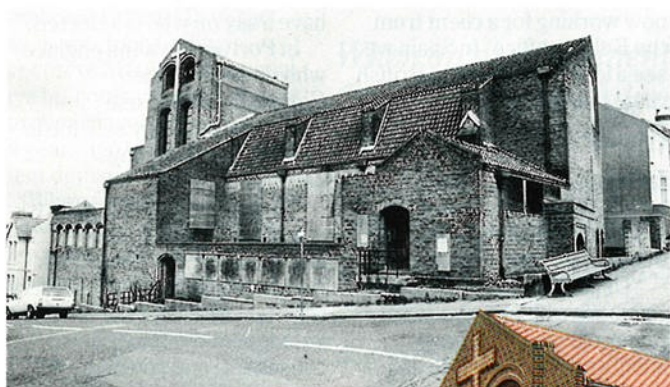


Religious conversion

Peace has been restored to St Wilfrid's Church in Brighton. After a decade of conservation wrangles, it was agreed that a resident congregation was the only way to save the listed building. Peter Weatherhead assesses the refurbishment by Hunter & Partners.



One of HS Goodhart-Rendel's finest works fell into disrepair more than 10 years ago and became a boarded up eyesore.

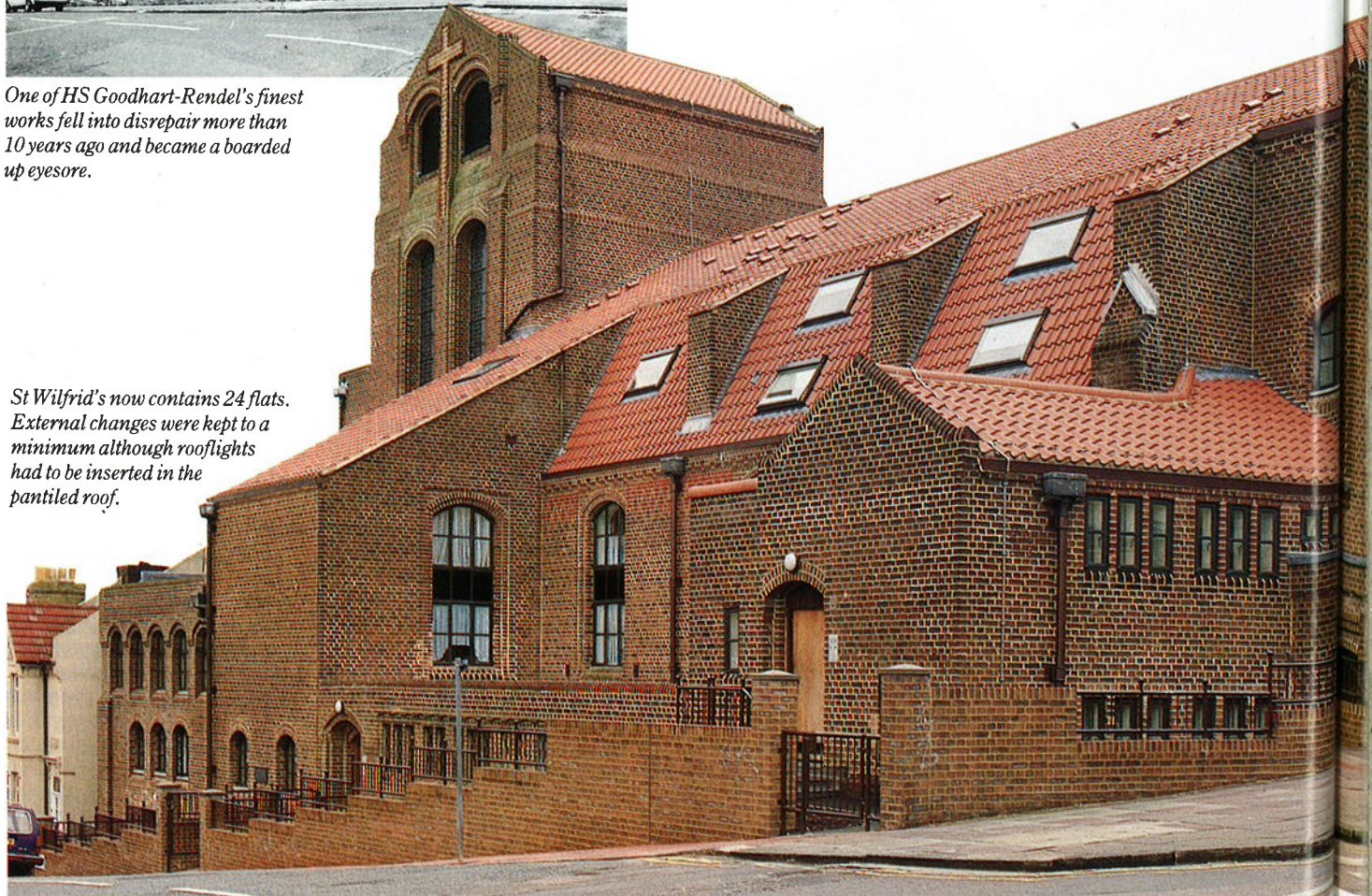
AN ARCHITECTURALLY important 1930s church, once designated for demolition, has been refurbished and converted to provide 24 self-contained flats in an enterprising £1.4m scheme for the Chichester Diocesan

Housing Association. Once a conservation *cause célèbre*, St Wilfrid's Church in Brighton was the subject of two planning battles before the controversial consent for conversion was granted by environment secretary Nicholas Ridley who overruled his own planning inspector.

The church is considered by devotees of inter-war architecture to be one of the finest works of HS Goodhart-Rendel and is a Grade II* listed building. Declared redundant more than 10 years ago, the building became a decaying, boarded-up eyesore and the diocese decided that demolition was the only economic solution. English Heritage and a panoply of conservation groups successfully opposed this, creating an urgent need to find a suitable use.

Architect Kenneth Claxton designed the initial concept of residential conversion which resulted in another planning battle. The conservationists argued that conversion would damage the church's character and that it should be put to a community use which utilised

St Wilfrid's now contains 24 flats. External changes were kept to a minimum although rooflights had to be inserted in the pantiled roof.



REFURBISHMENT · ST WILFRID'S, BRIGHTON



Powerful smoke extractors in the ceiling of the atrium were essential.

its considerable volume. No such uses were found and the environment secretary decided that a conversion which retained the shell of this landmark building was preferable to continued uncertainty over its future.

Consent was granted in January 1988 and architects Hunter & Partners were given the job of reappraising and refining the details of Claxton's concept into a workable scheme which could meet various statutory requirements and financial constraints. This required resubmission for planning permission and listed building consent. These were granted in September 1989.

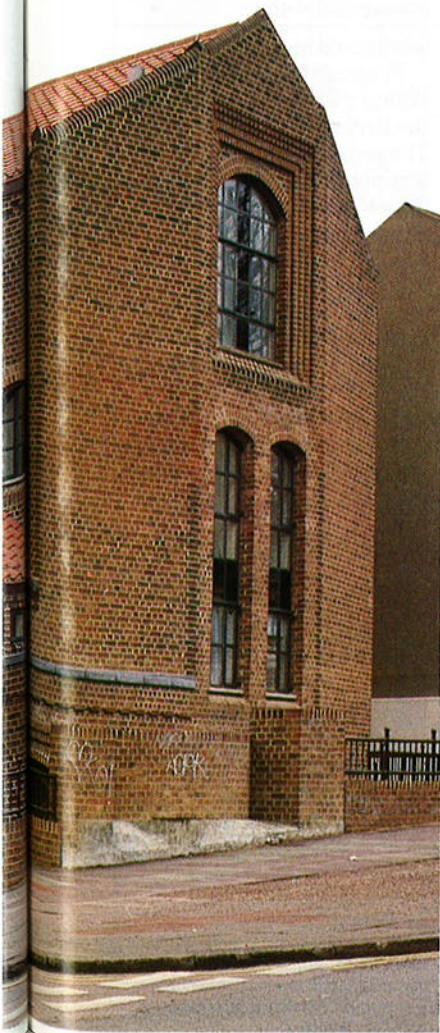
Claxton describes the original design as "very clever spatial manipulation" and sings the praises of Goodhart-Rendel's architecture. He decided to keep the building's massive belltower as a void because it "would be too complicated if you tried to do something with it, so it was better to keep it as a lovely open space". Residential accommodation was located in a core infilling part of the nave but

with what the architect refers to as an open street running along inside the eastern elevation.

There were few windows in this elevation which is cheek by jowl with adjoining houses. Creation of flats using this wall would have required insertion of windows on a scale unacceptable to local people so the new units were pulled back inside the church, facing an open stretch of former nave and its exposed internal buttresses with low arches. The original windows ventilate the open nave.

Graham Acus, Hunter & Partners' building surveyor running the job, comments that he was keen to avoid changes but there was a need to insert additional windows to provide added light to flats and a steel internal gallery as an access to and means of escape from one of two maisonettes created in the chancel.

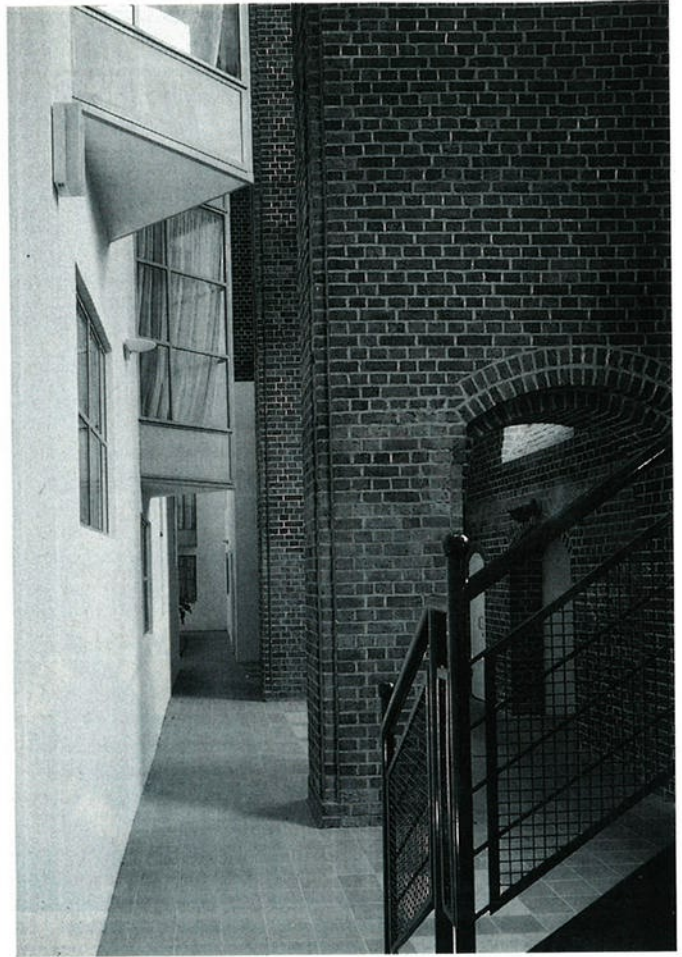
The conversion infills much of the former nave beside the internal street with a four-storey core of eight flats in two banks of four units, each bank having its own street entrance and staircase and one having ▶



The old belltower with its dominant vertical windows has been turned into a light, airy atrium, marred only slightly by the blue, two-level steel gallery. New, triangular windows in pastel colours add a light touch.



New windows have been carefully matched to the originals.



Original internal buttresses about the new residential blocks.

► a hydraulic lift. One of the stairs also accesses a further bank of eight bedsitting rooms constructed against the front elevation. The other accommodation is created in the former side chapel and chancel. The crypt has been converted to provide space for eight cars which necessitated construction of a steep ramp and new access.

The belltower remains as the building's main feature and the architects have created an attractive atrium as a centrepiece of the conversion. It has a colourful tiled floor, planters and benches and Goodhart-Rendel's dominant vertical windows make it a surprisingly light and airy space. The blue painted, two level gallery is more dominant than might have been preferred but Acus points to a battle over fire resistance requirements in all materials and windows. The blockwork infill core sports triangular, projecting, steel-framed windows painted in pink and light blue which add a compensating light touch to the atrium's treatment.

To one side of the former chancel is a room that houses a mural of the nativity by German artist Hans Feibusch which has

been conserved and can be viewed by appointment. Its retention was a planning requirement.

Fire protection

Smoke extraction was a major issue and specialist, Colt, designed a system that the Building Research Establishment ratified in order to reassure the local authority. Acus believes that few residential conversions incorporate an atrium and smoke extraction was almost uncharted territory for building control officers.

Colt's system provides a series of smoke detectors which activate four extract fans in a new ceiling in the belltower. "When we tested them it sounded like an aeroplane taking off," comments Acus. Additionally, large original windows in the eastern elevation, which stand beside the internal street, have been left unglazed and a new escape door in this wall is of open metalwork. A new escape passage was created on this side of the church.

The church's structure was sound although disuse had seen extensive leaking through the roof and considerable

vandalism. The building has been reroofed with new pantiles over most of the main areas but some single-storey side rooms have new flat lead-clad roofs. Box gutters, lead hoppers and downpipes have all been refurbished. All brickwork has been cleaned and repointed. New steel-framed windows have been discreetly inserted in the north and west elevations so successfully that it is difficult to distinguish them from original work.

The planning inspector was concerned that new floors would mar the church's appearance by being obtrusively visible where they cut across windows. This has not proved the case and the architects have handled this sensitively with a black panel within the window frames. Of more substance was the inspector's concern about the harmful effect of new windows in the roof. Hunter & Partners had to add more to the original design and rooflights pepper the steep pantiled roof pitches.

Removal of blue asbestos was a costly start to work on site. The coffered ceilings of the nave and side chapels had to be stripped in a £43 000 contract before any of the conversion

work could begin.

Pragmatism rules and St Wilfrid's Church is a classic of the British art of compromise. The environment secretary accepted that conversion would "involve the virtual loss of the interior of the building as it now stands" but decided that this was justified in ensuring the structure's retention. It has kept a building which Save Britain's Heritage described as being of "rare quality, a masterpiece of its period, and one of unique importance in the history of British 20th century architecture".

St Wilfrid's Church, Elm Grove, Brighton

- client*
Chichester Diocesan Housing Association
- architect*
Hunter & Partners (original concept: Kenneth Claxton Associates)
- structural engineer*
Dixon & Hurst
- quantity surveyor*
Harris and Porter
- contractor*
FT Wilson Construction

Peter Weatherhead is a director in the planning department of Debenham Tewson & Chinnocks, international property advisers.