[2016] ECC Bri 10

In re St Mary the Virgin, Fishponds

Judgment

1. This is a petition to attach a blue plaque to the outside of the church of St Mary the Virgin, Fishponds. The plaque is to be funded by the Bristol Civic Society and is to honour the late Gordon Welchman.

2. I make no apologies for quoting directly from the statement of significance and need.

Gordon Welchman was the son of William Welchman who was Vicar of St Mary's and later Archdeacon of Bristol. His prodigious mathematical ability won him a scholarship to Marlborough, from where he went to Cambridge. As a Cambridge mathematician and Dean of Sidney Sussex College, he was asked by the wartime government to form a team at Bletchley Park. There, he worked in Ultra Intelligence with Alan Turing, on the machine that broke the Enigma Code. After the machine had proved its value, Welchman continued to work on it, as part of the "Hut Six Team", and found ways to speed up its performance and so become more effective. He was also instrumental in the development and management of the entire Bletchley Park codebreaking operation, which is regarded as having foreshortened the Second World War. After the war, Gordon Welchman moved to America where he worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He continued to work in intelligence and made major contributions to mathematical and computer science. His work on intelligence networking was a precursor to the development of the internet.

The wording of the plaque, which has been drafted with the assistance of Joel Greenberg, Gordon Welchman's biographer, is proposed as follows

Bristol Civic Society

Gordon Welchman
1906 – 1985

Key contributor to World War II British
Codebreaking at Bletchley Park and abroad

Computer science pioneer and inventor

Born in Fishponds and baptised in this church

Gordon Welchman's father was the Vicar of St Mary's at the time of Gordon's birth. He rose to become Archdeacon of Bristol, a position he held from 1927 to 1937.

Gordon Welchman was baptised in St Mary's. The font in the Church today is the same font in which he was baptised.

There is a substantial educational potential to build stronger links through the Blue Plaque commemorating Gordon Welchman. He was a significant mathematician who worked at Bletchley Park as a code-breaker and he made a major contribution to the development of computer science. The telling of his story is a way to engage and inspire students in maths, IT and other STEM subjects. The plaque has the potential to spark the development of further community-based projects involving local children through their schools. The church would be a key partner because of the location of the plaque.

3. The original Rectory where Welchman would have been brought up, which would be the usual place for such a plaque, has been demolished.

4. I expressed my concern about the possible setting of a precedent in granting such a faculty, and invited comments from the amenity bodies. Historic England made it clear that this was outside their usual remit but commented informally: *Given the tree cover the proposed plaque is unlikely to be highly visible from the street and wouldn't appear to be overly dominant in wider views of the listed building. It will be visible from within the churchyard, but will raise awareness of a historic figure and his local connections. It will be removable and is unlikely to lead to further applications for similar plaques on the building. A memorial within the Church may be equally, or more, appropriate, but would be unlikely to have the public visibility desired by the blue plaques.*

5. The PCC emphasise the missional potential of such a plaque nationally and internationally not to say locally with the schools in the area.

6. In the unique circumstances of this case I am prepared to grant the faculty as prayed. I am satisfied that it will not set a precedent, is capable of being significantly helpful in the mission of the church, will cause no damage to the church building and is capable of being easily removed.

17th September 2016

Justin Gau,
Chancellor