

The Mayfair church, the health spa tycoon and an unholy row that's split the neighbourhood

ELIZABETH HOPKIRK

A ROW has broken out over plans to turn a Grade I-listed church in Mayfair into a spa.

Multi-millionaire George Hammer, who founded The Sanctuary in Covent Garden, wants to turn the Georgian building into a "wellness centre".

He says it is the only way of saving the crumbling Greek Revival building, which has been on English Heritage's Buildings-at-Risk register for 20 years.

But worshippers at St Mark's Church in North Audley Street and local residents, including Lady Sainsbury and actors Ray Emmet Brown and Gary Beadle, are campaigning to keep it as a church and say it plays a vital role in the community.

Lady Sainsbury, wife of former government minister Sir Tim Sainsbury, is president of the Save St Mark's Action Group and regularly attends the church's women's group.

She said: "It's a wonderful Grade I-listed building with a tremendous history. It's a terrible indictment on society and on the Church if we are not able to keep this wonderful place open when there is a vibrant congregation there. I feel very strongly about it."

St Mark's was built in 1824 and during the Second World War became a centre for American worshippers. It was visited by both President Dwight Eisenhower and Eleanor Roosevelt.

But during the Fifties and Sixties the congregation dwindled and the church was declared redundant in 1974. Since 1994 the Diocese of London has allowed an independent charismatic church to meet there. The Commonwealth Christian Fellowship has a congregation of around 120 and campaigners say it is active in the community, with anti-knife crime training for teenagers and home visits for elderly people.

They want it to remain a place of worship but the Diocese of London has signed a deal with Mr Hammer, giving him a 112-year lease subject to West-



Dispute: multi-millionaire George Hammer plans to turn St Mark's Church in North Audley Street into a spa. He is facing opposition from the congregation, including Lady Sainsbury, below



minster council approving his plans. Under the deal he would pay to restore the building, and then pay an annual rent of £100,000. The church has now been given notice to quit.

Holby City actor Ray Emmet Brown, who lives in Mayfair and worships at St Mark's, where he was married in 2005, said: "The church is a massive benefit for this community. We are a strange community, living in the heart of commercial London, so anybody that's aimed at bringing people together without look-



ing for financial reward is a good thing. "I don't know why this area needs another spa or leisure centre in place of something that will help to keep community spirit alive."

Kirk Mitchell, co-ordinator of the Save St Mark's Action Group, which has a 1,000-signature petition, said: "We are trying to preserve the building as a place of worship for the community. We are thoroughly opposed to any commercial vulgarity. It's appalling that the finest church of its kind in the country

is being sold to a businessman." But Mr Hammer, whose empire includes Urban Retreat at Harrods and who lives next door to the church, said many residents support his plans.

He said: "Commonwealth Church don't want to leave because they don't have to pay rent. But their practitioners aren't local so they could go anywhere. No church has found a sustainable use for the building but we have agreed to spend several million to bring it back into proper community use and to refurbish

CHAPEL HITCH FOR CANDY'S BARRACKS

LAURA CLOUT

THE Candy brothers' £1 billion Chelsea Barracks development has hit a fresh hurdle after English Heritage recommended a historic chapel on the site be Grade II listed.

The billionaires had planned to demolish the Victorian chapel to make way for blocks of flats, but it will now need to be incorporated in their design.

Nick and Christian Candy bought the site last year with investors Qatari Diar and plan to transform it into a "world-class" housing estate, aimed at very wealthy people looking for a London base.

The listing of the chapel follows strong opposition from hundreds of influential Belgravia residents who say the design is "more akin to office complexes". A report by English Heritage quoted in Building Design said the chapel "compares well to listed examples of barracks, hospitals, prison and asylum chapels of the period".

Spokesman for the Candys, Neil Reading, said: "English Heritage has recommended the chapel be grade two listed — but the final decision rests with the Department for Culture."

CHRIS BLACKHURST INTERVIEWS THE CANDY BROTHERS: PAGES 18 & 19 ►

it so there will be no further deterioration. We have been very careful to keep all the important architectural features in place."

Mr Hammer, 58, ex-husband of makeup artist Ruby Hammer, said he wants to open an alternative health medical centre, not a spa, and would give discounts to local people.

A Diocese of London spokesman said: "Mr Hammer's proposal will restore and enhance this important Grade I-listed building."