

Re St John the Baptist, Bromsgrove

Worcester Consistory Court: Mynors Ch, December 2011

Re-roofing – lead synthetic alternative

The petition was for the re-roofing of the north and south side aisles and the south porch of a Grade I listed church with Dryseal glass-reinforced plastic (GRP). The areas of roof in question had previously been covered with lead sheeting, much of which had been stolen in a series of thefts during 2011. Re-roofing with lead would have cost in the region of £400,000 while the cost of GRP was about £50,000. The diocesan advisory committee advised against the use of GRP. English Heritage (EH) objected to the proposals on the basis that lead was historically authentic, practical and a constituent part of the character of the listed building. EH also objected on the ground that GRP would be different in appearance from lead and that it was an untested new material whose performance and lifespan was not known. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the local planning authority expressed views matching those of EH. The chancellor considered a range of relevant material, including the *Report of the Working Party on Metal Theft* issued by the Church Buildings Council (CBC) in March 2011, the advice note *Materials for Roofing that are Used or Considered as Alternatives to Lead* issued by CBC in 2011 and the guidance note *Theft of Metal from Church Buildings* issued by EH in September 2011. The chancellor held that, if any material other than lead was able to replicate its characteristics in terms of its use as a roof covering, there was no reason in principle why it should not be just as acceptable in practical terms. Longevity was a consideration but it might well be more appropriate for a parish to use a material involving a reasonable outlay every 25 years than one that involved a very considerable outlay once in every 100 years. In terms of appearance, other materials might be broadly similar to lead even if of a slightly different colour, and where a roof was invisible from practically all points of observation there was no aesthetic basis for insisting on lead. An area of roofing that was invisible could not be said to be an important element in the appearance of a building. In the present case, given the nature and the location of the roofs concerned, the higher cost of lead and the increased likelihood of theft, there was no reason to insist on the use of lead. While there seemed to be a consensus among those consulted that GRP was not ideal as a roofing material, it was certainly adequate and had been used on other church roofs. If the PCC judged that, while less ideal than other materials, it should be used on the basis that it was less expensive, the chancellor was content to leave that question to the judgement of the PCC. A faculty was granted as sought. [Alexander McGregor]