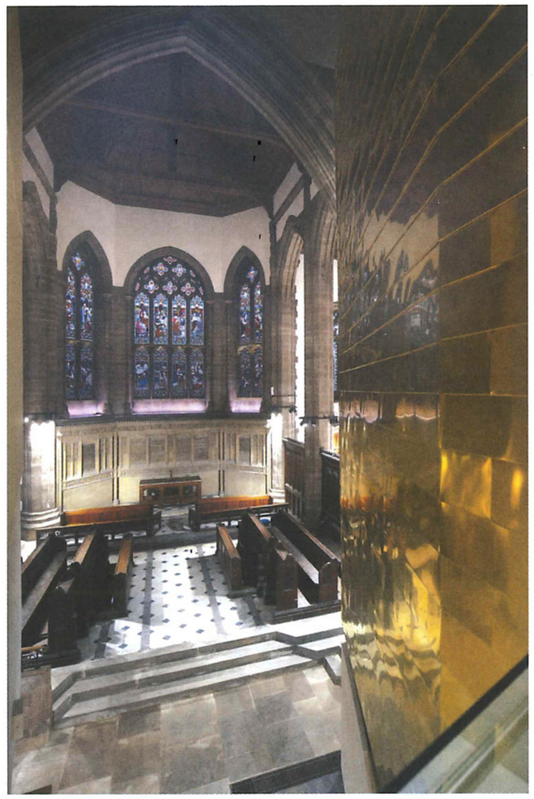
Saved for the City: All Souls, Bolton

Andrew Suter, Director at All Souls Bolton, who joined the charity in February 2014, talks about the conversion of a disused church into a thriving multi-purpose community hub, reflecting on its significance and the steps taken to restore it to its rightful place at the heart of the community.



Built in 1881, All Souls, a grade II listed church in the heart of Bolton, was born from a vision of local mill-owners, the Greenhalgh brothers, to serve their millworkers and the local community. Their strong belief that everyone was equal under the eyes of God and should have the same view in church, no matter what their status in society led to the development of a unique church, one without pillars obstructing views and used RSJ girders clad in timber to create the largest uninterrupted church roof in the country. All Souls remained at the heart of the local community for over a century until changing lifestyles and population led to its gradual decline and ultimate closure in 1986. The once magnificent building quickly fell into neglects to the despair of many locals.

It was shortly after that time that Inayat Omarji, a key figure in the community, decided to do something about it and galvanized local people and organisations to come together to save the building from permanent ruin. In 2005, the group approached the Churches Conservation Trust to support their radical plans and, although the Trust had only previously funded projects to stop churches falling into disrepair, they agreed to support the vision to use the premises for alternative uses. All Souls became the first church to receive approval for such dramatic plans, leading the way for other churches across the country to follow suit.

In 2009 the group registered as a charity, All Souls Bolton, to better oversee the project and ultimately run the building. With the Trust's support a £5 million contribution was gained from the Heritage Lottery Fund, £650,000 from the North West Regional Development Agency, £150,000 from Bolton Council and £120,000 from the Tudor Trust.

And, whilst the early planning stages were lengthy, complicated and subject to frequent changes, after a great deal of searching we appointed architect Nick Berry of OMI Manchester to design the building. The ground breaking ceremony with TV presenter, Lloyd Grossman, marked the beginning of the building work and took place in August 2013.

Conservation guidelines have meant the walls, roof, flooring and windows all had to be restored to their original state and substitute materials had to match although there was more freedom inside to design something contemporary.

Several other hurdles had to be overcome along the way too, most notably the retraction of a significant grant due to funding cuts. Building regulations also required that a fire exit had to be tunnelled under the protected walls. Slowly but surely the project moved towards completion.

The new centre opened on 6 December 2014 with 400 people attending the public ceremony. Since then we've won the English Heritage Angels Award for the development and are also shortlisted for the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors Awards. Our ambition is to ensure that this dynamic heritage centre sits at the heart of the local community, bringing people together from different backgrounds, cultures and religions. And, although All Souls remains a consecrated venue, we've limited the number of services to one a month to encourage wider use across the community.

Everyone's welcome to drop in, walk around, meet friends, have a coffee in the café or use the free Wi-Fi. There's a History Wall with touchscreen displays bringing to life the local community and its people, including Bolton during the war and the local area today. While the building is home to several local businesses it is also a flexible multi-purpose venue and focusses on community projects such as skills, workshops and training, film screenings and other family friendly activities to bring people together. Our 'Grow Your Own' initiative uses plants grown in church borders to provide seeds to local people who in turn grow their own and pass on cuttings and seeds to others. Schools are also encouraged to use the building as a learning resource to find out about heritage, local communities and culture.

All Souls is also inspiring other similar projects across the country as there are lots of empty churches currently sitting unused which could be utilised in the same manner as All Souls Bolton. We're even gaining a reputation further afield with fact finding visits from residents of places such as Sweden. There is still a lot to do, but we now have a fantastic building, and more importantly, a centre that brings together the local community in so many different ways.

For more information:
allsoulsbolton.org.uk | @allsoulsbolton