

CONFERENCE REPORT

## The Ecclesiastical Law Society's 35th Annual Conference: Sacred Space

St Peter's, Eaton Square, London, 10 June 2023

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'In what sense are heritage assets actually *assets*?'. This was one intriguing question put to one speaker during this year's day conference. When you are dealing with items that cause some people today offence by their presence in a church, this is a good question to ask, and went to the heart of our consideration of 'Sacred Space'.

The Rt Rev'd Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester, started us thinking with a talk on space and in what sense it is sometimes sacred. He remembered moving from Wallsend in the Diocese of Newcastle to the Diocese of Ely, when some people told him he was moving to a 'holy place'. But why, he thought, should a God who made the whole universe, hallow one place rather than others? Bishop John reflected on the way that God dealt with the people of Israel, forming a triangle as it were of God, the land and God's people. He suggested that, as God made us as embodied people, we meet with him in particular places, and they – by our memories of experience – become holy to us and to others who visit them. However, we recalled that, in their stories, there are often the unheard voices, for example the people who died while building our cathedrals. Perhaps all sacred space is also contested?

Araba Taylor, Deputy Chancellor of Southwark and Deputy Commissary General of Canterbury, spoke of the role of the Chancellor in making judgments where there is a contest surrounding contested heritage. She said she would value more guidance from the Church on the impact of contested heritage on mission. Is a link to slavery so compelling that it outweighs the other factors she has to balance in making her judgments? Deputy Chancellor Taylor argued that the judges alone cannot decide this.

Finally in our day we heard from Janet Berry, Head of Conservation & Collections Policy, Cathedral & Church Buildings Division, Church Commissioners. As well as setting the work of her section in context she also gave some examples of how

some memorials have been dealt with in practice. Such decisions need to avoid erasing the past while still caring for people today. These practical solutions have included covering wording that is now offensive, while a longer-term plan is made. In St John's, Dorchester the Gordon memorial was moved into the neighbouring museum, and in the Rottingdean churchyard the gravestones of two musical hall artists, which had been engraved with their stage names which were offensive, were re-worked completely. Ms Berry also told us of the Contested Heritage Committee of the CBD which will be able to give advice to DACs where they lack the expertise themselves.

In all, it was a thought-provoking day. In the end it is clear that not all heritage assets *are* assets which deserve our special protection. But care is needed in dealing with what past generations have handed onto us, so that as much of it as possible can be of value to our successors.

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