

Martyrs' chapel renovation is almost

By Dan Goater

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After almost a decade of planning and fundraising, including 15 months of painstaking renovation works, Tolpuddle Old Chapel – where the famous martyr George Loveless was a lay preacher – will reopen next month.

Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust, chaired by Andrew McCarthy, has spearheaded the project to renovate the Grade II* listed chapel, which was once officially described as being an 'at risk' building.

The renovation works were carried out by a specialist firm of conservation builders, Sally Strachey Historic Conservation.

Mr McCarthy said the complex nature of the 200-year-old cob walls necessitated a thorough and complex 14 months of conservation work by stonemasons with Greendale Construction building a small extension that was required to welcome visitors.

He added: "Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust was formed in February 2014 as a building preservation trust and now, after nine years of consultation, planning and fundraising, we have achieved our aim of saving this Grade II* listed chapel from being an 'at risk' building. The trustees have never asked any Tolpuddle resident for donations, ensuring that funding for the nearby St John's Church and the village hall was in no way affected. "Our funding was raised



CHAPEAU TO THE CHAPEL: The renovated south facade of Tolpuddle Old Chapel and, below, the interior renovation and, right, the lime-washed exterior. Inset: George Loveless
Pictures: JOHN MULLINS/JASON WILSHER-MILLS/IAN CRAY



from the Architectural Heritage Fund, The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England plus 11 major heritage charitable

trusts and numerous individual donors from outside the village."

He added: "The trust aims to tell the story of The Tolpuddle Labourers – who are

known by many as The Tolpuddle Martyrs – and how they constructed this now rare example of a purpose-built rural independent Wesleyan chapel, which is simple in design and reflects the

agricultural skills of those who built it."

The renovated chapel was first used for 'non-Conformist' worship from 1818 until 1834.

Under the guidance of founding trustee and lay preacher George Loveless, the Tolpuddle Labourers and their families grew in their understanding of the social injustice of their harsh living and working conditions.

In 1833 George Loveless and others of the group

finished after 10-year labour of love



MEN AT WORK: Jason Ive and Andrew McCarthy, chairman of TOCT, view a repositioned and repaired roof truss. Below: The new oak window frame for north arched window made by master carpenter Jason Ive and, right, looking towards the new front door and, below, the original exterior opening north arched window reveal 1818 cob and brick from 1818 built by Tolpuddle Labourers



met with delegates from the Grand Consolidated Trades Union from London and lawfully decided to set up an agricultural trade union – The Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers – to campaign for better pay and conditions. This early form of unionisation deeply disturbed local landowners and other authorities, who launched a prosecution against the labourers on the dubious grounds of

their swearing an illegal oath as part of members' initiations. In 1834 six of the labourers were unlawfully arrested and tried in Dorchester's Shire Hall courthouse before being illegally transported to Australia and Tasmania. The enormous public outcry at this injustice resulted in a pardon being granted to the six 'martyrs' in 1837, after which they returned to England. In 1844, five of the six labourers emigrated to

London Ontario in Canada to start a new life and were then known as the 'Dorchester Labourers'. It is thought the chapel continued to be used for its original purpose after the departure of its congregation leaders. The building is listed on an 1843 Tithe Map as belonging to 'The Wesleyan Soc'. The building ceased to be used as a chapel between 1843 and 1851. Dorchester Methodist

Circuit records show there was still 'a Methodist class' of at least 13 members in Tolpuddle in 1850, contributing cash, although not necessarily meeting in the former chapel. By June 1862 a new Methodist chapel was open in Tolpuddle and ownership of Tolpuddle Old Chapel reverted back to the ground's landlord – the Squire of the day. The building was then used as a single-storey animal house with an enclosed yard to the east. Later it was adapted to become a two-storey building with a hay loft, a cobbled floor and a new wider door to the east. It was subsequently used for storage. The chapel was listed by English Heritage in 1989 as a Grade II* building but its condition gradually deteriorated and it was put on Historic England's 'At Risk Register' in 2008. Tolpuddle Old Chapel Trust purchased the building in 2015, beginning the process of restoring it to its former glory.

Mr McCarthy said: "This spring Tolpuddle Old Chapel will open to visitors interested in its history, and as a local amenity for quiet contemplation, education, and events to serve the well-being of the community. "The new extension situated adjacent to the east wall of the chapel will help to support events and activities, including a pilot schools programme in British values."