations from over 200 members of the community. This was all supported by the presence of the village newsletter which helped get the community on board and kept them informed of the developments. By 2016, a total of £711,000 had been raised and St John's Place was officially opened on 27th June 2016.

Financial health

Since opening in June 2016, St John's Place has been working hard to ensure that it has sufficient income to cover its day-to-day expenditure. Breaking even hasn't always been possible due to hiatus periods between income generating activities finishing and new ones starting, and a slight reduction in the number of wedding bookings.

Three key factors that have affected its development and financial health:

1. A diverse income base

Since the start of its journey, St John's Place has worked hard to access funds from a range of sources including individual donations and community fundraising events, as well as grants from trusts, foundations, and other public bodies. St John's Place has continued to maximise the different income generating opportunities available to it. This includes income from: its anchor tenant – the local village school which uses the building every school day; a contribution towards utilities from the local diocese which retains control of the chancel; wedding receptions; other hire rental (including birthday parties, external fitness classes, an after school club and a local choir); and finally a set of community events that are run and organised by a group of committed volunteers.

Having this diverse income base means that the organisation has options to respond to demand when they experience fluctuations in different areas of the business. This would arguably be harder if St. John's Place were heavily reliant on one income source. However, having some form of stable income from the anchor tenant and the Diocese enables the organisation to take on the financial risk associated with employing staff. This is important to the organisation as it provides it with the capacity required to ensure that activity levels are maintained.



2. Access to an experience and committed paid and unpaid workforce

Since Bemerton Community Ltd was formed, the organisation has been fortunate to have access to an experienced and committed workforce. In particular, it has benefited from input from people with the following skills:

- Professional level skills in fundraising – those people who “knew who to touch for money, and what the words and music you needed to use for them to really buy the fact that you had a plan”;
- Project management;
- Accountancy;
- Community activism – “people who have a good idea of the scope of things that can happen to bring communities together.”

The organisation also benefited from having people with knowledge of the workings of the local authority and of the church. It also had support from a local resident architect who was able to support the initial design.

In the staff team, Bemerton Community Ltd has access to professional events management skills, which helps it to manage external bookings, and there is a group of four volunteers (from within the trustee board) who manage the programme of community events put on by Bemerton Community Ltd itself.

This pool of experienced people has enabled the organisation to successfully negotiate the planning stages, manage the programme of renovation works, raise the required funds, and now continue to ensure that St John’s Place is able to deliver and sustain a range of income generating activities. It has also enabled the organisation to move from the building phase into the operational phase: “Sometimes there are people who are very good at different stages of the operation ... for example, [they] had done a fantastic job at setting up the organisation ... but then [someone else] came in and was much more outwards facing and into community ... and we could then move into major fundraising ...”.

As well as knowledge and experience available within the organisation, the level of commitment and dedication provided has been significant in terms of its impact on the organisation’s current journey and success.

“It won’t work if you don’t have volunteers who are literally willing to commit multiple days a week to get you going and be dependable. People who will say ‘absolutely, I will be there’ ... Without the volunteers [including trustees] that we have, we’d be stuck ... even putting on a Christmas fayre requires 40 hours of work to get done, so seven or eight people will be involved doing the layout, arranging the food, arranging the stalls, being there on site ...”

3. An asset that is prominent and visible and continues to be within the community’s consciousness

St John’s Place is a prominent and visible asset within Lower Bemerton, being the largest building in the village. There is a huge amount of history attached to the place, such as people’s grandparents being married there, or family members being commemorated in the graveyard. It is also described as being “one of the best-looking venues in the area.” As such, Bemerton Community Ltd has done everything it could to build on the strengths of the asset itself, ensuring that a sense of space and light, and a welcoming atmosphere, were retained as integral to the building.

The fact that the church is still able to conduct key religious ceremonies such as weddings, baptisms and funerals, also keeps the church in the consciousness of the community. It is felt this has been aided by the survival of the village newsletter, which has ensured that the village is kept informed and up-to-date with the developments taking place at St John’s.

Finally, the development of St John’s meant that the local village school did not have to invest in very costly building works to accommodate increased demand. Instead, they had somewhere that they could expand into, which will again keep the asset in the consciousness of the community for years to come.

Overall, these things help to ensure that what St John’s has to offer is visible, noticed, and continues to be supported.



Future direction

Whilst Bemerton Community Ltd has yet to break even in its first two years of operating, those involved are confident that St John’s Place will be a success. This will depend on: offering a range of events that continue to meet the needs of the community; ensuring that their anchor tenant remains happy with their offer; ensuring that they build and develop the organisation’s social media presence; and ensuring that they take seriously the issue of succession planning.

“[The volunteer community engagement team] are very over-stretched ... but we don’t seem to be able to drive more volunteers ... so that’s a pressing issue for us ... we aren’t breaking even yet so we can’t buy in more support ...”

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of Bemerton Community’s income, expenditure and assets for the year ending 31st December 2018.

Income	£54,419
Expenditure	£58,626
Difference between income and expenditure	-£4,207
Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation	-£4,207
Annual income from grant or subsidy	£8,745
Fixed assets	£624,994
Current assets (Debtors; cash at bank and in hand)	Stocks: £0 Debtors: £5,595 Cash at bank or in hand: £33,277
Total	£35,822
Net assets	£660,816