

# St Mary's Church, Stogumber:

## Statement of Needs for railings at the south wall of the churchyard

### Section 1: General information

This should provide an overview of the parish and the current use of the building

Stogumber is a rural village of around 500 people, surrounded by open farmland, bordering the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Beauty and Exmoor National Park.

It is around three miles from the larger village of Williton, 12 miles from Minehead and 15 miles from Taunton.

There is a pub, volunteer-run shop and post office, cricket club, school (federated with Crowcombe village school) and a rather small village hall. There are quite a lot of clubs, community and voluntary activities.

Agriculture is the most extensive economic activity, but there are many other (often hidden away) small businesses and people working from home, and many residents commute to larger places for work.

In social-economic terms, the village could be termed 'comfortable' but around 25% of the houses in the village are social-rented (owned by housing associations) which is a higher proportion than similar villages in the area. The social-rented housing and the infant school mean that we have a higher proportion of families with children than some similar villages.

The church is the largest, most prominent, most historic, most beautiful and most important building in the village.

It is used most frequently for Sunday worship (around 4 services each month) and of course for weddings and funerals. The congregation typically numbers 25 (not the same 25 each week) with more for special services such as Remembrance and Easter, and 150-200 for Christmas services (pre-Covid).

There is a robed choir of 12 people for normal services (and more for special services) as well as a band of bell-ringers who practice once a week and ring for most services.

The School use the Church for special assemblies (such as end of term and leavers) as the school building itself is too small for all the pupils and parents to gather, as well as coming for special school services at Harvest, Christmas, Easter, etc.

The Church is also used for concerts (being much larger than the village hall it can be more viable when professional performers need to be paid).

The church is almost wholly filled by pews, installed in their current positions in 1538 and hence it would not be appropriate to remove them, which means that the church cannot be used for larger events where people need to move more freely, such as dances or exercise classes.

However, the Church is also used for community coffee mornings and afternoon teas, and for markets. At the present time, a village craft project has taken over the Sydenham chapel, making a huge net of fabric and wool flowers to cover the tower for the Queen's Jubilee.

### Attendances

Including Baptisms, Weddings, Interments, Funerals, and Thanksgiving services, 2940 people have attended services at St Mary's Church during the year January 2023 to December 2023. This was an increase of 640 over the previous year which was affected by Covid. The average weekly attendance at normal Sunday services (including the choir) has been 24.

### Section 2: What do you need?

To reduce the risk of people falling over the south wall of the churchyard, which is low on the inside (around 18" at its lowest) but high on outside (about 15' at its highest).

Previously, brambles, wild clematis and other vegetation kept people back from the wall keep people back from the low wall, but the vegetation was damaging the wall and has now been cleared.

The solution needs to be appropriate for the setting, but relatively economical, as the priority for maintenance funds must be the large Grade 1 listed Church building.

### Section 3: The proposals

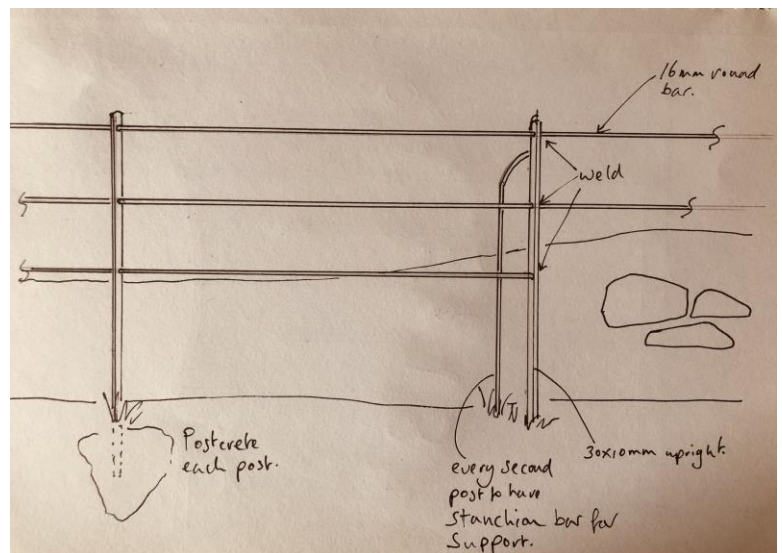
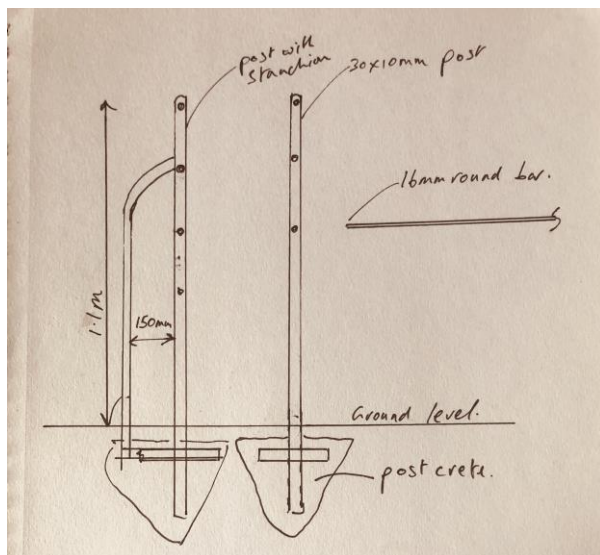
Set out what you are proposing to do in order to meet the needs set out in section 2.

Please read this in conjunction with the plans and photographs in the Statement of Significance.

We propose simple 'estate railings' to match the existing gate and short length of railings already alongside the wall:

- > Steel
- > Posts 1100 x 30 x 10mm at 1500mm intervals and set in concrete
- > Rails 16mm round bar passing through holes in posts then welded to posts
- > Number of rails to vary from two to four in each section (between each set of posts) according to the height of the wall behind. In other words, where the wall is higher there may be two or three rails, but where the wall is lowest, there would be four. This is so that the rails do not run too much in front of stonework such that this would impede future maintenance of the wall such as repointing.
- > Posts set 18" back from the wall
- > Stanchion bars (back-braces) on alternate posts for additional stability.
- > Galvanised, etched and painted black

The would railings *not* attached to the wall, so that movement or bumps to the railings are not transmitted to the wall which could weaken the stone wall, with the risk of stone falling to the footpath below.





## Maker

The railings would be made by Ben Horrobin, a third generation West Somerset blacksmith: his grandfathers and his uncle (with whom Ben worked) were blacksmiths in near Stogumber. His formal qualifications are:

1989-91 BTEC National Diploma in Art and Design, Somerset College of Arts and Technology

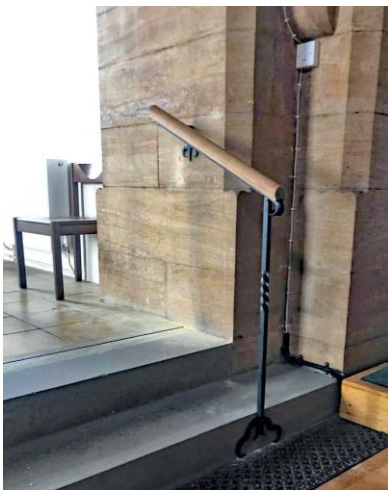
1991-94BA (Hons) Fine Art Sculpture, Staffordshire University

2001-02 BTEC National Certificate in Blacksmithing and Metalwork, Hereford School of Blacksmiths

2002-03 BTEC National Diploma in Blacksmithing and Metalwork, Hereford School of Blacksmiths

2004-2006 Certificate of Merit, the worshipful Company of Blacksmiths

Examples of his work may be seen below and here: <https://benhorrobin.co.uk>



## **Alternatives considered**

### **1. Lower the level of the earth against the wall**

It seems likely that the wall when originally constructed the ground level was lower on the inside of the wall (as it still is where it meets the gate) and that over time earth has moved downhill against the wall (particularly when disturbed by burials) so reducing the height on the inside.

We could seek to remove earth from against the wall and put it along the adjacent west side of the churchyard where the ground slopes into a hedge. We decided against this because:

The mini-digger drivers we consulted were not happy to operate their machines at the top of a high retaining wall that is of unknown age and strength, so the earth-moving would have had to be done by hand, which would have been expensive and laborious.

Also, removing several feet of earth would likely have exposed unmarked graves near the wall, and destabilised the marked graves a bit further from the wall, and any archaeological remains there may be in the vicinity, making the work more sensitive and requiring additional measures that would likely cost time and money.

### **2. Raise the wall higher**

The wall could have been raised by adding additional stonework to the wall, to raise the height on the inside. We decided against this because:

Stone construction would be considerably more expensive than the proposed railings, because it would take more time, the purchase of stone, and scaffolding from the footpath below the wall (also entailing temporary closure of the footpath).

Also, we would need an assessment of the structural strength and suitability of the existing stone wall for supporting tons of additional stone on top, and such assessment would in itself be expensive and take time.

### **3. Railings to match those already at the north end of the churchyard**

Instead of matching the gate and short length of simple 'estate railings' already adjacent to the south wall, we could install more elaborate and formal railings to match those at the north edge of the churchyard. We decided against this because:

Elaborate railings would have been discordant in the context of the south end of the churchyard, alongside the simple gate and the plain stone wall with no architectural features, which are at some distance from the church which is obscured by trees, and in any case the south side of the church is quite a jumble compared to the grander and more regular north side facing the more elaborate railings. Please see the Statement of Significance for more details and photographs.

Also, more elaborate railings would be much more expensive, and the priority for funds has to be the large Grade 1 listed church building itself.

### **4. A thorny hedge**

An impenetrable hedge of hawthorn, thorny berberis, rose or similar would be effective at keeping people away from the drop beyond the wall. We decided against this because:

The roots of the hedge would likely penetrate the wall and weaken it.

Cutting the far side of the hedge would require a platform or cherry-picker, which would be expensive and may require paid workers rather than volunteers (like most rural churches our congregation is relatively elderly) and if the cutting was neglected, the height of the hedge especially when windy may put further pressure on the wall.

#### **Section 4: Why do you need it and why do you need it now?**

Justify your proposals by explaining why you can't meet your needs without making changes. Also include anything which may have prompted the proposals.

We should reduce the risk of people falling over the south wall of the churchyard. The wall is low on the inside (around 18" at its lowest) but high on outside (about 15' at its highest).

Previously, brambles, wild clematis and other vegetation kept people back from the wall keep people back from the low wall, but the vegetation was damaging the wall and has now been cleared.

We do not think that the risk of someone falling is so low that we would be justified in taking no action, and we suspect our insurers would feel the same.

We have put temporary posts with white tape a distance inside the wall, to highlight the risk to people in the churchyard, but we do not think that this would be satisfactory long-term.

#### **Section 5: Justification**

If the proposals are likely to harm the significance outlined in the Statement of significance, explain how the proposals would result in public benefits which outweigh such harm (public benefits include matters such as liturgical freedom, pastoral wellbeing and putting the church to viable uses that are consistent with its role as a place of worship and mission).

The proposed simple 'estate railings' will not harm and will instead maintain the significance of the churchyard, since they are concordant with the existing short length of simple 'estate railings' and gate alongside the wall where the railings are to be installed. The railings will not touch the wall. The church building itself would not be affected, as it is at some distance from the place where the railings are to be installed, and sight of it is obscured by trees.