

Dumfries and Galloway Council – An Exercise in Neglect

Mark Huitson, June 2025

Introduction

The owners of Holywood Church, spent in excess of three years of focused and time-consuming research to understand the archaeology ignored or misrepresented by the last developer's agents and *Historic Environment Scotland* (HES). After realising they had been mis-sold a property with declared sound conservation proposals and planning permissions, the new owners dream of turning an unwanted derelict church into their home was shattered. Instead, they found a nightmare of owning property with millions of pounds of necessary work to make it merely habitable, and a re-discovery that should have brought good news to Scotland and a coup to the owners but was maliciously denied without good reason.

The owners found themselves in a frustrating crusade, alone, fighting against ubiquitous academic prejudice and Scottish heritage governance doubling down on its mistakes and incompetencies, all to hide their institutional failures. The owners found their own merit fighting bureaucratic obduracy and malignancy, free of critical thought and predictive intelligence. Mindless administrators and petty academics joined forces to conspire to treat the owners—two competent and qualified professionals—as invalid, in total contempt of the Scottish government's heritage policy of improving heritage understanding, challenge, and inclusion. Within this crusade there was battle with the negligent local authority, and the owners' frustration attempting to call an indifferent public to care.

The owners presented the re-establishment of a history understood two hundred years ago, thrown away by conceited Victorian speculation and the existence of the only two known Knights Templar preceptory bells in the world. The discovery is a hugely significant medieval historical find, safeguarding the church for the future, involving substantial fiscal reward, not only for the finders but the local economy and the Scottish government. The owners encouraged everyone to examine the evidence provided and independently form their own conclusions.

What occurred, however, is transparent institutional avoidance to engage with the owners' evidence for no other reason than prejudice, a reticence to accept flaws in the historical record, and that merit exists outside the world of the professional academic historian. No objective, supportable disavowal has been applied to the owners' discovery, yet the council and heritage governance have discounted the significance of the find and the validity of the owners and their extensive and insightful research; deliberately putting some of the most precious medieval artefacts found in Scotland in peril.

This document is primarily intended as a vehicle to record the church owners' correspondence and dealings with the local council, allowing public and legal scrutiny of the council's attitude and its bizarre, disconnected response to the owners' entreaties. It allows the church's owners

to express opinion, while allowing the reader to compare, for themselves, the balance of merit between the owners' discovery, intention and petition, and the authority's behaviour towards all three.

Illustrated is Dumfries and Galloway Council's decision to ignore all the circumstances around the owners' remarkable discovery, the church's future, and previous errant behaviour with regards to the original planning proposals and permission. The council has chosen to employ undeniable contempt regarding any sustainable future of the church, with a particularly narrow-view, only concerned with its own perceived government-led obligation under planning enforcement, ignorant to the consequences its behaviour has on the built-heritage environment. The council, through its officers, exhibits indifference to, and avoidance of the prime intent of governmental, and its own, built-heritage policies, *ie.*, to protect heritage while fostering public enjoyment of said heritage through a comprehensive understanding, ensuring its sustainability. The local authority demonstrates this indifference by failing to ensure its decisions are made with a comprehensive and competent objective understanding, and so it disregards the significant potential benefits Holywood Church would bring to the local area. It is a case study demonstrating why the built-heritage environment throughout Dumfries and Galloway is neglected, and why the local populous has such low regard for its governance.

The council's behaviour further illustrates the difficulty the owners have penetrating indifference, scepticism, prejudice, unprofessionalism and ignorance, to achieve either objective authoritative authentication of a tremendous medieval re-discovery that would turn a mis-sold church, into something else other than another building to stand unused—to rot—further advertisement of the decline of a once prosperous and devoutly Christian region, or equally objective disavowal.

In sober reflection of the owners' experiences, it was reasoned the council's behaviour, and the obtuse mindset of its officers was not so much aberrant behaviour, but a reflection of a much larger problem. The council and its personnel were simply part of a norm, generated over decades of shifting public priorities, an absence of delivering value, and a lack of intellectual authority. Rather than a demonstration of a deviant, poorly performing public authority, Dumfries and Galloway Council's place in the *Catalogue of Misplay*,¹ with regards to Holywood Church, is not a departure in an otherwise merit-worthy history of understanding of the church's history, its attending archaeology, and a care for local heritage, but rather compliance to a general and universal environment of indifference, ignorance, unprofessionalism and incompetence, adding up to a general apathetic attitude towards the issues that affect the heritage environment, its management and understanding.

Background

In 2019, Holywood Church was purchased by the new owners from the previous developer who, through his architectural and archaeological agents, secured a conservation plan and planning permission for a three-bedroom home conversion. The property was (*and is*) in a

¹ Huitson M. (2025), *A Catalogue of Misplay* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

dilapidated state internally, with its ecclesiastical fittings removed, plaster half-stripped, with remaining decoration in a poor degraded condition. There are extensive works required outside redevelopment; floors and timbers throughout are rotten, exterior stonework requires stabilisation, several key lintels installed in the mid part of the nineteenth century have failed, and extensive roof works are required. There are no water or sewage services installed, and much of the electrical wiring has been condemned. Since 2010, vandals have damaged two of the six stained-glass windows, three ancillary windows, and many original doors, which had to be replaced with inferior substitutes. All exterior space originally awarded with the sale from the *Church of Scotland* in 2010 had been asset-stripped away by the previous developer and sold for new house development.

The church was bought for fifty-three thousand pounds, eighteen thousand pounds more than the 2010 purchase price; an increase to reflect an attached conservation proposal and planning permission. The church was purchased on the understanding it contained two early sixteenth century bells, as defined both by the *Historical Building Record* and the property valuation. The reported ages of the bells were extremely pertinent to one of the owners, complimenting his interest in sixteenth century Scottish-Border history, the subject of the owner's extensive research and writings.

The previous developer, at the time of negotiations, declared nothing prevented redevelopment work from progressing, other than his own ill health—sale of the church being a reluctant choice because of that reason alone. The new owners, although having misgivings about the lack of progress regarding key elements of the development, were constrained by choice and timeframe.² Thus, purchase was made on the understanding and assumption the existing conservation plan and planning permissions attached to the church would be informed by a desk top assessment of the archaeology known or expected to underpin the church, with the attending archaeology appraised by archaeological inspection. The conservation proposals were also expected to have included environmental and structural surveys indicating any potential issues, although this information, requested by the owners, was ultimately withheld by the previous developer. It was also expected the previous developer's proposals would be constrained within local council and government development policies,³ ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the site was obtained *before* any conservation proposals had been submitted to the developer and subsequently to the local planning authority.

In Early Ownership

Within weeks of purchase, it was evident to the new owners, one a qualified and practiced forensic archaeologist, the other a former professional building surveyor, that inspection of any attending archaeology, or a comprehensive desk-top understanding of the archaeology underpinning the church and its effects on the environment of the church building, as well as comprehensive understanding of the building had *not* been carried out by the developer.

² Montgomery M. (2024), *Hidden in Plain Sight: Unmasking Scotland's first Knights Templar*, 'A Home for Two.'

³ *Dumfries and Galloway Council Local Development Plan 2* and the *Scottish Government National Framework, Historic Assets and Places*.

The church suffered catastrophic humidity problems which rendered damage to existing wall surfaces and contents, and presented air quality so poor, mechanical dehumidification had to be employed to allow comfortable working, with high mould spore readings causing concern for one of the owners with long-term breathing issues.

The architect's proposals to display the bells by alterations to the bell chamber were deemed ill-advised and unworkable by the owners' bell engineer. Prior survey and understanding of the church building was incomplete, with the church's sealed basement ignored and an absence of understanding regarding building's settlement and causes of the extreme humidity effecting the church throughout.

A cursory, closer inspection of the church bells revealed the bells had been misinterpreted as sixteenth century. In the relatively informed eyes of the owners, the bells were clearly far older, supported by an early bell form of one of the bells, and an early inscription form on the other. There was also other existing archaeology on site (two medieval plaques) that had not been appraised by *any* archaeological survey. Thus, the owners were forced to carry out what others had not, that is to fully understand the archaeology underpinning the site and the historic significance of the bells, if only so a competent conservation plan and a re-assessment of the cost of development and valuation could be assigned, and insurances obtained.

2020 Planning Application to Remove the Bells

In 2020, before the owners' investigation into the archaeology of the site had been significantly progressed, there was an immediate concern the previous developer's (architect's) proposal for altering the bell chamber, *ie.*, removing the louvres and installing fixed glass panels to facilitate public viewing was both detrimental to the bell chamber environment and failed to provide any meaningful public access. Having the bells enclosed behind fixed glass would be of detriment to the bell chamber's existing equilibrium, giving cause for the bronze to sweat, particularly during hot weather, and the bell frame to dry out, promoting splits and cracking in the timber.

With both bells being no more than 40cm tall and largely obscured by the surrounding structure, it would be difficult to view them from the ground with any kind of meaningful appreciation. Considering the bell tower was only accessible via precarious ladder entry, the bells would not be enjoyed, seen or heard (without restoration) by the owners or the public. Also, the architect had presented a solution that would negatively impact on the visual appearance of the tower, a significant presence in the area. It was the owners' desire to retain the original appearance of the tower, while affording the public better external viewing of the bells, particularly as they no longer would be heard.

There were also practical, structural and financial considerations. At some point, the bells would need to be dropped to allow structural work to the tower, which included, structural underpinning, new floors and a new roof. Part of that project included removing and rehangng the bells, with the bells, bell frame and fittings refurbished to ringing capacity, quoted in the region of forty thousand pounds.

The owners sought advice from the council's planning section, on how they should treat the bells, with the aim to remove them from the tower and display them for the public's enjoyment, either on-site or in a local museum/institution. The council offered advice, presenting the owners a guide for decision making.⁴ & ⁵

However, as the enquiry into the bells' provenance progressed, while planning permissions were sought, it was becoming evident the bells had been misrepresented by the *Historic Building Record*, maintained HES. The name of a bell's sponsor 'Welch' (as head of house) was clearly misreported, and even though the name had been challenged by governmental audit in 1920, interpreting as 'Weich', the bell's sixteenth century date construct had been allowed to stand, even though 'Weich' did not appear in the complete list of fifteenth or sixteenth century heads of Holywood Abbey. The owners' investigation of the inscribed name led to some interesting associations, and a litany of unsound Victorian assumption. Thus, the owners decided to suspend their planning application and wait until their investigation into the bells' provenance was completed, before making any decisions about the bells and any further approach to the council.

The Research

In the course of understanding, carried over three years of focused, collaborative research and review, the owners uncovered a catalogue of misplay and misunderstanding that prevented the church, through cost and provenance, becoming the owners' home,⁶ facts, either overlooked, misunderstood or deliberately ignored by the previous keepers of Holywood Church, previous inspection, HES, and subsequently the local authority within its planning considerations.

Desktop analysis and physical evidence indicated decorative stone rescued from the original twelfth century-built church was deliberately interred under the main church floor. Monitoring humidity levels over a twelve-month period revealed an average humidity level of 90%, caused by vapour from ground-heated water permeating the entire church space above, indicating significant deep-sited voids, impacted by rainfall levels and external environmental conditions—the situation evident for decades.

Whereas there was not a surfeit of archaeological report, there was sufficient to present an understanding of what lay under the church, and what hung in the belfry. This information was unfortunately widely dispersed, with little included in the government's archive, *Canmore*. However, all information was accessible and retrievable within any competent search by the former developer's agents, which they had failed to carry out, neither inspecting nor considering the attending archaeology on site and how best to treat it.

The two bells had been irrefutably misidentified as sixteenth century and were *in fact* twelfth century, as per the original testimony held within the eighteenth and nineteenth *Statistical*

⁴ [Response from council, re first planning application, April 2020](#)

⁵ [Supplementary response from council, re first planning application, May 2020](#)

⁶ Huitson M. Bonde R. (2023), *The Templar Bells of Scotland: An investigation into the origins of the bells in a Dumfriesshire church*.

Accounts of Scotland, and whereas this was not an impediment to redevelopment work, it meant the owners were unable, without authoritative redesignation of the bells, to attain a valuation, so insurance was denied. Frustrating ownership of the site was compelling evidence that the site was previously understood before the mid-nineteenth century to be a former Templar infirmary. The bells' sponsor held concurrent religious title and position as a knight within the king of the Scots (1124-1153) David I's entourage. With only two holy orders allowing that state of religious dignity existing in Scotland at the time of the bell's consecration, and compelling connections to the origins of only one of them, the bells presented the only significant provenanced Knights Templar artefacts so far found and published in the world.

It was clear the previous developer's plans were fundamentally flawed in terms of delivering a cost-effective house conversion. The site was victim of the state's failure to maintain a robust understanding of the built-heritage—its understanding being built upon the singular opinions of outmoded Victorian historians, reinforced by their status rather than research. The developer's agents had been negligent with regards to their duty of care and had failed to offer the developer a comprehensive and deliverable proposal. Regrettably, the previous developer had passed that truancy of competence onto the new owners, who had reasonable expectation that all was correct.

New Plans Required

Whether some of the owners' discovery had already been made by the previous developer during their ownership, and this was the reason work had stopped, the developer seeking to sell the church rather than convert it, is open to conjecture. However, it was clear the developer could not escape the humidity issues, nor the significant archaeological constraints to service installation and excavation and had chosen not to disclose these as issues which adversely affected any cost-effective development of the church.

Following the crux of their research, the new owners of Holywood Church were presented with significant impediment to their plans for a home conversion. They were presented with a mis-sold property that had a misrepresented historic record of its bells and provenance of the site, formed not from misunderstanding, but incompetence, and no viability in terms of its conservation proposal; the planning permissions worthless unless the owners could raise the significant extra spend to develop the church as their home.

The owners always understood, as the church was known to sit on the site of a former abbey, in the middle of a four-hundred-year-old cemetery, that archaeology was always going to be a concern. Thus, the owners pragmatically expected the completed development, to be markedly outside of budget, but that was the price of owning heritage—it is rarely a financially beneficial asset. However, the owners intended to create a home, not an investment.

Whereas it was always understood unexpected archaeology was going to be a likely concern, particularly highlighted by the fact no water services had ever been installed into the church, it was expected problems could be overcome by limited excavation, and of course a realistic view on likely budget overspend. However, this was not the case, and the owners were presented

with the prospect of a substantially revised refurbishment cost, re-appraised with archaeological agents for the necessary archaeological investigation and subterranean engineering to waterproof the voids under the church.

With unique Templar artefacts hanging within the belfry appraised as ‘priceless’ by *Lyon and Turnbull* and *Coutts*, antiquities and insurance specialists, and the associated abnormal security costs to preserve the bells on site, presenting further expense, not only in terms of redevelopment, but yearly financial consideration in terms of insurances, presented a considerable burden on the owners. Included was potential loss of ‘quiet enjoyment’ of the owners’ home as tourist numbers increased from less than one hundred visitors to the site per annum, to potentially thousands.

The found provenance of the site and the bells was an immediate and considerable security concern, dictating early public declaration was strictly avoided while authoritative authentication was obtained and the site and bells treated appropriately.

Within this new reality, any plans for a house conversion were abandoned. The owners maintaining the church for any other reason was not a viable option for them, leaving the owners to seek a new titleholder for the church, one who could provide investment and development for the church and offer secure protection for the bells. The find potentially offered a huge benefit to the sustainability of the church, and so a collaborative solution was sought with the Scottish authorities to allow the owners to move forward, understanding that authoritative authentication would be required so the church could be sold *without* misrepresentation.

The Council’s Archaeological Officer

In June 2021, following completion of the first draft of the owners’ investigative report, with several points of investigation and clarity still required, the owners contacted a number of leading UK history and archaeology academics, including *The British Museum* and Scotland’s *Treasure Trove Unit (National Museums Scotland)* for advice. Dumfries and Galloway Council’s archaeological officer, *Andrew Nicholson* was referred to the owners as first point of contact by Scotland’s Treasure Trove Unit,⁷ to examine and evaluate both the unrecorded and misunderstood archaeology found by the owners in the course of research.

Telephone contact was made with the council’s archaeology officer in August 2021, amidst restrictions and disruption imposed by the Covid-19 lockdown, during which the officer was briefed on the owners’ discovery. The telephone conversation was followed up with an email by the owners, confirming and reiterating some of the detail that supported the owners’ conclusion.⁸ The officer verbally declared the subject of the find was outside his sphere of understanding, his being focused on the Anglo-Saxon period. However, it was expected and agreed that the officer would both appraise the archaeology in context of his role within the

⁷ [Referral Email from Treasure Trove Unit \(NMS\), June 2021](#)

⁸ [Follow up Email to Council's Archaeologist, August 2021](#)

council and the reinterpretation of the bells and archaeology, both deliberately interred and existing from remains of the former abbey complex. However, despite follow-up by the owners, the officer failed to attend the site as promised to appraise the finds or feedback any consideration or advice regarding the owners' research.

With the officer's failure to attend the Holywood site, or engage with the owners' research, it was important the owners understood the role of the council's archaeological officer, to determine if his attention was necessary, important or helpful to the appraisal of the discovery. Despite request made to the council, the owners were both denied the officer's attendance, and later the officer's job description, however as the role was reasonably standard throughout all UK councils, there was assumption the council's officer would cover similar duties:

- Providing professional advice on archaeology and heritage issues to council members, senior officers, external partners and the public.
- Providing archaeological planning advice to the council, other agencies and developers, including responses to planning applications.
- Monitoring fieldwork and post-excavation programmes, helping to protect and manage the area's historic environment.
- Assist, prepare and implement policies and strategies for archaeology for inclusion in local policy frameworks and advise on the implications of other policies.

It was expected the officer had a degree or equivalent in archaeology or a related subject, a good working knowledge of British archaeology including fieldwork experience, and good analytical and communication skills. As such, although the subject of the owners' investigation may not have been within the officer's preferred field of understanding, it was reasonably expected the officer would be competent enough to evaluate any archaeological report and present an informed opinion as to the viability of its conclusion, in context of the understanding of two medieval bronze artefacts and associated stonework.

Despite confirmation of the officer's obligation to appraise the finds and offer advice to the owners, the officer failed to follow up any visit to the site from the owners' request in 2021 or feedback any information or advice. The officer's actions mirrored the behaviour of HES, who similarly offered initial assistance only to 'disappear' after receiving the owners' testimony and evidence of discovery.

The council's officer only emerged in 2024, strictly within a council-led desk-top consultative role in connection to the owners' retrospective planning application to have the bells removed from the property.

The Council's Museum Service

With the council's archaeological officer not attending, nor indeed even engaging with the discovery owners took their report to the Council's Museum Service in October 2021.

The owners' report, at that time around one hundred pages and titled, *Myth and Mystery: The Bells of Holywood - An investigation into the origins of the bells in Holywood Church, Dumfriesshire*, was supplemented by critique from two academics, cited as best placed to review the owners' investigation, as recommended by leading archaeological and medieval history university contacts, including *Malcolm Barber*, world-renowned Templar specialist. Mr Barber advised the owners, he himself did not have the specialist knowledge required, as he had not specialised in twelfth century Scottish Templar archaeology.

The owners found the academics' responses inexplicable and so sought both appraisal and explanation from the museums service. Both specialist academics had ignored the owner's research as if invalid, opening with condescension directed to denigrate any merit within the owners' investigation. The owners' capability was dismissed, claiming they should read 'academic recognised' books on the subject matter, and so be better informed, even though the owners had included all pertinent specialist and scholarly reference in their report. That the owners' palaeographic interpretations required experts, even though the owners had used international scholars to understand and test their interpretations, and the academics, deemed experts, and available, within their peer group, provided interpretation that was demonstrably incompetent in terms of the photographic evidence presented.

Hypocrisy and prejudice were clearly demonstrated by the two academics. Whereas the academics implied the owners were not informed or capable enough to carry out the research, they replaced the owners' comprehensive and collaborative understanding with unsupportable opinion, blindly supporting *James Barbour's* 1898 re-interpretation of the bells, the academics termed, the 'traditional' or 'accepted view'. To this opinion, and to counter both the owners' conclusions and support James Barbour's misinterpretation, the academics added deviance to contemporary evidence and peer understanding; untruths offering transparently bias and duplicitous review.

To clarify, the academics' 'accepted view' is in fact the 'academic view'; academic published work on Holywood Abbey and the bells' understanding, underpinned by three Victorian historians' superficially formed theories, *not* research. The 'traditional view' of the bells had been, for over one hundred years prior to James Barbour's 1898 sixteenth century re-interpretation, that they were twelfth century (one bell being of a confirmed pre-1200 design). James Barbour's re-interpretation, in fact, only lasted unchallenged for no more than twenty years. Regrettably, a 1920 government audit correctly challenging Barbour's bell sponsor name construct, allowed his dating theory to stand (even though it made no sense), thus by default validating Barbour's dismissal of the traditional view of the bells dating.

The meeting with the regional curator of museums, *Judith Hewitt*, confirmed the philosophy that had directed the academics' reviews, and highlighted a significant impediment to the owners receiving honest critique from any lead academic:

"No leading academic in medieval studies will accept a new historical reveal from non-academics. Only a report written by a regarded scholar will be properly considered, and only then if it does not challenge another academic or a fellow antiquarian's work. Regardless how monumental, complete, evidenced and

compelling the reveal is... no academic will agree with it... In general, academic work builds on the work of previous generations of scholars. It does not seek to dismantle previous thought, only to offer alternative supposition. Thus, subjectivity often replaces objectivity more than it should. Thus, in terms of robust historical understanding the ‘academic view’ is often and invariably flawed.”

In November 2021, the curator followed up the meeting with the owners with a review of the owners’ initial report.⁹

‘A very impressive and thorough examination of the bells and their significance.’

‘You [the owners] have examined the bells very comprehensively and challenged the existing interpretation of them substantially.’

‘I think there is definite cause to look again at the way that they have been interpreted based on your findings.’

‘They [the bells] don’t seem to have been examined thoroughly until now, and there seems to have been a reluctance to consider the idea that they may have been wrongly identified.’

‘Publication may help to bring forward more information and I think fresh eyes on the bells and opening up discussion about them can only be a good thing. Publish and start a debate to see where that leads.’

The curator reinforced the issues the owners would have moving forward. The curator was someone who clearly saw merit in the owners’ research but would not validate it. It was offered that the curator saw the subject of the research outside their knowledge, but as the subject was outside everyone’s understanding, there being no focused scholarly work on early medieval bells, the establishment of Templar-kind in Scotland, or the nature of eleventh and twelfth century secular clergy (the root of the bell sponsor’s ecclesiastical title), it was difficult to see who *was* ‘qualified’ to validate the find in debate.

The owners would encounter this reluctance to authenticate from many international senior history scholars, all who would see merit, but stop short of publicly endorsing the owners’ conclusions, prepared only to push any agreement into debate. If the curator could not offer any alternative to the owners’ conclusions, and if the lead scholars would not agree, and other scholars would similarly abstain from formal agreement, who would have the status to authenticate the discovery or disavow it with objective and supportable evidence? What the academics did possess was the ability to critique the investigation, construction, methodology, referencing and validation of the owners’ evidence, as in any thesis. The owners had produced unquestionable evidence, not conjecture, and a conclusion that offered the only answer to the bells’ sponsor, thus it was deemed scholarly reluctance to validate, was not through lack of expertise or objective assessment of the evidence, but a prejudiced lack of will.

The Bells in the Bell Tower.

As part of any redevelopment and refurbishment of Holywood Church, the bell tower required, as a minimum, stabilisation due to a failed ground floor lintol, a new roof, new timber flooring throughout, and revised safe tower belfry access arrangements, including new ladders. The bell frame required strengthening at the joints throughout with stainless steel bolts.

⁹ [Email from Dumfries Museum Service, November 2021](#)

Before any work could be carried out to the bell tower, the bells would have to be dropped to the ground floor of the bell tower and stored securely.

The bells required overhaul and refurbishment; the stumps of the cast-in crown staples drilled out to minimise the risk of the bells becoming cracked, repositioning the bells, including cutting the treble wheel to increase clearance in preparation for rehanging for swing chiming, with new ironwork and headstocks, new clappers and staples, new wheels, pins, ball bearings and pulleys, bell ropes and new stainless steel strapping and headstocks as a minimum to allow rehanging. Restoring the bells and bell frame to ringing capacity, carrying out the minimum works identified during Ranald Clouston's 1993 inspection of the Holywood bells was quoted in 2023, to be in the region of thirty thousand pounds.¹⁰

Removal of the Bells

Redevelopment work on the church had been suspended in 2020, as soon as the owners were aware of the constraints the buried archaeology presented to any viable financial development of Holywood Church as a dwelling. An estimate of eight-hundred-thousand pounds had been communicated to the owners by archaeological agents for dealing with the interred archaeology of the former twelfth century-built church, the subterranean archaeology remaining from the former abbey, and subsequent ground engineering works to waterproof the voids under the church, including structural underpinning and strengthening of openings and failed lintols.

To facilitate closer, safe inspection of the bells, and provide temporary safekeeping, allowing renovation to the bells, including weighing and digital mapping, the bells were lowered in 2022 by *BCM Steeplejacks Ltd*, Melrose, within guidance provided by the *Council for the Care of Churches, The Conservation and Repair of Bells and Bell Frames, Code of Practice*, and method statements provided by the bell engineer. The bells were stored on site, crated in two bespoke ISPM 15 quality art-shipping containers, following advice from The British Museum.

The bells were removed off site in 2022 without public consultation, to maintain confidentiality of the discovery, and fears for the bells' safety following an arson attack on a similar building less than three miles away, and as protection against the bells uninsured status and vulnerability to scrap thieves while stored in a dilapidated building.

Dumfries and Galloway Council

Even before purchase of Holywood Church by the current owners, there had been a campaign in 2009-10, initiated by a few leading local citizens, headed by the *Reverend Andrew Crosbie* and former provost *Jack Groom*, challenging the Church of Scotland's apparent lack of concern regarding both the future of the church's bells and underpinning archaeology; all being disposed of with the proposed sale of the church for thirty-five-thousand pounds to any private buyer.¹¹ Reverend Crosbie, who believed the bells to be far older than their sixteenth century

¹⁰ Huitson M. Bonde R. (2023), *The Templar Bells of Scotland: An investigation into the origins of the bells in a Dumfriesshire church*.

¹¹ *Bells could be lost*. Transcript of Daily Record Article, dated 2009

attribution, had offered to remove the bells at his own expense, so they may be either deposited in the local museum or displayed within a local church. The Church of Scotland ignored the petition, confirming the bells would remain with the church as a ‘quirky feature’ of the sale.

The campaign was later redirected to the council in its planning considerations regarding the church and the sale of the land attached to the church site. Despite a request from Reverend Crosbie to negotiate the removal of the Holywood Church bells as part of the deal, backed by two councillors, the call was dismissed by the council’s operations manager, urging councillors to keep out of the dispute over the bells. Thus, the bells were lost to the public as part of a private sale.¹²

The owners, interviewing Reverend Crosbie in 2021, a staunch critic of James Barbour’s competence, critiqued and applauded the owners’ investigation. He confirmed the owners’ findings and that there was little support from the council or the local community for retaining the bells for public enjoyment. Regardless, the owners endorsed Reverend Crosbie’s original aims and reinforced their intention to give the bells opportunity to be presented to the public; for the bells to be recognised for what they are, rather than be labelled by an errant interpretation proposed by James Barbour.

From discovery in 2020, confidentiality had been maintained and requested by those who assisted and reviewed the owners’ findings. It was ignorance that had deflected miscreant attention from the bells, and so a policy of confidentiality to maintain that ignorance was prudently employed by the owners. By the latter part of 2023, mindful it was increasingly likely that general publication of the discovery was necessary to circumvent continual prejudice with regards to authentication, and the fact the bells had been removed off site covertly for prudent security reasons without planning consideration, it was thought necessary to inform the council of the discovery, and to stay on the right side of planning statute.

A letter was sent to the council’s chief executive officer in December 2023, with copies to the local ward councillors, and the Director of Economy and Resources, to;

‘Specifically request the council to engage with the owners, and seek to remove the inappropriate listing, and allow the bells to find a secure home, hopefully within a public institution, and allow the owners to facilitate a new secure future for the church and the site with a new owner.’ The owners requested; ‘all to reply as a matter of courtesy... to an extremely significant and unique discovery in Dumfries; a find of huge national and international historical interest, valued in the tens of millions of pounds.’¹³

The ten-page letter outlined the issues surrounding the discovery, including the circumstances surrounding the purchase, the research, critical issues with the church, the owners intention to sell the church, incidences of vandalism, miscreant after-hours incursion, police involvement, reason for the bells removal, the negligence of former keepers, and particularly the deviant property listing and behaviour by HES, effecting valuation, problems attaining third-party authoritative authentication, legal recourse, and tourism benefit... *etcetera*. Rather than send copies of the archeological report with the letter, the owners invited the recipients to request

¹² <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/church-bells-fight-is-lost-2587222>

¹³ Owners’ petition to the council, December 2023

the full report via email. The owners reasoned, although they could not guarantee the recipients would read the report, their request for the report would give an indication of their ‘interest’.

No response was made by the recipients of the letter. No request for the owners’ report was ever requested, and the council officer delegated to answer, was only concerned with stating the council’s obligation under planning legislation. As such, the officer ignored the tenor of the petition and the issues it presented, offering superfluous advice that had little context in regard to the owners’ petition, intent for the church, or action already taken.¹⁴

The council’s response demonstrated an obtuse attitude towards the discovery, even before it ascertained its authenticity. With the nature of the discovery and the owners’ entreaty ignored, it would later explain the council’s future performance towards subsequent planning requests by the owners, displaying a similar ignorant attitude towards the discovery.

The council, including the responsible councillors, did not appear to want to involve themselves with even any potential benefit the discovery would bring to the region, mirroring the attitude of much of the community surrounding the church.¹⁵ Whether their disinterest was due to ignorance or indifference is not known, but the council’s behaviour ultimately contributed to the owners’ understanding why the historic-built-environment in the region is so underdeveloped and unsustainable.

Authentication, the Property Listing, and Planning

Following the unhelpful response from the council, the owners turned their attention away from the local authority and its focus on planning obligations. It was evident, any planning constraints regarding the bells would be resolved with authentication of the bells’ remarkable provenance. The fundamental argument was the origin of the bells’ understanding and its inclusion onto the property listing. Whereas it is not uncommon for bells to form part of a property listing, it must still be made on an understanding of the bells, as per the narrative presented by the historical record. As it was clear the listing created in 1971 utilised an incompetent government assessment of the bells as sixteenth century, instead of a reference to earlier government records of twelfth century, confirmed by competent examination, and that history presented the bells’ fiscal value as extraordinary, then the property listing should have reflected this.

The owners’ legal team’s solution to the government’s errant property listing, was to challenge the source of its understanding. The government’s agent, HES, had misrepresented the church’s historic building record in terms of its bells, firstly, by an errant understanding incompetently created by their own 1920 audit, then in 2023 by creating an indefinite narrative of the dating of the bells, not formed from any historical record, narrative or investigation, but by its own arbitrary view transparently created to excuse its past incompetence and current prejudice against the architects of the discovery.¹⁶

¹⁴ [Council's response to owners' petition, January 2024](#)

¹⁵ Huitson M (2025) *Holywood Church – ‘a Future?’* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

¹⁶ Huitson Mark (2025), *Historic Environment Scotland – A Malignant Caretaker* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

A baseline figure of fifteen thousand pounds was suggested to the owners for legal costs, with the caveat HES may choose to remove the bells from the listing but not authenticate (or disavow) the owners' discovery. This did not offer a solution. Also pertinent, if HES chose to double down on its error and prejudice, legal action and costs would escalate significantly, particularly as the issues the owners were raising had significant consequences with regards to the integrity of the entire Historic Building Record maintained by HES and the merit of historical enquiry forming it. An alternative legal solution was offered to challenge HES's deliberate misrepresentation of the bells, having a significant detrimental effect on the valuation of the owners' property. This route to remedy, however, was no less time consuming or economic.

The owners, seeing legal remedy as the last resort, returned to the council as a possible route to gaining authentication (or disavowal) of their discovery, utilising the planning process to coerce third-party professional witness testimony of the bells' provenance, thought to be necessary in the council's decision making.

In June 2024, the owners belatedly replied to the planning officer's reply to their original petition in January 2024.¹⁷ The letter, confirming with evidence the extraordinary provenance of the bells, reiterated conversion of the church into a domestic dwelling was unfeasible due to the site's historic provenance, and inherent, destructive, deep-sited archaeological issues. The owners stated they were purely maintaining security of the site and bells, defending the site against palpable miscreant attention until a new owner could be found. The owners reaffirmed their intention to find the best possible solution for selling the church and bells, to ensure the church was redeveloped and not 'abandoned' in favour of removing its financial asset, *ie.*, the bells.

The council's reply was offered within the limitations of the planning officer's understanding and planning remit; *'submit an application which seeks to remove the bells to an identified safe place and ensure that the structure which held them in place within the tower is kept intact as much as is possible.'* The officer's reply was still largely errant to the nature of the issues, the discovery, or the reasons the bells had been removed and could not be displayed, given public access or their location, or returned within the owners' tenure.¹⁸ However, as the prime purpose of the owners' planning application was to coerce authoritative authentication (or disavowal) of the bells' provenance from a professional third party-witness, the context of the council's narrow-view concerning planning conditions and constraints regarding the bells merely as 'architectural fittings' was of minor concern. With authentication of the bells awarded, the bells' errant inclusion into a category B property listing would be resolved.

One of owners' main anxieties, regarding selling the church and its bells with a reveal of a Templar provenance, was fuelled by advice given by selling agents, and confirmed by speculative purchaser enquires. Unless the purchaser for the church was an institution or organisation concerned with investing substantial monies into the redevelopment, archaeology

¹⁷ [Owners' response to council's email, dated January 2024, sent June 2024](#)

¹⁸ [Response from council's-heritage planner, July 2024](#)

and sustainability of the church, then it was likely all other interested parties would strip away the bells away as priceless antiquities, with the church remaining undeveloped. Regardless of motive, in all cases the bells would likely be removed permanently, as security afforded by the Holywood site would forever present a significant concern.

Seeking planning permission to temporarily remove the bells, to stay on the right side of statute, was still required while authentication was resolved and a new owner for the church procured. Seeking temporary removal, however, would not resolve authentication. It was envisaged permissions to remove the bells temporarily may be given, considering safety and security concerns, without the need to authenticate the bells' provenance. Instead, the owners required a strategy that would coerce action of authentication from the council.

Therefore, the owners sought permission to remove the bells permanently. The application would be centred on the need to use the bells' remarkable provenance to attract interest in the church, and use monies realised by sale of the bells, gifted to ensure the archaeology and the church was developed by a new developer, creating a sustainable signpost to history. It was realistic to expect the bells with authentication would be removed from the church, as the church did not present a secure home for the bells.

2024 Planning Application

A planning application was made, including a narrative why the bells were removed, including proposals.¹⁹ The owners stressed they were not seeking to separate 'medieval' bells from their intrinsic connection to the church site, but place priceless Templar artefacts, discovered in the course of understanding the heritage they were mis-sold, with a new keeper who could preserve them, and in turn use the significant provenance of the bells, global interest, and the monies they raise to ensure an historic church, with substantial archaeological problems, unsuited for development under its existing planning permissions was sustainable for the future enjoyment of the public.

The application was made on the understanding that:

- the bells, officially listed as 'medieval period' by HES in the Historic Building Record would have no market value, as opposed to 'Templar' which would generate significant interest.
- if the bells' Templar provenance was not authenticated, the church would remain unused, dilapidated in its current tenure, and unsellable unless the owners could attract a speculative offer, which would likely only be interested in removing the bells.
- notwithstanding any 'Templar' conclusion, the owners archaeological report presented an uncharacteristic, substantial, collaborative, comprehensive, and painstaking investigation, merit-worthy of consideration.
- any initial review of the owners' report would be measured against both the poor quality and source of existing understanding, and the duplicity of the 'specialist' critique.

¹⁹ [Supplementary information, Planning Application, July 2024](#)

- it was not the council officers' remit to necessarily authenticate or disavow the owners' conclusions from their own comprehension but give consideration to the owners' testimony and seek verification, if necessary, via third-party professional evaluation.
- that the thrust and detail of the government's entire heritage policy and local development plan would be employed in any decision making.

A Note on the Bells' 'Market' Value

A medieval church bell, depending on provenance, size, condition, decoration, and age, is valued anywhere between six and one hundred thousand pounds Sterling. However, church bells have a limited niche market, particularly considering the surfeit as more and more churches close. Supply far exceeds demand. The cost of removal, refurbishment, and relocation means it is often more economical to dispose of redundant churches with bells in place (as is the case of Holywood Church), rather than remove them to be retained, or sold on, or offered as a donation to another church or museum. Indeed, in terms of the owners' financial commitment, removing the bells and maintaining secure specialist-vaulted storage off-site, has already exceeded any projected value 'medieval period' bells could possibly generate in the current marketplace.

The Holywood bells are quite small, not extraordinarily decorated, and exhibit damage to their cannons. Being around 40cms tall and 40cms in diameter, weighing less than 100kgs, they are relatively portable. They are significant in terms of bell archaeology, as they illustrate the time-line development away from high-waisted or beehive forms to squatter economical shapes in the 12th century, using far less bell metal while still producing comparable harmonic value. But even provenanced to a twelfth century ecclesiastical or Scottish lord, such bells have little value outside their connection to the site. The reality is, outside scrap metal value, church bells have little monetary resale value on the collectors' market, or even general public interest, and so risk of targeted theft is minimal, outside miscreant scrap metal opportunists.

However, it is the bells' extraordinary provenance that creates an extraordinary valuation (with authoritative authentication), estimated in the tens of millions of pounds Sterling, with an arbitrary insurance valuation closer to nine figure values. The bells present the site as unique Templar material and property, with no verifiable scholarly or institutional counterargument to dispute that fact. With the evidence presented to the public, a lack of official authentication does not diminish potential miscreant attraction—risk of theft, or the desirability to own unique 'priceless' Templar material, or wanton destruction. These are all very real concerns for the bells' owners. It is something they did not foresee when they bought a church on the specific understanding it contained two early sixteenth century bells.

Contributing to the Council's Planning Decision

The council's planning decision was directed by its statutory consultees, including the council's own archaeological officer, HES, the council's senior planning officer (*Built-Heritage*), and any public objection.

The Council's Archaeological Officer

The same officer who had failed to follow up any visit to the site from the owners' request in 2021 or feedback any information or advice, emerged in 2024, strictly within a council-led desk-top consultative role in connection with the owners' retrospective planning application.

The officer's advice to the council, as in 2021, avoided any archaeological evaluation of the owners' conclusion regarding the bells. The tenor of the officer's recommendation to the planning decision was to treat the bells, claimed by the owners 'with a unique Templar provenance', as immaterial to planning intent, *ie.*, to maintain the bells as purely architectural fittings, as per planning guidelines, within the church with their 'special interest' only considered as 'medieval period' bells, linked to the site.²⁰

Rather than offer up appraisal of the archaeological content of the owners' submission, and either provide specific challenge, disavowal or authentication of the owners' conclusions, the officer ignored the research, relying instead on obfuscation and facile reasoning not to present any informed archaeological advice to the council relating to the evidence presented by the owners—reasoning which would illuminate why the bells, with a comprehensive understanding of their true 'special interest' gained through research not supposition, were and should be removed for safekeeping.

To qualify his reluctance to offer up a qualified evaluation, the officer claimed, '*A retrospective listed building consent application is not the appropriate forum for discussing in detail the associations of the bells*'. The officer's argument for not providing his evaluation of the archaeological content of the planning application was absurd, considering the sole reason for the bells removal was precisely the detail (archaeology) and association (provenance) of the bells. The appropriateness of the council's specialist archaeology officer's consideration of the bell's understanding of provenance was *extremely* relevant, as it was in 2021.

The officer simply confirmed the owners' archaeological report, '*centres on a new interpretation of the inscriptions on the two bells, and a number of propositions as to potential associations leading from this new interpretation*'. The officer did not clarify the viability of this new interpretation, the significance of their Templar attribution, or offered any assessment as a qualified archaeologist. The officer neither confirmed nor disavowed the owners' conclusion. '*It is accepted by all parties that the bells are medieval in date and associated with the former abbey, beyond that there is little consensus.*' The officer failed to clarify the quality of disharmony within that '*consensus*', or his own opinion within any disagreement. He failed to present the fact there is no *evidenced* legend whatsoever supporting any other dating or bell sponsor association than the owners' attestation; a point the officer obfuscated rather than addressed, with what should have been an informed view as the council's expert witness.

To clarify, there is only *consensus* that the bells are associated with the former Holywood abbey. The 'medieval period' dating paradigm reported by the council's archaeological officer is *not*

²⁰ [Dumfries and Galloway's archaeologist's recommendation.](#)

consensual, but HES's unqualified opinion alone, repudiated by the owners. Whereas it is true to say the bells were created in the medieval period (1098-1601), there is no record existing that this vague dating construct was ever employed in *any* historical narrative or supported by any detailed assessment or research informing the historical record. The 'medieval period' construct was subjectively employed by HES to belie the fact the only dating construct presented in *any* historical record, in the wake of the owners' successful dismantling of James Barbour's errant 1898 sixteenth century dating hypothesis and HES's forebears, *The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland* (RCAHMS) demonstrably incompetent 1920 support of that theory, left only mid-twelfth century dates associated with the bells on historical record,²¹ or through the owners' research confirming that testimony. As the 'medieval period' dating classification had no foundation in any prior inspection or historical record, it can only be viewed as deliberate artifice employed by HES to remove its prior misrepresentative sixteenth century dating, without condemning it, and not to disagree or confirm the existing eighteenth and nineteenth century governmental Statistical Accounts of Scotland records and the owners' verification of that testimony... and so remains entirely misrepresentative of the historic record.

The council's archaeological officer, rejecting the owners' Templar testimony without prudent and professional consideration, takes the prejudiced position the bells *are not* what the owners testify them to be, and so his advice to the council is made on the premise, they are medieval ecclesiastical fittings—medieval bells of no great uniqueness, monetary value or importance outside association with the site. If this was the case, the owners would *not* have removed the bells from the church in 2022, and so planning permission, retrospective or otherwise would *not* have been sought. Removal and storage have cost the owners far more than 'medieval' bells could ever generate on the open market. With costs still rising, it would be beneficial to return the bells to the empty church, that is of course if the owners were as indifferent to the bell's intrinsic value as is the council's archaeological officer.

Within the officer's assessment, he makes several claims, which the owners cannot substantiate:

- Claims the owners did not report the finds to the authorities, when, in fact, they were reported to the officer in 2021, only to be ignored.
- The bells were independently valued by the council's museum service in 2020, when the owners have no knowledge of any such valuation.
- The bells were removed because of structural issues with the tower, rather than recognise it was the security issues that dictated the bells be removed off-site, until a new owner for the church and bells could be procured.
- That permission should be denied because the owners have not determined where they will be displayed, while the officer was fully aware why that situation was unattainable, whilst authoritative authentication was denied.

²¹ *The First and Second Statistical Accounts of Scotland*

The officer ignored any reference to the highly relevant, revised and unreasonable development and archaeological cost, as well as the unforeseen provenance the church presented in terms of the original planning consent and intention to turn the church into a dwelling.

To reiterate, instead of evaluating the owners' archaeological report, presented in support of their planning application—a report offering a detailed archaeological interpretation of the bells' origins, the officer presented a dismissal of the bells' extraordinary provenance without providing any verifiable or robust counterargument to that dismissal. The officer had three years to engage with the research. Considering the huge significance in terms of Scottish and local history, and the benefits it would bring Scotland, questions must be raised why the officer thought the original request from the owners for his engagement and appraisal was not worth his time.

The owners cannot confirm if the officer was unaware of the ubiquitous philosophy of prejudice applied by academic and some professional historians, that historical understanding is commonly and errantly built on the shoulders of other scholars and their subjective thinking, or that anything with a Templar connection is shied away from by most professional historians because the subject has sadly been grossly corrupted by sensational histories and speculation. The owners' understanding of this detrimental philosophy was gained from approaches to over two hundred international academics and their institutions. The owners confirmed what the council's own museum officer reported in 2021; that this universal condition of prejudice would prevent any objectivity being applied to the owners' research. The question raised is, was the council's archaeological officer outside this regrettable caustic behaviour, or part of it? The latter appears to apply, hence his reluctance to engage with the archaeological evidence presented and report its relevance to his employers, leading to his evasive testimony and behaviour.

It is conjectured by the owners, the council's archaeological officer, not wanting to be embroiled in what he regarded to be a contentious issue with regards to authentication, avoided raising any argument that could be seen to discount or agree with the owners, ignoring the balance of merit in the owners' presentation against the deficit of understanding presented in the existing historical record, placing a 'lack of consensus' on the shoulders of others, with the officer purely as an uneducated observer, and not a critical specialist witness—a role he is employed to fill. As such, within his professional remit, the council's 'specialist' officer could only be judged part of the problem, complicit with maintaining a lie—duplicitous and negligent.

Historic Environment Scotland

HES, the Scottish government's heritage agency, acts as a statutory planning consultant for local planning authorities. Planning authorities are duty-bound to seriously consider HES's advice in its decisions regarding any heritage-based planning application.

HES's advice to the planning authority was based on the belief HES regarded there were no security issues presented by the bells' retention in the church, and the bells, cited from the

‘medieval period’, connected to the site of the former abbey, would better serve government heritage policy as per their own interpretation; left *ad infinitum* in the building, regardless of the building’s uncertain future and probable disuse due to its unavoidable archaeological constraints.

The advice from HES was made, following three years refusal to share their evaluation of the owners’ archaeological report with the owners, submitted in 2021. The agency neither disavowed nor authenticated the owners’ discovery. Considering the owners’ claim the bells were priceless unique artefacts, and as such the bells and their attending archaeology would create extraordinary interest in the church (and Scotland on an international scale) and facilitate its redevelopment, the agency’s unsupportable denial, including a reclassification of the bells only to escape their errantly created record, was judged injudicious by the owners’ legal advocacy.²²

HES’s behaviour was no better than the council’s archaeological officer, both avoiding agreement or disavowal of the owners’ discovery and its significance; evasive rather than judicious, maintaining the professional heritage sector’s discrimination against any investigation by those they deem ‘amateur’, regardless of the obvious merit in that presentation, measured against blatant inaccuracy within the ‘accepted’ academic record, the root of the sectors preferred understanding.

The agency had previously excused its dismissal of the owners’ research, claiming it was not legally obliged to consider it. This was not the case in terms of its consultative role in the planning process. Their dismissal of the owners’ testimony in this instance was inexcusable (as it was in 2021).

The government’s agent, HES, deliberately misrepresents the church’s historic building record in terms of the bells. Firstly, by originally reporting an errant sixteenth century understanding, incompetently created by its own 1920 audit, then in admission of that misunderstanding, by creating a flocculent ‘medieval period’ dating narrative not directed by any historical record, account, specialist consultation, evaluation or research, but by its own arbitrary view, created to excuse its incompetence and its prejudice against the architects of the discovery. The only dating narrative on historic record, outside the dismantled sixteenth century proposal, is one of mid-twelfth century, created via two government audits in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and confirmed by the owners’ investigation, with the second bell a confirmed pre 1200 design. There is no excuse from HES to refer to the bells as ‘medieval period’, but at the very least twelfth century. And as the owners present the only understanding of the bells’ sponsor without any contest, and his legend significantly ‘conditions’ the bells, HES’s actions deliberately denigrates the significantly important historical background of the bells and the site and any fiscal value.

Clarification of HES’s role was sought from the Scottish minister in charge, as spokesperson for the Scottish government. The minister was asked to submit a direct question to HES, hoping

²² Huitson Mark (2025), *Historic Environment Scotland – A Malignant Caretaker* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

for a direct answer; what *specific aspects* of the owners’ research prevented the agency mentoring the owners’ discovery to reflect the bells’ ‘special interest’, and so provide a comprehensive public understanding of Scotland’s medieval Templar history?²³ HES did not answer the question, instead HES obfuscated to hide the truth of its reticence to mentor or recognise the discovery and its prejudice against the discovery’s architects. HES, not disavowing the discovery, suggesting the owners’ report be ‘archived’, reasoned the bells’ unique provenance was not important enough to guide any future planning action and conservation proposals.²⁴

The Council’s Senior Planner, Built-Heritage Policy

The council’s *Senior Planner, Built Heritage Policy*, is a consultee to the council’s planning decisions, one who had been the owners’ point of contact with the council, since the beginning of 2024 and their petition to the council. Thus, the officer was fully informed regarding the issues surrounding the church, Templar discovery, and the owners’ campaign for authentication. The officer had a duty of care to ensure the property listing was correct and any amendments had been properly treated.

It was explained to the council and the planning officer, the sole reason for removing the bells from the church was the discovery of their unique Templar provenance and associated security fears. It had nothing to do with the structural integrity of the belfry, or even the abandonment of any redevelopment building works by the owners. The removal was purely prudent action to safeguard the bells while the property remained empty and so at risk, particularly with the owners forced to publicly promote the bells’ unique Templar provenance, allowing them to place the church on the market and find a new owner. Whether the Senior Planner, Built Heritage Policy understood the true significance of the discovery is unknown, however it was reasonable to expect they would seek understanding to ensure they were aware of the discovery’s potential, before making any decisions regarding planning.

In terms of planning consideration, despite disqualifying themselves from any competent evaluation of the owners’ archaeological report—a report that presented the fundamental evidence of the bells’ provenance, the council’s senior planner employed ambiguity over the report’s credence, despite no equivocalty being presented within the report:

‘I am not sufficiently knowledgeable or qualified to comment on much of the content of the report regarding the history of the site and the bells. I am aware that there are differing opinions based on different approaches to the study, which is common for all research in both science and history. The research in relation to the site and its historical use and development, and the conclusions drawn, inevitably differ between authors and researchers and a debate on the detail will no doubt continue as to which is more valid. For the purposes of the determination of the Listed Building Consent I do not consider this to be an issue only that the bells are themselves significant fixtures and fittings as historic artefacts associated with the church.’²⁵

²³ [Letter to MSP Angus Robertson, March 2025](#)

²⁴ [Response-from SMP Angus Robertson, April 2025](#)

²⁵ [Response from Senior Planner - Built Heritage Policy](#)

Although the officer disqualified themselves from objective evaluation of the report, it was expected the officer had similar cognitive abilities to the owners' beta read of professionals, *ie.*, to read a report and consider the nature of the argument, if not the technical detail within that argument. So, as a minimum, to make cerebral judgment on the quality of the research, the authors' qualification, the referencing employed, any collaborators' credentials, and the veracity of any counterargument. It was expected the officer had the ability to discern the difference between Victorian subjective theory which formed the basis of the historical record of the church site and bells, against the *only* objective enquiry carried out, *ie.*, the owners' archaeological research, replacing Victorian subjective theory with modern objective and evidenced understanding; the basis of scientific research and the foundation of the owners' study. Importantly the officer was expected to judge if the 'medieval period' amendment made by HES properly reflected the nature of the bells' 'special interest', and that amendment had satisfied the conditions within the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997act, under which she was acting.

The officer however, dismissed the owners' research and its conclusion as invalid to the officer's decision making, without consideration of any impact the bells' extraordinary unique Templar provenance would have on the property in terms of safety for the artefacts, and what should constitute the property listing, *ie.*, a competent understanding of the bells 'special interest'. Instead, the officer proceeded to offer argument the bells were neither extraordinary, unique nor priceless, and retention in an undeveloped church provided no security risk to the bells, the church, or the owners.

The presented evidence of provenance by the owners had already been tested by the foremost recommended academic specialists, with clear demonstration the specialists' counter-opinion was offered without any verifiable evidence, and thus demonstrably unsupportable. The report was supported by third-party testimony, including the council's own museum officer, confirming ubiquitous prejudice existed to forever prevent objective critique. The officer had no sight of any objective disavowal of the owners' testimony and would have understood why authentication had been prejudicially denied.

As the report presented the best referred specialist scholars' critique and clearly illustrated there was no more qualified view available to 'debate' the provenance with any integrity, the officer's supposition that further research would occur, and debate would continue until a resolution was reached, was unfounded. For the officer to ignore this fact, to kick the issue of provenance 'down the road', and to imply uncertainty over the report's credence and was only one of many possible presentations of research, that is or will be available, was entirely misleading.

The sole principal of removing the bells either temporarily or permanently was on the single understanding the bells were not as defined in the Historic Building Record, forming the category B property listing of Holywood Church, *ie.*, neither sixteenth century nor unattributable 'medieval period', but priceless bells of unique twelfth century Templar provenance. This issue was extremely important, not only because it properly defined the 'special interest' of the listed building, but because the Templar provenance raised the valuation

of the bells significantly, more than a thousand-fold, and with that valuation there was an increased security risk to the bells, the church that housed them, and the owners protecting them. Authentication of the bells' Templar provenance was incredibly important to the owners and the planner's considerations, particularly as it presented the only realistic solution to a church requiring over one million pounds to refurbish for either habitation, under the existing planning permission, or alternate reuse.

The officer, as a professional, was not at liberty to make subjective decisions on important issues the officer was not qualified to consider, but instead to seek objective, qualified third-party assessment to assist them in their decision making. Without confirmation of the bells' provenance and value, the officer could not possibly conduct a risk assessment of the bells remaining on site in terms of security, against the bells' removal and any adverse impact on the character of the church.

Professional and objective authentication or conversely disavowal of the owners' testimony, was incredibly important to any decision making, yet the officer's decisions were entirely subjective, ignoring the owners' testimony as valid to any consideration. Thus, the owners considered the officer's behaviour entirely negligent, contributing to the council eventually imposing actions on the owners to return the bells without understanding their special interest. Any reasonable person would consider this reckless endangerment of the world's only significant provenanced Knights Templar artefacts—unless of course the council could prove this not to be the case—and *that is exceedingly unlikely*.

Public Objection

As in the owners' planning application of 2020, the only public objection to removing the bells was by the local representative of the *Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland* (AHSS). An objection was made regarding the owners' action; *'The hypothetical historical background now provided in no way justifies the action taken.'* *What we definitely know about these bells is that they are medieval... These bells have a vital connection to the tower in which they hung; they should not have been removed, and we ask the Council to ensure they are now returned as soon as possible.*²⁶

The local 'AHSS cases panel' making the objection, did not qualify their dismissal of the owners' archaeological report claiming it '*hypothetical*'. The danger of AHSS making a public statement denigrating the quality of the owners' investigation, was that the public may consider AHSS's views qualified. Therefore, challenge was required to test AHSS's competence in the matter, checking what, in AHSS's view regarding the owners' application and report lacked merit. Thus, in August 2024, the owners requested AHSS's critique of the owners' investigation and the qualification of those in AHSS who made the objection, while asking for their positive engagement so that a pragmatic solution could be achieved for the church within the society's remit.²⁷

²⁶ [Objection by AHSS, August 2024](#)

²⁷ [Owners' engagement with AHSS, August 2024](#)

By October 2024, with no response offered by AHSS, a follow up petition was sent by the owners to AHSS to engage it with the issues that surrounded the owners' campaign.²⁸ AHSS's reply to the owners' second petition, indicated *no* appraisal of the owners' report had been carried out, resulting in a prejudiced and ignorant dismissal of the evidence presented. AHSS did not offer any qualification for its objection, other than it contravened the category B listing, and so it was felt it was its duty to object.²⁹

AHSS acted only as an echo of HES's responsibility, so it was difficult to see AHSS's value in the matter, as it was simply reminding the council the bells were part of a category B listing, without offering any consideration whatsoever of the detail or circumstances around the owners' application for the bells' removal. As such, its contribution was devoid of any critical or predictive acumen directed at preserving the church.

The owners' response was not conciliatory or particularly sympathetic towards the volunteer-led organisation. The owners expressed their disappointment the society declined to engage with the campaign and interrogate the issues that had been presented by over one hundred years of inattention—the failure to grasp a comprehensive understanding of the site and the bells' history, and so prevent its demise as a vital piece of Scottish spiritual presence and architecture—a building now unable to be repurposed, to sit and rot in the middle of an abandoned historic graveyard.³⁰

AHSS regrettably reflected the response the owners received from relevant community, commercial and charitable organisations set up to protect and understand Scottish archaeology, heritage, Templar and Freemason association, and spirituality in the form of local Christian-based churches and groups—*demonstrable indifference to the circumstances surrounding the owners' discovery*. Often, where an initial response was achieved, further attention invariably failed to follow, leaving the owners chasing up replies and wondering what in their petition was turning organisations away? Indifference, scepticism, indolence, maladministration? What was frustrating, was the huge contrast of response from the confirmed beta read; senior legal advocates, public sector managers, professional historians, academic trained scientists and analysts, medievalists, *etcetera*, who saw nothing but merit and a compelling conclusion within the owners' investigation.

It was telling and even disappointing that AHSS offered the only public objection in 2020 and 2024. To ensure community engagement, in addition to the council's statutory advertisement and circulation of the planning application, the owners sent a letter out to the Holywood community in June 2024,³¹ advising them of the situation and inviting participation and comment.³² No response was ever received.

²⁸ [Follow up letter to AHSS, October 2024](#)

²⁹ [Response from AHSS, October 2024](#)

³⁰ [Owners' response to AHSS, October 2024](#)

³¹ One hundred and twenty homes, spread over twelve postcodes and a further eighty individuals and businesses associated with an interest in Holywood Church and potential tourist attraction.

³² [Letter to Holywood community, June 2024](#)

Over four years of campaign, and twelve months of active promotion, with all the evidence presented for public scrutiny, the owners have engaged a significant number of local and other individuals/groups within Dumfries and Galloway. The owners testify, outside polite reception, there has been little engagement with the discovery, and where there has been engagement, it has not been followed up with action or concern. Local feeling, outside a few polite enquiries with those encountered while dog walking, express no concern about the loss of the bells or the church's condition, nor the condition of the surrounding historic cemetery.

It raises the question regarding the government's attribution of 'special interest'; the condition that ties the bells to the church. Unlike the church, the bells have no visible impact on the area, in fact visitors would not know the bells are hanging in the tower. They are neither visible nor audible. Access to the public is denied, thus interest, as defined by HES, is only illusory. Nothing exists on site to direct the public to the church or the site's history. So, what informs the public? What ensures the government's *core principles of understanding and recognition* are relayed to those who visit the site? Who should be responsible? And if it is the owners, what should they relay, their own interpretation supported by evidence, or the government's interpretation created to avoid evaluating the evidence provided? Does the church contain 'medieval period' bells, taken from a former abbey, once on the same site, or are they twelfth century, taken from a former Templar preceptory, sponsored by a hero of Scotland? Both are true, but what offers greater illumination? Is imprecise incomplete narrative adequate? Surely the public deserve, indeed have a right to fully comprehend the correct historical record, and be able to interrogate the evidence that supports the bells' beginnings? This inclusive understanding is certainly the aim of the Scottish government, proclaimed in its policies. *However, it appears the government's agents have very different ideas.*

The Council's Planning Decision and Enforcement

The Council's Retrospective Planning Decision

'In conclusion, it is considered that the proposals fail to comply with policy on historic assets contained in LDP2 Policy HE1, NPF4 Policy 7 and the Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (2019) in respect of alterations to listed buildings. As it is considered that the proposals fails to satisfy the requirements of Section 14(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997, it is recommended that late Listed Building Consent be refused... the removal of the bells, without any intention to keep them in a location associated with the site, has an adverse impact on the fabric, character, special architectural and historic interest of the listed building. It has not been satisfactorily demonstrated that the removal of the two bells is necessary for purposes of either security or safety.'³³

The Council's Decision; Negligent Behaviour

- The council's decision was made on an entirely subjective and negligent dismissal of the owners' testimony of a significant, unique and priceless Templar discovery.
- The council failed to carry out any judicial, professional or objective evaluation of the evidence presented by the owners citing the bells' extraordinary provenance and

³³ [Planning Authority refusal of owners planning application, October 2024](#)

valuation, by any specialist officer, third-party expert, or institution connected to the council's decision making.

- Despite the owners' challenge, the council did not question the lack of merit regarding the origins of the property listing; particularly in terms of the bells and HES's reported 'special interest'; an arbitrarily awarded flocculent dating classification with no corroboration within any historical narrative or inspection.
- That without disavowing the bells extraordinary provenance, and dictating they remain in an empty building regarded only as 'medieval period' bells, while the evidence of their provenance and value is promoted to the public, constituted reckless endangerment of the bells, the property, and the owners if they chose to remain on 24-hour vigil.

Reviewing the planning decision by the council and government over the treatment of the bells, the owners' planning advisors, which included *Planning Aid Scotland*, claimed:

'They applied a narrow, uninformed view, reaching an illogical conclusion... their decision, they thought *in-line* with planning policy, was in fact contrary to the *intent* of policy. Their decision, not informed by a comprehensive understanding of the archaeology, or the error of the existing listing, illogically condemned the site and bells, not their preservation. Policies and laws to protect heritage only benefit if those enforcing them *understand* the prime intent of those policies. However, it is apparent there was little acumen or empathy behind the planning bureaucracy in this instance.'

At the time of writing this article, planning enforcement is underway, following failure of the owners' planning appeal to the *Scottish Government Planning and Environment Appeals Division* (DPEA).³⁴ Therefore, this article is subject to possible revision as further information becomes available, as the owners challenge Dumfries and Galloway Council over its decision.

Attitude, Illogicality and Conditioning

In 2010, at the height of the last campaign to remove the bells, the Church of Scotland refused to allow the bells to be removed from the church before its sale. However, there was agreement that the council would accept the historic artefacts if they were to be offered to them sometime in the future.³⁵ Within the owners' first planning application, the council were open to the bells being installed in the local museum. Considering the council's original openness to the bells being removed from the church, it was asked by the owners' legal and planning advisors, what had changed regarding the council accepting the bells would be better removed from the church than left insitu, hidden within a private property? It was reasonable the council would want them retained in Dumfries. However, that was before they were presented as priceless. Were the bells any less desirable or important? Why did the council's attitude change from interest in the bells to disinterest?

In another consideration. Would a door panel, thought decorated by an unattributable sixteenth century artist, be allowed to sit in an empty building, if it were later discovered to be painted

³⁴ 'DPEA, Adding Misplay not Merit' (www.hiddenheritage.info)

³⁵ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/church-bells-fight-is-lost-2587222>

by *Leonardo da Vinci*? If the door was an architectural feature in a listed building, then there would be justification for leaving it insitu, so long as it was secure. But the listing would have to be amended so it reflected the door's particular attribution as an integral part of the property's special interest. Important detail such as this, ensures the property is managed and conserved in relation to its special interest. In the door's case, having it decorated by Leonardo da Vinci is a considerable conditioning factor in how that building and the door is treated, especially in terms of prudence and protection.

Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997, allows for such features to be included in property listings as an integral part of such properties:

‘the desirability of preserving, on the ground of its architectural or historic interest, any feature of the building consisting of a man-made object or structure fixed to the building or forming part of the land and comprised within the curtilage of the building.’

However, there is provision to ensure the listing, and any special interest is conditioned by understanding, so that the feature is treated properly within the context of the listed building.

‘Before compiling or approving any list under this section or amending any such list, Historic Environment Scotland **shall consult such persons or bodies of persons appropriate as having special knowledge** of, or interest in, buildings of architectural or historic interest.

So, did HES consult a specialist with regards to the owners' reveal of the special characteristics of the bells, presented in an extensive and detailed archaeological investigation? Did they amend the property listing in consideration of any specialist evaluation of that evidence of the bells and sites significantly revised special interest?

The answer is, HES may well have evaluated the owners' examination, but it failed to transparently share any consultation or evaluation with the owners. Instead, HES amended the listing, not to reflect the evidence presented by the owners or any historical inspection or narrative, but with its own subjective description, that ignored the evidence... *but why?*

Why would HES, and subsequently the council, wish the bells kept in a derelict church, in private ownership, unrecognised for what they are—hidden amongst thousands of other medieval bells dotted around the UK? Why did HES and the council not mentor the owners to help them bring the only Templar bells in the world into Dumfries and Scottish legend? Apprehension or scepticism—*perhaps*, but primarily prejudice and ignorance.

Any objective scrutiny of the owners' evidence would reveal the bells had never been properly considered within a competent examination. The owners' archaeological inspection had demonstrable merit—it was collaborative, comprehensive, and presented evidence *not supposition*. The owners' conclusions were presented as the only possibility for the bells' origins, not merely speculation.

HES corrupted the listing, knowing the owners' investigation had no supportable specialist academic counter. HES were prejudiced against the architects of the find, who had exposed the significant shortcomings of HES's maintenance of a hopelessly outdated property listing. HES chose a solution that would cite the listing as truthful, but only in general terms. They would

not contest the owners' dating but hide it in a flocculent 'medieval period' reclassification. But the bells' medieval attribution was not the 'special' interest, but the bells Templar attribution. This fact escalates the interest in the property, its listing, and of course any potential sustainability, historical and fiscal value of the church.

The council, already exhibiting indifference to the discovery, failed to ask the correct questions because they did not want to get involved, such was the truancy of their care for heritage, its sustainability (the key objective of planning) or the truth of the matter. Both offering duplicity to hide their prejudice. HES knew the owners' research was sound, as did the council's archaeological officer. But it was the consequences of the discovery that would expose the truancy of merit in both the historical record and those that managed it, that influenced HES and the council's negligent decision making.

The Owners Unmet Security Concerns

The security of the church site in 2019, even before the owners' Templar discovery, was as much a concern to the previous developer as it was to the new owners. Even before the owners took possession of the church, there was a history of vandalism and illegal entry reported and evidenced. Two stained glass windows were irreparably damaged, ancillary windows broken, doors forced and items from the church removed. The threat was so great, the previous developer had moved into the derelict property to maintain a physical presence, installing CCTV and external lighting. Therefore, prudence dictated one of the new owners continued to offer a physical presence by taking temporary shelter outside the church to provide 24-hour onsite security, while work was carried out and occupation was possible.

The arrival of one of the owners onsite late in 2019, after a period of vacancy was applauded by the local farmer and the forest warden, as a deterrent to theft in the area. Nearly six years later, one of the owners is still on site.

Location

Hollywood Church site is relatively isolated, surrounded by farmland, one quarter mile from Hollywood village, three miles from the centre of Dumfries, and under two miles from the concentration of two large urban areas; Lochside and Lincluden, formally regarded as areas of deprivation. The church stands in the middle of an unmaintained historic graveyard and is fully accessible to the public. There is no defensible space, boundary or private ground.

According to information provided by the *Scottish Police Data Repository*, retrieved September 2024, Dumfries and Galloway is fourth on the list of the most unsafe areas in Scotland in terms of crimes per capita:³⁶

1. Glasgow City: 1251 crimes per 10,000 population (bolstered by a significant drug culture).
2. Dundee City: 1152 crimes per 10,000 population.

³⁶ Scottish Police Data Repository, retrieved September 2024

3. West Dunbartonshire: 1100 crimes per 10,000 population.
4. Dumfries and Galloway: 1093 crimes per 10,000 population.

Dumfries and Galloway was third on the list in 2023, and if only societal crime is factored, rather than traffic crimes and incidence involving dishonesty, it remains third in terms of crime rate. For context, East Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire, with similar large rural spaces and few towns have less than 254 crimes per 10,000 population.

The Practicalities of Security

Whereas security of the church was an immediate concern in 2019, the church at that time was thought to hold nothing of real value and so 24-hour protection was provided principally in terms of deterring vandalism and safeguarding any building materials and stored items.

Following discovery of the bells' extraordinary, unique and priceless Knights Templar provenance in 2020, secrecy of the discovery was employed, particularly as insurance for the bells and church was denied. In matters of seeking third-party review and support, all entreaties were accompanied by requests for confidentiality while authoritative authentication of the find was sought, and public declaration could be made.

The following is an extract taken from the owner's journal:³⁷

'Following completion and dissemination of the study, and its conclusions, fear grew the report would eventually leak out and the potential of the bells presence and value would become an attraction to malefactors. I was served paranoia on a plate, laden with nocturnal visitors to the immediate closed-cemetery grounds and trespass into the church. We were anxious, following the nearby convent fire and increased police reported incidences of arson in the area, as well as the significant increase in dubious, unwarranted after dark visits onto the Holywood church site by individuals and groups. In 2020, I had recorded six incursions onto the immediate church site within its closed graveyard, between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. The number of logged incursions grew to twenty-eight in 2022, with several individuals refusing challenge and retreating in haste without giving good reason for their early morning presence. There were also numerous occurrences where people had entered or wandered into the church building, and although their intrusion appeared innocent, they were found deep within the interior when it clearly was not an open church.

Without a robust plan for the proper protection of the church site and bells, prudence dictated greater safety for the bells and ongoing secrecy of the find, until a new proposal for the church development was drawn up with the authorities concerned, within the confines of the church's planning listing.

Rehanging the bells was considered and rejected, as the bells, hanging in place, do not attach to the church building directly. They hang from a frame that sits without mechanical connection to the tower structure. They are relatively small, portable, and each connected to the bell frame by only four bolts; easily and relatively quickly removed if the proper safeguards are ignored. Therefore, in August 2022, the bells along with the other artefacts found, including two stone plaques, were removed to secure locations off-site, whilst recognition was obtained for their unique value in terms of Scottish history.'

In 2020, with realisation the bells' sponsor may have a Templar connection, and one of the bells appeared to be the oldest datable bell in the UK, plans to remove the bells for either onsite

³⁷ Montgomery M. (2024), *Hidden in Plain Sight: Unmasking Scotland's first Knights Templar: Removal of the bells.* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

display in the hearse house or the local museum was postponed. It was decided to leave the bells in the belfry for reasons of protection. However, the roof and deteriorating flooring supporting the bell frame (the frame is not mechanically secured to the tower), became a greater concern by 2023, and the owners could not avoid lowering the bells to facilitate closer third-party inspection, digital mapping, weighing and preparation for potential refurbishment.

With all development work halted, it meant the bells would remain on the ground floor of the tower, as per recommendation, until authentication was obtained and the church could find a new owner. With only one door between public access and priceless artefacts, concern grew because even without the bells' provenance broadcasted, they still had a significant scrap value, easily transported by two people. Their loss was unthinkable.

The church had a fire incident in 2020, as such, part of the electrics had been condemned, resulting in compromised power to the main church hall and tower, reducing the ability to effectively service security measures, *ie.*, increased lighting and alarm.

In June 2021, a car, driven to Holywood church was set on fire outside the perimeter.³⁸

In January 2023 a can of petrol was found abandoned outside the south door, with no indication who may have left it.

However, it was reports of an arson attack on the nearby historic *St Benedict's Convent*, destroying its roof and contents in August 2023, that presented a fire risk too many. Coupled with an increase in late night incursion onto the site, and a particularly abusive encounter with two youths, shortly after midnight in June 2023, the bells were removed off site.

The only reason the bells were removed was for security while the property lay empty, in a state of dilapidation, vulnerable without robust security through occupation (the church has seven points of access). Insurance for the bells could not be obtained while uncertainty existed over their provenance, and secrecy was maintained about their storage location, as that was a condition of the high-value storage facility. The public had no access to the bells prior to removal, and this was the case with storage, so publishing their location had no benefit. The planning authority at this time was not consulted, because permission to remove the bells would require public consultation and an exposé of the bells' provenance and presence.

Police Advice

In February 2023 the police were requested to give support and advice, following increased incidences of inexplicable late-night incursions onto the site. The owners were preparing to publish their discovery (on the advice of the regional curator of museums and HES), and were concerned promotion of the find may increase unwanted miscreant attention to the site.³⁹

The police officers attending, examined the security measures in place, and were briefed on the find, and the bells removal against planning statute. The officers fully supported the removal of the bells and all other valuable items from the church. Following their visit, the police

³⁸ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/man-drove-over-work-colleague-25582088>

³⁹ [Letter to police re site security concerns, February 2023](#)

maintained a regular check on the church, keeping to their promise to maintain a high visibility in the area.

The Council's Senior Planner's Dismissive Attitude

The council's planning officer, although not able to dismiss the owners' testimony of the priceless nature of the bells, took the position that the bells had no value, so downplayed the security risk. Ignoring the owners' previous testimony regarding security concerns, the officer chose to be ignorant to the fact the owners were actively promoting the discovery via a media campaign (since June 2024), with a website, petition, videos, book publication, fund raising, community and legal consultation and social media postings, *etcetera*.

'The applicants' research regarding the bells has drawn attention to them but, unless inadvertently, the interested audience is likely to be academic or generally benevolent. If, following further consideration, the outcome is to keep the bells on site it can be done discreetly and quietly in terms of publicity, unless there is a desire to attract visitors... The cemetery is visited by members of the local community and will remain open to the public as people have interest in the gravestones and family histories and the church building as well as the site. There have been parallels drawn with recent fires in Listed Buildings which are not in use and have been empty for some time and where the surroundings are fenced off and not regularly accessed by the law-abiding public. This is unlike the circumstances at Holywood Church where the surroundings are open to the public and there is a well-used walking route along the public road just outside. While it is not possible to preclude accidental fire in any building, I would not consider this to be sufficient argument for permanent removal of the bells.'

The officer's opinion and response were disproportionate to the information reported to them concerning the owners' security concerns described, by letter, in December 2023, June 2024, and September 2024.⁴⁰

With the bells affiliated to celebrity Templar legend with universal popular appeal, it was entirely injudicious to state the bells, and the site, would primarily attract only academic interest, or entirely benign enquiry. The officer was aware, one of the owners had remained on vigil outside the church since 2019, with a growing number of after dark incursions onto the closed, publicly accessible cemetery site, particularly after midnight, with the police involved in February 2024. The threat to the church was the same as any empty property within easy reach of Dumfries, particularly in a property where miscreant attention is possible without observation, presenting an opportunity for more mindless vandalism.

It there was a perceived threat experienced by the previous and current owners for a period of fifteen years, was it likely the situation had improved in 2025? With promotion of the find commencing in June 2024, with a suggestion the church held Templar artefacts, and associated archaeology, it is hard to imagine the church would not attract more miscreant attention, or invasive enquiry. This palpable threat would only diminish with property occupation, associated enhanced security measures and 24-hour monitoring. The owners relied on their declaration the bells and associated archaeology was removed from site, to deter criminal interest. The owners had, and still have, a moral obligation to protect the bells, and thus applied

⁴⁰ [Letter to Senior Planner \(built heritage\), September 2024](#)

prudence and appropriate risk management to achieve that. Bringing the bells back and announcing that fact, would be catastrophic.

Prior to publication of the find, the owners, in May 2024, consulted a security specialist (*Triton*) who reviewed the church property, and the owners' case, security of the site, local crime data and local police intelligences. Assessing the seven entry points to the church they recommended only a 24-hour security dog team as an effective solution to protect the site, thus allowing the owner to leave the site and return to his family.

A dog team was employed in May 2024. Regrettably, the owners had to terminate the dog team in August 2024, when their crowdfunding appeal failed, due to a lack of local support.

Since the release of the security team from the site in August 2024, the owners have had to challenge, on eight separate occasions, groups of youths/men intent on investigating the perimeter of the church, some arriving in vans, between 11.30 pm and 4 am. These groups declined to give any cogent reason for their presence so late at night/early morning. Abuse was presented against the owner in two incidents. With the site open to the public, no crime was evidenced or committed, so no police involvement was sought, although the police did attend one incident and advised the owner to log further incidences, and call if in fear or threat. Later incidents were duly logged.

Currently, the owners' campaign is subdued, due to a lack of financial resource for promotion, so the find is not on the radar of many. However, this situation will change.

Corrupting the Intent of the Government Heritage Policy

The council employed heritage and planning policies to support their argument the bells should not be removed from Holywood Church. But as the council did not fundamentally understand the heritage of the site, nor the artefacts it held, and chose to disregard the evidence and understanding presented by the owners, without objective reason, the foundation of their decision making was essentially flawed.

The council's subjective dismissal of the owners' understanding, acquired over three years, and focused collaborative scholarly research—understanding which eclipses knowledge obtained from parroting Victorian unresearched theory—the foundation of the church's property B listing, was remiss. For this reason, the owners can state the council acted detrimentally to the core principles of the government's *Historic Environment Policy*, which promotes an *inclusive* understanding of heritage, moving away from the existing, often imperfect and constrained comprehension, formed by past flawed and outmoded narrative. The council's flagrant disregard of the owners' research, which took time, great expense and extraordinary effort to understand their mis-sold heritage, is a fundamental breach of the Scottish government's aim. It has led to a council decision based on outdated and distorted information, that in turn would deliberately put in danger artefacts of national importance, and a church at considerable risk if the owners allowed Dumfries and Galloway Council to apply bureaucracy over merit.

‘The principles and policies that make up the Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS) help us to care collectively for this precious resource as we work towards a shared vision.’

‘HEPS is designed to support and enable good decision making about changes to the historic environment. Good decision-making takes into account all aspects of the historic environment and the different ways people value it, is transparent and open to challenge and recognises that a wide range of factors can affect the historic environment in different ways. Changes might support its long-term survival, impact on its current management or even give us new information to improve our understanding of it. HEPS sets out a series of principles and policies for the recognition, care and sustainable management of the historic environment. It promotes a way of understanding the value of the historic environment which is inclusive and recognises different views. It encourages consistent, integrated management and decision-making to support positive outcomes for the people of Scotland. It also supports everyone’s participation in decisions that affect the historic environment.’

HEP1: ‘Decisions affecting any part of the historic environment should be informed by an inclusive understanding of its breadth and cultural significance.’

HEP2: Decisions affecting the historic environment should ensure that its understanding and enjoyment as well as its benefits are secured for present and future generations.

HEP3: Plans, programmes, policies and strategies, and the allocation of resources [including HES], should be approached in a way that protects and promotes the historic environment. If detrimental impact on the historic environment is unavoidable, it should be minimised. Steps should be taken to demonstrate that alternatives have been explored, and mitigation measures should be put in place. [This last sentence concerns HEP3 and HEP4].

HEP4: Changes to specific assets and their context should be managed in a way that protects the historic environment. Opportunities for enhancement should be identified where appropriate.

HEP5: Decisions affecting the historic environment should contribute to the sustainable development of communities and places.

HEP6: Decisions affecting the historic environment should be informed by an inclusive understanding of the potential consequences for people and communities. Decision-making processes should be collaborative, open, transparent and easy to understand.

Core principles on understanding and recognition

- Recognising the cultural significance of sites supports good decision-making.
- A place must be understood in order for its cultural significance to be identified.
- A wide range of factors contribute to cultural significance.
- Knowledge and information about the historic environment is critical to our understanding of our past, present and future.
- The historic environment changes over time, how it is understood and appreciated.
- Research, discussion and exchange of ideas can all contribute to our understanding of the historic environment.
- Understanding will improve when information is made widely available, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute to knowledge of the historic environment.

Core principles on managing change

- Some change is inevitable.
- Change can be necessary for places to thrive.
- Caring for the historic environment benefits everyone, now and in the future.
- Good decisions take a long-term view.
- Good decisions reflect an understanding of the wider environment.

- Good decisions are well-informed, transparent, robust, consistent and proportionate.
- Good decisions make sure that nothing is lost without considering its value first and exploring options for avoiding its loss.
- To manage the historic environment in a sustainable way, its cultural significance and the cultural significance of elements within it have to be understood.

Core principles on working together

- Everyone has a stake in the historic environment and how it is looked after.
- Effective management is a collective effort.
- Effective management takes wider interests into account.
- Good management empowers and involves communities.
- Early dialogue and close collaboration lead to better outcomes.⁴¹

Performance?

Ranking a council in terms of performance is not necessarily an indication that all services lack proficiency. Just as the number of complaints made are not necessarily a benchmark for assessing a council's quality. Customer complaint statistics are easily distorted by complaints concerning under-resourced services that historically and universally attract dissatisfaction. Conversely, one of the owners, a former public sector manager leading on value and *Lean management*, is well-aware of organisations presenting corrupted data to hide the true nature of customer dissatisfaction. Excuses abound, and a lack of financial resource, the 'go to' excuse, is rarely the true issue. The truth of poor service provision is, and always will be, poor management.

In terms of crime, community and education, the county languishes near the bottom of the league table.⁴² This situation is evident in the owners' communication with the police, as witnesses to miscreant behaviour, interrogation of various community leaders in relation to attitude regarding heritage in the region, and interaction with the region's employment pool.

Regional performance aside, the owners, only concerned with the council's attitude to the sustainability of Holywood Church, are focused on their own interactions. But with a catalogue of misplay spanning decades, an undercurrent of unprofessionalism, and indifference to the heritage environment and the owners' discovery,⁴³ the council's general performance does condition the owners' expectation of the council's competence.

In context of the owners' dealings with the council, based on their combined sixty years' experience in public service, within a variety of councils, public organisations and departments of the UK Civil Service, in their own judgment, the owners viewed the response to their interactions as a user/customer of Dumfries and Galloway Council, as exceptionally poor and hugely illogical.

The council's response to the owners' entreaties were inappropriate and discriminatory. Their interest in a major positive discovery in their administrative area not just lacklustre, but

⁴¹ *The Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS)*

⁴² <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/worst-scottish-councils-revealed-zxl29jv6l>

⁴³ *Holywood Church - The Future?* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

completely absent. Highlighting the negative experience was an absence of professional conduct from senior managers, and the sympathy from an apologetic disillusioned front-line staff, pessimistic regarding the council's support for the owners' case.

A Lack of Accountability

Dumfries and Galloway Council have been criticised for a growing number of complaints, centring on a lack of professionalism.⁴⁴ A third of Ombudsman decisions were directed at the council's planning decisions during the eighteen months prior to March 2024, with sixty percent of complaints upheld. Yet despite these justifiable complaints, the council was criticised by a member of its own audit, risk and scrutiny committee, for not seeking satisfaction after complaints have been upheld.⁴⁵

The councillor sitting on the committee raised a valid point regarding his perceived lack of customer satisfaction, even with exposure of poor service. In consultation with customers, it was confirmed there was a distinct lack of council accountability to ensure mistakes were corrected. There appeared to be an indifferent attitude by the council, not only to the mistakes they made, but also in terms of putting them right.

Anecdotally, within the owners' consultation with a significant number of Dumfries and Galloway residents and groups, none praise the council, nor its service delivery. All condemn the council's lack of care for the region, expressing overwhelming sense of 'decline' in standards of safety, service and sustainability. Most residents the owners talked with, have succumbed to the expectation customer service is on a downward slope along with everything else... *and nothing will change.*

The owners have spent most of their working lives in public service, in various public authorities in a variety of senior roles. Thirty years ago, in their not so limited experience, there was always satisfactory resolution for customers who had a genuine grievance with local authority. Ombudsman enquiries were a rare event. Mediators would be listened to—their clients dealt with—to their clients' satisfaction.

The owners had presented a genuine complaint that their property was mis-sold to them due to the incompetencies, unprofessionalism and failings of heritage governance and understanding with regards to Holywood Church. They had delivered startling revelation that not only would transform the future of the church but bring tourists and investment into the area. Raise Dumfries' profile and provide another reason to visit. Yet, the council did not seem to care.

So, did the council accept mistakes had been made, and sought a positive outcome for what had been a catastrophic purchase for the owners, and an incomprehensible misunderstanding of the site's archaeology? Did the council consider its own role in ensuring the future of the church and its sustainability, or did it ignore the errors and choose to add itself as another entry

⁴⁴ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/complaints-made-dumfries-galloway-council-33680529>

⁴⁵ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/claim-dumfries-galloway-council-need-33742861>

in a catalogue of misplay? Instead of prudence, the council chose to kick the problem away as if it would not come back to bite them, and further ‘enhance’ its poor reputation.

There is no doubt the Bells of Holywood are extraordinary Knights Templar relics—*unique—interesting—priceless*. There is no doubt the council’s negligent ignorance of that fact will not provide any defence for their behaviour.

So, what is the owners’ solution? The owners, in their professional lives, have never experienced the necessity of legal remedy being brought by public sector customers to resolve sincere and justifiable complaints. So why is it today, the owners are in battle with obdurate public agencies, whose first response to a genuine complaint is to ignore what they cannot contest, and double down on their refusal to admit any error, kicking the complaint down the road in the hope the complainant will get tired and go away, as if there was no accountability for bad behaviour. Why is it today, the owners’ only remedy for demonstrably bad behaviour by governmental agencies is to spend tens of thousands of pounds in legal action to reprimand idiocy in those public services, simply because they will not admit there is a gross error in their understanding, or there is a mistake to be resolved? If the reader takes the time to read the owners’ petitions and compare them to the institutions’ responses, they will see unquestionable truths. Public Institutions rarely:

- display humility or culpability.
- respond to anything they cannot refute.
- respond directly to the issues, preferring to prevaricate or obfuscate instead.

The owners tested the robustness of the council’s complaints procedure with a challenge to the senior planner’s (built heritage) report placed on a public portal, in terms of ‘malicious publication’; *ie.*, the officer purposefully denigrated the owners’ archaeological report and the owners’ security situation with several misleading statements.⁴⁶

The council rejected the complaint without even considering the nature of it, as it was claimed the officers report was part of a live planning application.^{47 48} The owners then tested the Ombudsman route of accountability, and although it confirmed the planner’s report was indeed part of the planning process, ‘independent’ from the council, and that publication was required regardless of its merit, it criticised the council for not dealing with the complaint under its complaints procedure. The council never responded to the owners or the complaint.

‘The Council said they would not take this complaint forward because the planning application was still live and undetermined. The Local Authority Model Complaints Handling Procedure (MCHP), published by the SPSO, does not state that complaints on live planning applications cannot be handled through the MCHP. Mr Huitson was raising a concern about the administration of his planning application, rather

⁴⁶ [Owners’ complaint to council, October 2024](#)

⁴⁷ [Council’s response to the owners’ complaint, October 2024](#)

⁴⁸ [Owners’ response, complaint to council, October 2024](#)

than the planning decision itself. The Council could have handled this complaint through the MCHP and they should reflect on this.’⁴⁹

An Indifferent and Negligent Heritage Gatekeeper

In balance, between the owners’ efforts to understand the truth of their mis-sold church, the council countered with demonstrably malicious behaviour towards safeguarding significant Scottish heritage for the benefit of Scotland. The council and all the agencies involved could not or would not dismantle the owners’ discovery—they chose to ignore it instead.

The council’s indifference to the pragmatic future of Holywood Church, the owners’ Templar discovery, and the artefacts safety is demonstrated. What is transparently apparent, the council’s officers conducted what should have been an objective professional appraisal, in an entirely amateurish, subjective, evasive and dismissive manner, ignoring the testimony of the owners, without offering any sound argument and applying their own unevidenced and ill-formed opinion.

There was reasonable expectation the council, in making decisions regarding the future of Holywood Church and the bells, would carry out a professional assessment of the evidence provided, using, if necessary, third-party experts to make good any gaps in their own understanding. Professional review using objective testimony, based on fact. Instead, the council hid behind a bureaucratic application of policy, with an argument based solely on an interpretation of the bells as unattributed and undated ‘medieval-period’ bells taken from the former Holywood Abbey—testimony that had *no* referenced historical narrative to support the broad dating categorisation, which had been imposed subjectively by HES in flagrant disregard of the narrative that forms the historic record, the testimony of the First and Second Statistical Accounts of Scotland and the owners’ confirmation of the Statistical Accounts dating proposition. HES’s ‘medieval period’ categorisation deliberately denigrated the fiscal and historical value and understanding of the Holywood bells, for no other reason than to prejudicially counter the owners’ discovery, rather than mentor it.

The council’s attitude towards Holywood Church is further contribution to the failure of heritage in the region, graphically illustrated by evidence of their reluctance and incompetence to breathe success and sustainability of the church and a variety of high-profile remnants of the area’s past—detering visitors to the area, promoting an increasing environment of public indifference.⁵⁰ It begs the question, why? Surely the council should relish such a find within their county. Would they rather the populous remain ‘historically incorrect’? Do they not want the tourism and economic positivity fall out from such significant archaeology?

It was the owners’ evidenced opinion, the council’s officers, reviewing academics, HES, National Museums Scotland, and the DPEA’s reporter all shared reticence to raise what they deemed a contentious issue—to ‘rock the boat’. Their resistance to give any credence to the

⁴⁹ [Ombudsman response, November 2024](#)

⁵⁰ *Holywood Church - The Future?* (www.hiddenheritage.info)

owners' investigation and conclusion had nothing to do with the veracity of the understanding and challenge presented by the owners, but an entirely prejudicial attitude of denial.

And yet, in dismissing the owners' research, they also all dismissed many academics whose works contributed to the report, many international specialists who were collaborated with, the owners' own relevant degrees and public service acumen, published government policy, and government-led, approved and published statistical accounts. And all this to allegedly stay in favour with an unqualified, single Victorian whose own paper has been thoroughly dismantled.

The council officers became intentionally blind to the merit of the owners' petitions and testimony and obvious quality of their presentation, 'fudging' their decision making, so as not to declare anything contentious, *ie.*, an extraordinary Templar discovery, or any admission of just how bad the Scottish history record can be and HES's associated woeful management.

It would not be surprising to discover neither the council's officers nor the DPEA reporter read the owners' report in full, instead, in ignorance and indolence, relying on the excuse historical enquiry is commonly speculative and so can easily be discounted, especially Templar history. The owners, however, presented an uncharacteristically objective and comprehensive investigation, with no possibility of any other conclusion. The officers were informed of this, they could confirm the owners' claims, even in superficial consideration of the owners' report. The officers should have invested their time and thought wisely. But they did not. As such, the officers displayed reckless behaviour, demonstrating a lack of critical thinking and predictive intelligence. What did they think the outcome of their denial of the owners' testimony would achieve, if they could not prove the owners' discovery false? Did they think the owners would drop their case, knowing they possessed some of the most valuable medieval artefacts in the world outside a museum? That the owners would negligently bring these precious artefacts back to a derelict church in one of the most crime-affected areas of Scotland—into a building few in the community cared about, simply to satisfy a bureaucratic process administered by an incompetent authority?

The owners' case will not be resolved by the council doubling down on the errors of the historic record and an obdurate refusal to admit the planning process does not guarantee benefit for the protection of the built heritage environment, if pragmatic decision making is not applied over mindless bureaucracy. The owners will not rest, and there is little doubt the council 'kicking the can down the road', will only lead to legal remedy and media scrutiny. Who will succeed?

The owners' campaign is a fight for those who have both an intimate relationship and care about their heritage, existing outside the closeted halls of self-serving academia. They intend to raise the issue, so that all those who study their history can influence a historical record hopelessly outdated—to have authenticated a significant discovery in medieval history. It is a crusade, and there is no doubt who the dissolute belligerents are.

As the owners build a campaign to have recognised the Templar bells of Scotland, within that story will be the poverty of care within the nation's governance, and the caustic incompetence

and prejudice of individuals named and shamed for their delinquency of that care. What do you think will be their excuse? *Will it change anything?*