

## BACKGROUND

Since its medieval origins, St. Mary's Church has been located at the heart of Cheltenham. It continues to be so to this day sitting close to where the medieval High Street and Regency Promenade meet.

But, as the town prospered, the buildings surrounding the churchyard positioned themselves to face the surrounding streets, turning their backs on the Church; a situation that prevails today and which has reduced the prominence of the church within the town.

Nowadays, the churchyard has a mature look – tree and shrub maintenance is kept to a minimum (though regular tree related safety inspections are undertaken). Grassed areas and footpaths are patchy and in places over-run by parked cars; and the gate piers and overthrows are damaged or missing. There is a recent history of anti-social behaviour and the manner in which buildings turn their back on the church makes it a threatening and unpleasant place at night and on winter evenings.

Yet in spite of this and its various historic traumas, St Mary's Church and churchyard survives as a tranquil and green oasis close to Cheltenham's commercial core and it clearly has attractions for the town centre workers who spend a sunny lunchtime and for others passing through.

## OPPORTUNITY

Now, as improvements take place on the streets and buildings around the Church, there is an opportunity to revitalise this special space. The Art Gallery & Museum is creating an opportunity to walk through its new extension from Clarence Street to the entrance to the churchyard; the planned removal of through traffic from Boots Corner and the inner ring road brings with it an opportunity to improve pedestrian links between the church and the town centre; and the development of the Brewery Phase 2 will connect the existing Brewery directly to the High Street, lifting the character of the High Street close to the Church.

This document sets out our ambition to enhance the churchyard so that it becomes once again a well-loved place connecting town centre streets and offering people an opportunity to linger and enjoy tranquillity in the heart of the town.



## NEARBY PROPOSALS



### 3. Art Gallery & Museum Extension

That will create much more exhibition space but also extend partnerships with the Craftsmen's Guild and University and provide direct access to the churchyard.



### 1. Portland St/North Place



### 2. Brewery Phase 2

New frontage that will allow direct access to the Brewery complex from the High Street



### 4. Boots Corner

Proposal to restrict traffic to bus only subject to Department of Transport Local Sustainable Transport Fund bid



### 5. Royal Well

Main Traffic and Pedestrian Routes



Direction to 'Key Concept' locations



Urban Block Boundary



Church Yard Site Boundary



Extended Site Boundary



1. Portland St/ North Place



2. The Brewery



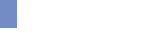
3. Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum



4. Boots Corner



5. Royal Well



# CHELTHENHAM ST. MARY'S CHURCH



our vision for the future

**Cheltenham**  
Development Task Force  
making things happen

Municipal Offices  
Promenade  
Cheltenham GL50 9SA  
t: 01242 264328  
e: [builtenvironment@cheltenham.gov.uk](mailto:builtenvironment@cheltenham.gov.uk)  
w: [www.cheltenham.gov.uk/developmenttaskforce](http://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/developmenttaskforce)



## HISTORY

St. Mary's church is the oldest surviving building in Cheltenham having stood on this site for over 850 years and it is believed that Christian worship on the site dates back to the 8th Century.

*"By great good fortune the church has through the centuries escaped the vandalism of the Tudor reformers, of Cromwellian soldiers and nineteenth century clergy and parsons, and thus within its ancient walls - so near to the busy heart of the town - past and present still meet."*

(Gwen Hart: A History of Cheltenham)

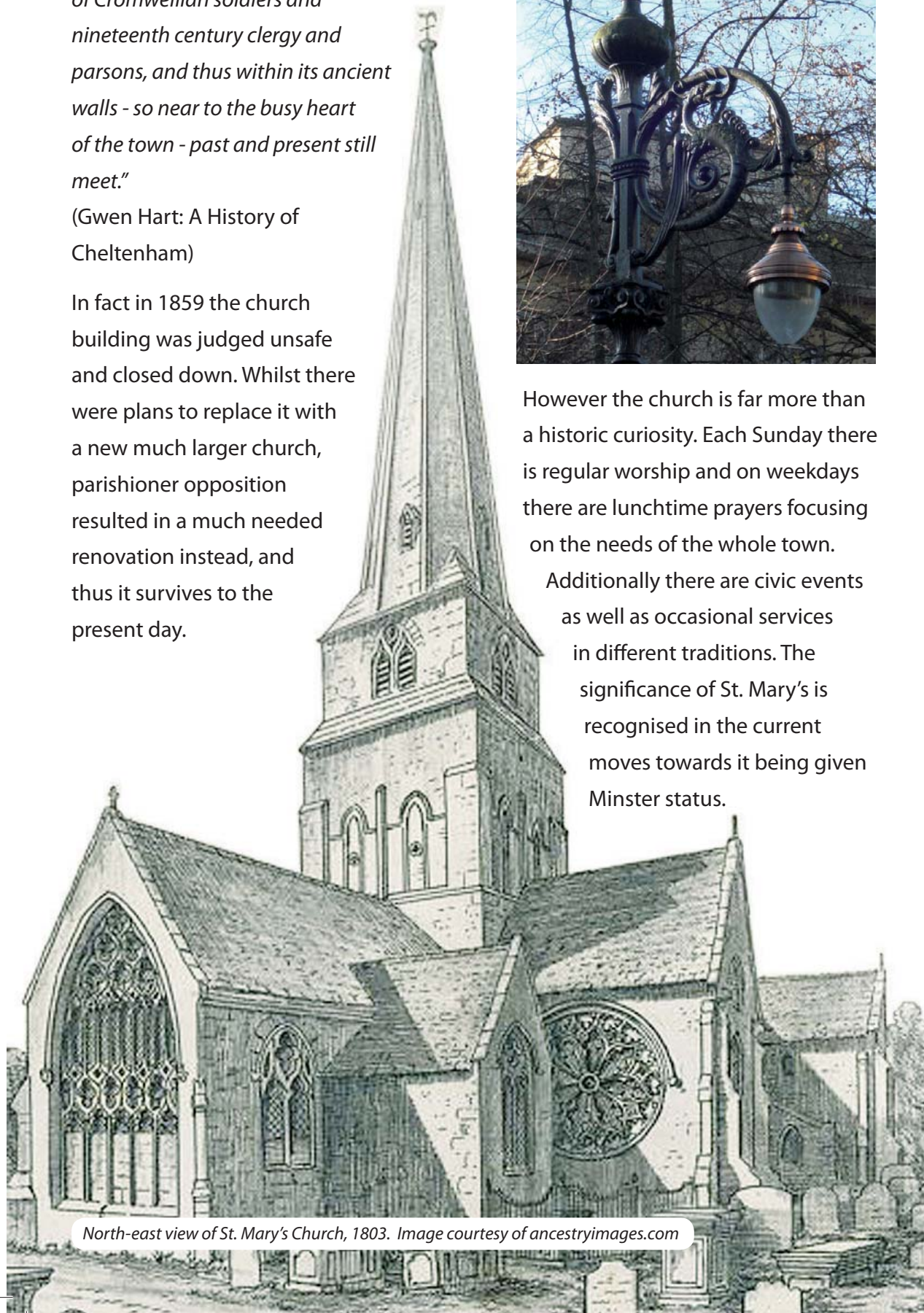
In fact in 1859 the church building was judged unsafe and closed down. Whilst there were plans to replace it with a new much larger church, parishioner opposition resulted in a much needed renovation instead, and thus it survives to the present day.

This historic value is reflected in the listing status of the site. The church itself is one of only five grade 1 listed buildings within the town and the churchyard contains several grade 2 listed structures including tomb chests, "dragon and onion" lamp-posts, the churchyard cross and wall.



However the church is far more than a historic curiosity. Each Sunday there is regular worship and on weekdays there are lunchtime prayers focusing on the needs of the whole town.

Additionally there are civic events as well as occasional services in different traditions. The significance of St. Mary's is recognised in the current moves towards it being given Minster status.



North-east view of St. Mary's Church, 1803. Image courtesy of ancestryimages.com

## THE CHALLENGES

- Need to highlight the very existence of the churchyard in the surrounding streets, without compromising the tranquil essence that the churchyard enjoys
- Poor access from town centre streets – narrow alleyways and building overhangs, which add to the character of the area but which can appear threatening
- Through-routes that do not encourage people to linger
- A fine medieval building in the town which has been "shunned" by its newer neighbours
- Lack of natural lighting in some areas and poor quality artificial lighting elsewhere
- Sense of dereliction – damaged gateposts; mantles, graffiti, litter; vehicle damage, overgrown foliage, patchy grass etc
- Unauthorised car parking within the churchyard
- Anti-social behaviour and sense of isolation which threatens legitimate users of the space

Further information on this project can be found at:

[www.cheltenham.gov.uk/developmenttaskforce](http://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/developmenttaskforce)

With thanks to Berman Guedes Stretton (architects and designers) who are leading the Art Gallery & Museum project; who have kindly provided free of charge their advice and material.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES

- Close working between the Diocese and Borough
- The Art Gallery and Museum extension which will overlook and open onto the churchyard offering a new link to Clarence Street and housing a relocated Tourist Information Centre
- New directional signage both to the churchyard and beyond
- Improve the footpaths and upgrade connecting alleyways – remove graffiti; improve lighting; change surface materials to provide a uniform church approach
- Repair the original pillars and mantles above entrances
- Undertake landscape survey and carry out remedial works to trees, shrubs and grassed areas
- Encourage new building on vacant land to the north-west by agreeing a design strategy for any new development, ensuring it overlooks the churchyard to provide easy surveillance and has sympathetic uses
- Respond to and benefit from proposed changes to surrounding streets
- Upgrade paths and control vehicle movements – perhaps by providing car parking off-site and/or kerb upstands as used previously
- Instigate a robust landscape management regime
- Use the site for community events

