

Bear Flat Association

Beechen Cliff Church & Community Hall Open Community Meeting 13th May 2026

Summary and Transcript from Audio Recording

Venue: Beechen Cliff Church

BFA Meeting Panel: Gareth Somerset, Timothy Cantell, Jill Kingaby

Secretary: Jerry Trenchard

Summary of the Meeting

Background

The Methodist Church has decided to sell Beechen Cliff Church and its adjacent community hall due to long-term falling congregations and the financial burden of maintaining the building. A feasibility study commissioned in 2024 and reported in 2025 found no viable option for retaining ownership, and in April 2026 the sale was formally announced. A sales agent has not yet been appointed.

What the BFA has done

The BFA successfully applied for an **Asset of Community Value (ACV)** designation, awarded by B&NES Council in December 2025. This gives the community a six-month window from the announcement of sale — running to **October 2026** — to submit a formal bid. The BFA must lodge an **Expression of Interest by 1 June 2026**; the committee intends to do so. If no sale completes within 18 months (by October 2027), the community's right to bid reactivates.

The BFA's realistic position

An outright community purchase of the whole site would require setting up a legal entity and is described as an enormous undertaking. The more likely approach is to engage with potential purchasers during the six-month window and seek to influence any bid to preserve community uses. The BFA's role is explicitly **not** to back any particular buyer, but to protect community assets regardless of who wins.

What is at risk

The building currently hosts the children's nursery, a community market, a monthly repair café, choir rehearsals, community meetings, and theatre use.

Key themes from the Q&A

- *Planning protections:* The ACV and non-designated heritage asset status are material considerations in any future planning application. Being within a conservation area adds further constraint. Demolition would require specific consent. A formal listing application to Historic England — which could be made by the BFA — would provide the strongest protection and prevent

demolition, though it would also reduce the sale price and make adaptations more difficult.

- *The Methodist Church's position:* A former steward and trustee (Alan Bain) spoke from the floor, explaining that the merged Bath Methodist congregation is now thriving but has exhausted four years of effort trying to find a solution for this building. They have no reserves for major repairs, are obliged to achieve market value, and will sell to any credible buyer. They would welcome a church-to-church sale.
- *Valuation:* The Methodists are not disclosing a guide price, intending to sell by tender. The BFA could commission an independent valuation but would only do so if seriously contemplating putting its own money in.
- *Risk of the building being "sat on":* There is precedent where a purchased listed building has remained empty and deteriorating. For an unlisted building the legal recourse would be even more limited — moral pressure only.

Next steps

- Submit Expression of Interest before 1 June 2026
- Await appointment of sales agent by the Methodists
- Identify and engage interested parties during the six-month window
- Publish meeting notes and provide monthly updates via the BFA newsletter and website
- Hold a follow-up public meeting around August/September 2026, with a broader panel including potentially B&NES conservation officers

Meeting Transcript

Opening Remarks

Gareth Somerset (Acting Chair, Bear Flat Association):

My name is Gareth Somerset. I am the acting chair of the Bear Flat Association. I am also part of a panel set up by the BFA committee, comprising myself, Timothy Cantell, Jill Kingaby, plus Phil Oakley and Fran Bryden, who unfortunately could not be here tonight. We are tasked by the committee to look at the issue of the sale of Beechen Cliff Church and Community Hall, the impact it would have on the community, and what we might be able to do about it.

I should mention that Cllr Stuart Bridge has taken a keen interest in this issue but unfortunately cannot be here tonight. We are very happy to welcome Cllr Ian Halsall, who tonight will be representing both his ward and Stuart's.

Purpose of the Meeting

GS:

The Methodist Church has decided to dispose of the site, and we are concerned about how this will affect the community. This meeting is about what the BFA has done, what we are proposing to do over the next few weeks, and to keep you informed about what is happening. We also hope to gather some practical ideas from the community.

Why Does the Methodist Church Want to Sell?

GS:

The Methodist Church has told us that they have had falling congregations for a long time, so the church is no longer tenable as a place of worship. They also have other churches in Bath which they have to support, and something has to give. They have decided that Beechen Cliff Church must be sold in order to raise the money to support their mission in Bath.

Back in 2024, the Methodist Church announced they were looking at options to make the church affordable while retaining ownership, but without the running and maintenance costs. To that end, they commissioned a feasibility study in 2024, which reported in 2025. It had been hoped the building would remain under Methodist ownership, but after considerable deliberation they concluded that none of the options produced by the consultants would work for them. On that basis, in April they announced they would sell the church.

Implications of the Sale

GS:

The implications for the Bear Flat community are probably fairly obvious to everyone who lives here. We are talking about the potential loss of the nursery, a valued community asset especially for young families. We also have the community market,

the repair café that meets once a month but draws many people, and a range of community meetings. Several choirs rehearse here, and it is used as a theatre. [*Post meeting note: we can also add Community Tea Parties, fitness classes and the polling station*]. For all these reasons, we regard it as a valuable community asset.

Asset of Community Value

GS:

Because of its importance, last year we made an application to designate the church and hall as an Asset of Community Value with B&NES Council. The council agreed and awarded this designation in December of last year. The designation gives the community time to make a bid to purchase the site. It is also a marker of the building's value to the community and signals to any potential developer or purchaser that both the community and the council hold this view.

The ACV gives us six months from the announcement of the agreement to sell, which would place us in October of this year. This right is triggered by the BFA, as the organisation which applied for the designation. We must submit an Expression of Interest within six weeks of the announcement to sell — the deadline is 1st June. The committee will meet next week to make the decision to submit the expression of interest, which, barring some totally unforeseen circumstance, we intend to do. The ACV lasts for five years. If the sale does not go through within an 18-month period from the intention to sell (October 2027), the whole process can revert and the community will again have the right to bid.

Realistic Assessment

GS:

Some realism is needed. Making a bid by ourselves would mean buying the whole site and setting up an entity — a business or charity — to run it. This would be an enormous undertaking. More likely is that we will use this period to contact and discuss with interested parties how we may play a part, primarily to ensure that whatever is done with the building retains community value. Our role is not to help any one person win the bid. Our role is simply to try to retain community assets for the community.

Where We Are in the Process

GS:

We need to submit the expression of interest this week. The Methodist Church still needs to appoint a sales agent — this has not yet happened, and they will advise us when it does. The final submission date for proposals to purchase is October. To be clear, anyone can work up a proposal and submit it to the Methodist Church now; however, the Methodists cannot agree to a sale until the six-month point. In the interim period up to October, the BFA will be identifying who has an interest in the site and talking to them about how we can influence their bid to preserve the community assets we want.

Questions and Answers

Q: Would the owners be willing to sell only part of the site — for example, just the church but not the hall?

GS: We have had no indication that they would be prepared to do that. Everything we have been told is that they want to sell everything. Circumstances can change, but that is our current understanding.

Q: Are the Methodist Church under any obligation to disclose who they are talking to?

GS: No. There is nothing in the ACV application that would require them to do that. This is now a commercial proposition for the Methodist Church. It should be emphasised that in a property bidding process, there will be sensitive information. The BFA itself must be careful, when talking to different parties, not to disclose sensitive information.

Q: How are you going to obtain the information to be able to talk to parties?

GS: Whilst there is no obligation, there is goodwill. The Methodists are very helpful and would most likely tell us who is bidding.

Q: Do the Methodists have any criteria for selecting a favourable bid — for example, criteria that take account of the social aspects we are interested in? And does B&NES Council's planning function have any leverage over those aspects for any proposal?

Timothy Cantell: On the planning question first. An asset of community value is an important material consideration in any future planning application. If a developer wanted to change the use from religious use to, say, some kind of commercial use, they would need to apply for change of use, and it would be open to the BFA to argue that planning consent should be subject to a condition requiring the applicants to provide a community facility equivalent to the hall in any future scheme. This may not be easy to predict, but it does seem to be an avenue open to us in the worst-case scenario — where we do not secure a partnership or relationship with one of the bidders and a developer wishes not to provide a community facility. As to the criteria the Methodist Church might use, we are not privy to that.

Q: Do they have any responsibility regarding the social standing of the present activities in the building?

Timothy Cantell: I have to sidestep that. We understand that the decision to accept an offer is taken not just locally but also nationally, and we have not seen what the criteria are. One suspects that for a charitable body, the obligation would be to achieve best value rather than to continue providing social facilities. *Cllr Ian Halsall:* I want to endorse Timothy's comment. I am also a qualified planner. The Asset of Community Value designation means it is a material consideration if any planning application comes forward for this place, whether commercial or residential. We would have a strong case to object given the importance of these two buildings to the community. Obviously it is for the community to decide whether to accept some compromise form of alternative use, provided the community facility is retained. But planning permission will be required to change the use of this building, and that

affects its value. It would be marketed as a church and hall, not as a free-market commercial venture. That only changes if planning permission is granted.

Q: Do we have any precedent locally for the sale of a church?

GS: I know of two precedents. There is St. Mark's Church, which my understanding is was converted to a community hall back in the 1970s. It was a Church of England building, and the congregation having fallen away, the C of E — which was relatively wealthy, particularly at that time — decided to dispose of it by gifting it, via a deed of trust, to the Bath Volunteer Society and the university, on the condition it always remains a community hall. The other is Widcombe Social Club — not a church, of course. You could imagine a comparable model, but that site was already owned by the people wishing to develop the club. They did not have to buy the site, so we are in a very different situation from both those cases.

Statement from the floor:

When this first came to my attention, I looked at comparable sales. Clevedon Chapel, Eastbourne Avenue: £2 million for what became a five-bedroom semi-detached house. Bath Central United Reformed Church, Argyle Street: sold for development with a guide price of £695,000, despite being Grade I listed. The old Methodist church in Oldfield Park, listed: asking price £295,000. Holy Trinity Church, Chapel Road: sold around 2017 to a specialist regeneration developer for community mixed use.

Response (GS):

These sites can sell for a lot of money, but they sell for considerably more after they have been developed. And this is not an easy site to develop.

Q: Do we have any idea what the value of the building is at this moment, without planning permission and with an ACV on it?

GS: We do not know the value. The Methodist Church is keeping very quiet about this because they want to leave open the possibility of a sale by tender, in which case they do not wish to declare a price.

Q: Might it just stay as a church and community facility?

GS: That is always a possibility if another church were interested in taking it on.

From the floor: I had heard there was a church that expressed interest and then withdrew. GS: This is a little sensitive, but there has been such an interest.

Q: What is the building's listing status?

There is no national heritage listing. It is a non-statutory heritage asset. In planning terms, this still carries some weight if the building were to be converted.

Q: Has there been an application made for a listing, such as Grade II, and has anyone applied to Historic England for help to restore the spire?

GS: To address the general point — if we need to raise money, grant-awarding bodies would be a natural avenue. Historic England may be part of that, particularly if specific funding were needed for, say, tower repairs. *From the floor:* That is exactly what happened with St. Stephen's on Lansdown, where the tower was in poor condition. The church applied to Historic England, who agreed to match whatever the community raised. The community came together, raised the money, Historic

England matched it, the tower was repaired, and the church continues. *From the floor:* I also wanted to say how much I appreciate the Bear Flat Association stepping up and doing all this work on behalf of the community.

[*Post meeting note:* Historic England supports Grade 1 and 1* buildings with grants, rarely Grade II. St Stephens is Grade ii*. Funding for BC church would be highly unlikely].

Q: Did the feasibility study look at appointing a commercial manager — someone to find income-generating uses for the building, such as a community cinema, weddings, or commercial hirings, perhaps on a profit-sharing basis rather than a fixed fee?

GS: I am not aware that it did. The feasibility study was focused more on the cost of renovation, rebuilding, or change of use. To be honest, I do not know all the fine details of what the study contained — we were shown some of it but not all. The Methodists evidently feel there are issues they are not willing to share. In any case, thank you for that suggestion.

Cllr Halsall

As well as being an Asset of Community Value, this building is also a non-designated heritage asset, which carries weight in planning terms when any application is considered. Historic England — the government body — does not actively seek out buildings to list. It is for the community to apply. That is perhaps something we could do to further strengthen the case and add some protection, which could affect price. If the building were listed, that is an additional constraint on future use and on how it can be converted or redesigned. There is also something distinctive about the floor — the slight slope means every member of the congregation can see the front. The BFA could put forward an application to Historic England to get the building listed. If it is listed, that creates an extra constraint on future use.

GS:

We have attempted to get a listing on another property on Bear Flat — it takes quite a long time, but it is possible.

Church member (former steward) Alan Bain:

I am a member of both the Bear Flat Association and this Methodist Church, and I was the last steward before the four churches merged. We folded four Bath churches together because none of us was large enough to continue running independently, and we needed to make some tough decisions — particularly after COVID — about how to keep any form of church life going in Bath. I am pleased to report that the merged church has been very successful: we are back and thriving. But keeping this building running has been enormously hard work for a very small voluntary governing team. We have just about managed to balance the books — income in, heat and light out — but anything that goes wrong has had to come out of our capital reserves. We do not have reserves sufficient to deal with a serious problem — if the spire developed an issue, or if there were a major roof failure, we simply could not act. We have tried for four years to find a partner, but ideas have remained just ideas. Unless there is a legal entity willing to back a proposal with money, we cannot engage further. Under UK national church rules and charity law, we need a legal entity and a viable, funded proposal. We are also constrained to sell at market value.

I am genuinely open to anything the community can come up with, and I will be signing off the final deal as a trustee. We want to benefit the community, but a community bid may not produce the best market value unless this association can create a legal entity and raise the funds. I live here, my children grew up here, but we are at the end of four years of really hard effort. And it is not just this church — we have another church also going to market. Churches are not established to run historic buildings. They are established to deliver mission. We need to use this money to deliver that mission or we will simply go under.

From the floor (church minister, Oldfield Park):

I am a church minister down the road in Oldfield Park. We have a congregation of 230 people every Sunday morning. It is a Pentecostal church. Would you sell this property to our church? We are a charity.

Methodist church member:

We would absolutely love to have further discussions. It would go through a governance process through the central UK Methodist body. That would be by far the easiest option. We did talk to a couple of churches, both of which had good plans, but nothing came through because we are obliged to achieve market value or something close to it. My preferred option would be for this to continue as a church with the hall continuing to operate. But I have to be honest — that is not looking like the most likely outcome. If we list the building and pile on conditions, all we will do is reduce the number of bidders and reduce the price. It is quite possible that by the end of the process we would end up with an empty building because we simply cannot carry on as we are. I thought it would be useful to be honest about that.

Q: Would you sell to anyone, provided they paid the right price?

Methodist church member: Yes.

Q: What about concerns over the building being purchased and then left empty and unused — as has happened with King Edward's School on Broad Street?

GS: It is a valid concern. It is not impossible that a property developer could buy the site, delay and wait for value to accumulate. *Timothy Cantell*: It could happen, and there would be very little anyone could do. King Edward's is listed, and even then the council has struggled to bring it back into use. They have been able to force the owners to keep the roof more watertight, but this building is unlisted. We really would not be able to do anything beyond applying moral pressure. Let us hope it finds an active use. *Cllr Halsall*: As a last resort, the council is actively trying to pursue a compulsory purchase of King Edward's School, but as Timothy says, it will take years and is an extremely complicated process.

Q: What protections exist against demolition and development?

Cllr Halsall: Demolition would require planning permission. The Asset of Community Value, the non-designated heritage asset status, and the fact that the building is within a conservation area are all material factors. If consent were ultimately granted, it would in principle be possible to demolish the building, but listing would prevent that. Being in a conservation area adds further protection. *From the floor*: Demolition in a conservation area requires a specific consent, and any development that would take the building's place would not be a trivial matter to get funded or

approved. A developer would have to raise a substantial amount of money, probably in London, and that takes considerable time.

Q: Given the collaborative model you are exploring, have you considered other forms of funding — lottery funding, for example?

GS: That is something further down the road. We are only about three to four weeks into the process since the expression of interest, so we have not yet reached that level of detail. People in the community who have expertise in grant-raising would be incredibly helpful to us — if you have that knowledge, please do get in touch.

Q: What is the likelihood of someone purchasing this property and simply locking it down?

GS: It is not impossible. The danger is that a property developer sees a scheme to build on the site whose value significantly exceeds the current land value plus demolition costs. *Cllr Halsall* It would need planning permission. But as I said, the ACV, the non-designated heritage asset status, and the conservation area all add to the protection. From a community perspective, we want to see the building stay and be in productive use.

Q: Does the BFA have the funds to commission an independent valuation?

GS: In principle, yes, though it is quite an expensive process and we have limited funds. I would want us to know what model we are likely to be following first. If we are working alongside a primary purchaser to secure community use, an independent valuation would not be the best use of money. If we are seriously contemplating putting our own money in, we would need to know the value — though in that scenario, the cost of a survey would be trivial compared to the total expenditure involved.

Q: Will there be clauses in any sale to prevent the building ending up like King Edward's — purchased, sat on, and left to decay while it accumulates value?

Timothy Cantell: It is possible, and there would be very little legal recourse. Let us hope the building finds an active use.

Q: Is there a model where the property is managed commercially — rented out to multiple users — rather than owned outright by a single buyer?

GS: The sale will shortly go on the open market and anyone interested will be able to see the process for placing a bid. If someone wants to get ahead of the process, they should contact the Methodist Church directly — we would be happy to provide their contact details. However, the BFA is not in a position to act as a broker between buyers and sellers.

Q: Do we have any idea what it costs to run the building?

GS: We do have some information on this. As the church member mentioned, it just about covers its running costs at current occupancy, but with no allowance for serious maintenance. Those figures are available.

From the Floor:

A suggestion was made that this meeting would have benefited from the presence of someone from the council's design and conservation team, given what a unique asset this building is on this side of the river. The suggestion was made that the

head of regeneration at B&NES, or the conservation team, might be invited to a future meeting. *Cllr Halsall* noted that without a specific planning proposal in front of them, planning officers are unlikely to engage directly, but a conservation officer could outline the legal position and available mechanisms for seeking protection or listing. It was also noted that the council's design review panel can be engaged proactively. GS confirmed the BFA intends to hold a follow-up meeting and will invite a wider range of speakers.

Closing Remarks

GS:

In summary: we will publish the discussion from this meeting on the BFA website. Please share the link with anyone who was not able to attend. We will also include updates in our monthly newsletter. There may not always be progress to report, but we will communicate regularly. In perhaps two months — around August or September — we could hold a further meeting when we know considerably more than we do at present. If anyone has further comments, please do get in touch.