

PRESS RELEASE

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DOCKYARD CHURCH RESCUE DEAL CELEBRATED

The future of one of Kent's most important buildings looks to be secure following a landmark rescue deal between a council and a building preservation trust.



Grade II* listed Dockyard Church at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey has lain empty and derelict since a fire in 2001. However, on 5 July, the building will pass into the ownership of the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust following its compulsory purchase by Swale Borough Council.

The church, with its impressive classical portico, was built in 1826-28 to the designs of George Ledwell Taylor (1788-1873) to serve the officers of the new naval dockyard at Sheerness. The dockyard was built in one campaign to a masterplan by the great engineer John Rennie (1761-1821) and was one of the architectural wonders of its age. Since the closure of the naval base in 1961, the dockyard has been run as a commercial port. A number of important buildings were demolished in the 1960s and 70s with others, including the church, sold off to private developers.

In 2001 the church suffered a devastating fire, and has since stood as a forlorn ruin as plans for its redevelopment failed to materialise. Now, as part of an initiative backed by English Heritage and local campaigners, Swale Borough Council has stepped in to compulsory purchase the church to enable its restoration by a building preservation trust.

The Spitalfields Trust, which in 2010 fronted the successful purchase of 10 listed buildings in the residential quarter of the dockyard, has stepped in to take on the building and implement emergency works. The church will then be passed to a new trust which will oversee its restoration to provide community space, small business units and, it is hoped, a display area for the magnificent 40ft square model of the dockyard made in the 1830s and currently in the care of English Heritage.

The church rescue campaign received a boost in 2011 when English Heritage and the World Monuments Fund Britain funded a detailed feasibility study looking at how the restoration of the building could be achieved, and what uses would be most appropriate. This report was commissioned by SAVE Britain's Heritage.

William Palin, local resident and trustee of The Spitalfields Trust said: 'The compulsory purchase of the church and the vesting of the building in the care of a preservation trust represents a great moment both for Sheppey and the whole region.'

This is a magnificent building which has languished unloved for too long. Now, thanks to the perseverance and vision of the council and the support of English Heritage, it is in safe hands and plans for its restoration can be taken forward. We are excited to be working with both Swale, English Heritage and other conservation groups to bring about the revival of this landmark building.'

Gerry Lewin, Deputy Leader at Swale Borough Council said 'Local residents are passionate about their heritage and for that reason the council has worked tirelessly to find a solution to one of the Borough's most important threatened listed buildings. Securing a future for this prominent building and bringing the dockyard model back to Sheerness where it belongs will be a real boost to Sheerness and to the Borough as a whole.'

Tom Foxall the region's Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas at English Heritage said 'St Paul's Dockyard Church is the most impressive of England's three surviving dockyard churches and we are pleased to have been able to support Swale Borough Council with the Compulsory Purchase Order which is needed to safeguard its future. We look forward to working with the Spitalfields Trust and the new dedicated Building Preservation Trust to bring this outstanding church back into beneficial use. Its listing at grade II* duly places it in the top 6% of the most significant listed buildings in England.'

Marcus Binney, President of SAVE, said: 'This is a glorious outcome to a desperate problem. Churches are key landmarks in all great Royal Naval Dockyards. SAVE is delighted to have played a key part in the rescue and revival of this handsome church. It also shows the perils faced by developers who wantonly allow listed buildings to rot.'

NOTES TO EDITORS:

The Spitalfields Trust was founded in 1977 to prevent the destruction of Georgian Spitalfields in London. Since then it has taken on and repaired over 60 buildings, including a medieval manor house in Wales and Shurland Hall, a Tudor palace on the Isle of Sheppey. It is currently involved in the restoration of a number of listed naval officers houses in Sheerness Dockyard.

The Trust will pass on the church to a new dedicated building preservation trust late in 2013 which will oversee the restoration project.

English Heritage is the Government's statutory adviser on the historic environment. The organisation exists to protect and promote England's spectacular historic environment and ensure that its past is researched and understood.

SAVE Britain's Heritage has been campaigning for historic buildings since its formation in 1975 by a group of architects, journalists and planners. It is a strong, independent voice in conservation, free to respond rapidly to emergencies and to speak out loud for the historic built environment.

World Monuments Fund (WMF) is the leading non-governmental organisation for the protection of cultural heritage. WMF Britain is the largest affiliate office outside WMF's headquarters in New York.

In 2010 the WMF place Sheerness Dockyard on its 2010 Watch List of endangered international sites.

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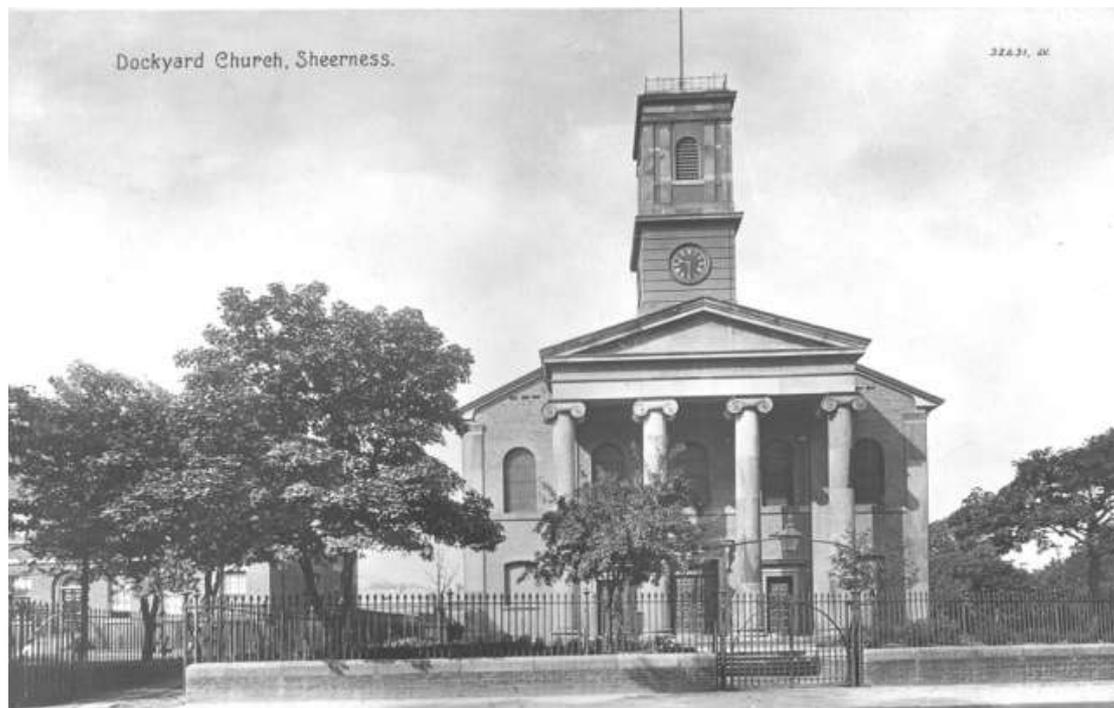
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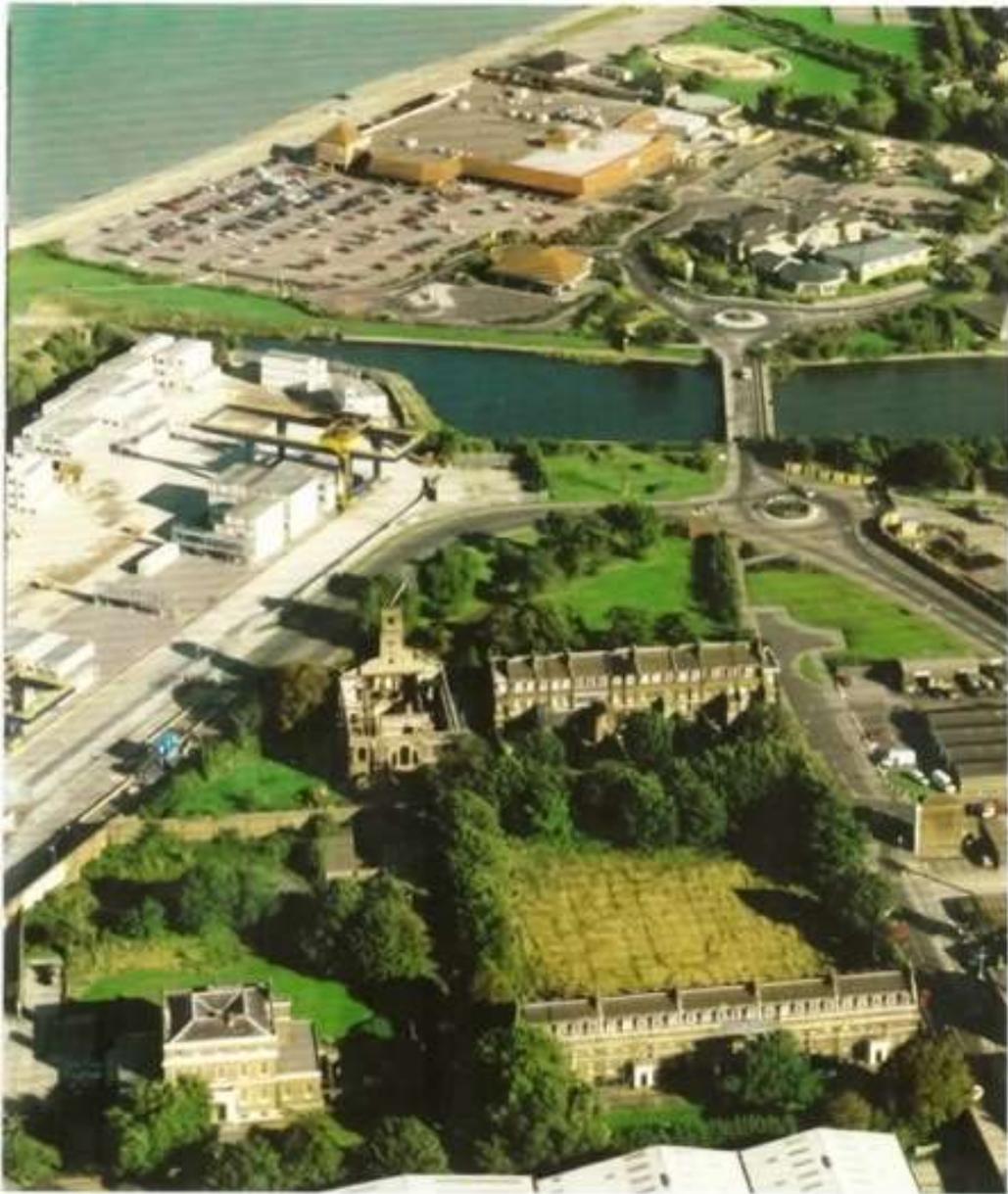
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Dockyard Church in the 1890s



The Church today



Aerial view of the east end of Sheerness Dockyard showing the church and officers' terraces