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OXFORD DIOCESAN GUILD OF CHURCH BELL RINGERS

CENTRAL BUCKS BRANCH

THE GEORGE EDMANS BELL FUND

Introduction

At the Branch AGM on 11 February 2012 I undertook to investigate the constitutional documents of the George Edmans Bell Fund (“the Fund”) and to report back with recommendations at the half yearly meeting to be held on 14 July 2012. I have been provided with the constitutional documents, and also discussed the matter with Terry Wagstaffe who was involved in the original creation of the Fund, and for whose help I am most grateful. This article is an edited version of the report for the half-yearly meeting updated to reflect the conclusions from the meeting, and to include the formal proposal which will be put to the AGM

Background

The Fund was originally set up in 2003 from a bequest of £1,000 from the late George Edmans. The object of the Fund is to provide financial assistance to Churches in the Central Bucks Branch for the purpose of maintaining and improving their bell installations. Such assistance is expressly limited to “minor works including new ropes, fittings such as pulleys wheels sliders and stays, repairing or replacing clappers”. Major works such as bell re-hanging, augmentation or new frames are expressly excluded. Grants can only be made out of the income of the Fund, but not the capital. Thus only interest earned can be used for grants, and not the original invested sum or any subsequent donations to the fund. The original £1,000 bequest has been augmented, principally by donations over the years from Branch (general) funds.

Constitution

I understand that the Fund is a charity, but not a Registered Charity. It is governed by a set of Rules adopted at its inception. These Rules can only be amended with the approval of a (simple) majority at an AGM of the Branch and notice must be given at least one month in advance. The Fund is administered by the Branch Officers for the time being. They have responsibility for investing the funds and have sole discretion on the awarding of grants from the Fund (subject to the constraints in the Rules).

Finance

As at 31 December 2011, the Fund’s bank account (which is held at HSBC Bank PLC) contained £2,877.22. Of this, £300 was recorded as a loan from the Branch General Fund, £146.22 was accumulated income (which is available for grant under the Rules) and £2,431.00 is the capital of the Fund. So far as can be ascertained only one grant (of £18 in 2005) has ever been made. Interest earnings are currently around £2.00 per year. At the half-yearly meeting, it was agreed that the loan from the Branch General Fund be converted into a donation. Further donations of £130 have been received since 31 December 2011 and interest received in the first 6 months of 2012 amounted to

£1.03 which means that as at 30 June 2012 the capital of the fund was £2,861.00 and accumulated income £147.25.

The present situation

It is clear that the Fund is not currently achieving its intended purpose, with only one very small grant being made in its 9 year history. Equally with a total currently available for grant of £147, increasing by a mere £2 per annum, it is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. The Fund is effectively dormant with no material income and no real ability to make meaningful contribution to even the smallest of jobs. While the intentions of the original benefactor remain very worthwhile, it appears that there is no realistic probability of them being satisfied under the present arrangements.

Options for the future

There appear to be three possible ways forward which were discussed at the half-yearly meeting:

First is to do nothing. The Fund would remain as currently constituted and there would be a small amount of money which might from time to time pay for an odd stay, but not a lot more.

Second, the members of the Branch could decide by resolution at the AGM that there was no further purpose for the Fund and that it should be dissolved. The assets would then be disposed of in a manner which was (as far as possible) consistent with the original objectives, and with the approval of the Guild Trustees. The most appropriate conclusion in this case would be for the funds to be transferred to either the Guild Bell Fund or the Guild Bell Restoration Fund.

Third, efforts could be made to revitalise the Fund to seek to meet the original objective of having funds available to support minor works not covered by the main Guild funds, and permit it to make meaningful contributions to such projects and to attract new money.

To follow the first option would, in my view, achieve nothing. The objectives of the original benefactor would not be met, nor would the Branch and its towers derive any benefit.

The second option is, in my view an admission of defeat. The intentions were worthy, but we cannot fulfil them and the money is better used elsewhere.

The half-yearly meeting agreed, and felt that efforts should be made to revitalise the Fund

Revitalising the Fund

There is only purpose in seeking to revitalise the Fund if it can meet a real need and it is going to have the continuing support of the Branch membership. There is a constant need for maintenance in Branch towers, and I suspect much of this is either overlooked or deferred for lack of finance. The churches in this predominantly rural part of Buckinghamshire are in general not well endowed and funds for such works are very limited. Having a fund which could make a meaningful contribution to such maintenance could and should be the catalyst to get the jobs done. The objectives of the Fund are, I believe, as relevant today as they were when the Fund was started. At the same time, it has been shown with many bell funds that members are more likely to give if they see the money actually being spent on real works rather than simply sitting in a bank account. The Fund seeks to

meet a different need to those of the Guild Bell Funds. The Branch should however be careful that, if it chooses to revitalise the Fund it does not take away financial support for those Guild Funds.

In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to amend the Rules of the Fund to remove the restriction that only income can be used for making grants, and allow all money in the fund to be used. This requires a resolution at the Branch AGM. As the Fund is not a Registered Charity, no further approvals are needed. That said, it would be courteous to consult the family of the late George Edmans (and I believe Terry Wagstaffe is still in contact with them) and also the Guild Trustees (although neither has any powers under the Rules). It is probably still sensible for there to be some constraint in the Rules on the amount that can be given to any project. This could either be expressed as a proportion of the total fund or a monetary amount. The latter is the easiest to administer, and given the current size of the Fund and the nature of the works it is seeking to support, I would suggest a limit of £500, which is the equivalent of a 50% contribution to a new set of ropes for a 6 bell tower. This can always be amended by resolution at an AGM (and should be reviewed annually). It is probably sensible that there is some overall constraint to prevent the fund being totally extinguished, and it is suggested that in any event no grant should exceed 25% of the value of the fund. The proposed formal resolutions are set out later.

If the Fund is permitted to spend its capital, it will also need to have sources of new income, and the Branch will need to come up with ideas for this over time, without, as mentioned before, detracting from the Guild funds. An initial thought would be for there to be a box for small change which is passed around at each Branch event. This might only raise a small amount each time, but over a year it could mount up. It would also serve to remind members of the existence of the Fund.

The Branch officers will also need to be proactive in relation to the Fund, and as they visit the towers in the Branch and see work which may need doing, reminding the tower members of the existence of the Fund and its ability to help financially. It has also been suggested that an information sheet be prepared and circulated to all towers to increase awareness of the Fund and its purpose.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Branch seek to revitalise the Fund rather than leave it moribund or dissolve it. By doing so we would continue to honour the name of George Edmans. This is clearly possible – it will merely require a bit of effort. As noted above, this recommendation was supported at the Half-yearly meeting. I therefore intend formally to propose the following at the AGM:

“The George Edmans Bell Fund

That Rule 3 of the Rules of the George Edmans Bell Fund be amended by deleting the words “up to, but not exceeding, the accrued interest on the invested capital” and replacing them with “out of all monies held by the Fund, up to a maximum in respect of each grant of £500 or such other sum as may from time to time be approved by a Central Buck Branch Annual General Meeting, provided always that no grant shall exceed 25% of the aggregate value of the Fund at the date of grant.”

If this resolution is passed Rule 3 would then read as follows:

The CBB Bell Fund will be set up initially by investing the bequest from the late George Edmans together with any other monies subsequently received for or donated to the CBB Bell Fund. Grants may be made at the sole discretion of the CBB Bell Fund Managers out of all monies held by the Fund, up to a maximum in respect of each grant of £500 or such other sum as may from time to time be approved by a Central Buck Branch Annual General Meeting, provided always that no grant shall exceed 25% of the aggregate value of the Fund at the date of -grant. Financial assistance will be limited to minor works including new ropes, fittings such as pulleys wheels sliders and stays, repairing or replacing clappers. The CBB Bell Fund will not make grants for major work such as bell re-hanging, augmentation or new frames.

Jeremy Pratt

July 2012