

Last-minute bid to stop Mayfair spa in church

by Pat Ashworth

A PLANNING APPLICATION to convert a redundant Mayfair church into a luxury spa will come before Westminster Council for a decision this month, despite a protest campaign mounted by its tenant congregation, and a proposal by Holy Trinity, Brompton, to restore it as a place of worship.

St Mark's, North Audley Street, a Grade-I listed building, was declared redundant in 1974 and remained empty until 1994, when the diocese of London leased it to the Commonwealth Church Fellowship (CCF). It was built by J. P. Gandy-Deering in 1824 as a chapel-of-ease to St George's, Hanover Square.

St Mark's has been a priority on English Heritage's Buildings at Risk register since 1988. The congregation offered to buy the church, but was turned down. The diocese's declared priority was to retain the building for worship, but, with repair and conversion costs estimated in 2002 as up to £2 million, it was considered unlikely that a religious use could guarantee the necessary finance.

In 2005, the diocese entered into an agreement with the Polish magnate George Hammer for a "Wellness Centre" that would retain the structure. Mr Hammer applied for planning permission in 2007, and has been allowed to extend a contract that expired in April.

The present congregation of 120 adults and 45 children was served two months' notice in June, but negotiated an extension until 17 October. The Save St Mark's Action Group is chaired by Lady Sainsbury, who said: "We are dismayed by the diocese's sudden move — which goes against assurances given to the church — and are deeply saddened by proposals to make over a building built to the glory of God to new forms of self-worship."

A CCF spokesman said: "Particularly poignant is the fact that while London is reeling from knife crime and teenage pregnancies, there are three thriving youth groups at this church, building self-esteem among just the kind of youngsters who are most vulnerable."

Holy Trinity, Brompton, wrote to the director of Planning and City Development in December: "We believe that we can actively assist in offering a viable alternative to the plans proposed by the recent application."

A diocesan spokesperson said: "The church of St Mark's, Audley Street, has been a redundant church for the past 30 years. Over the years we explored a number of options to secure the building's long-term future. . . Mr Hammer's proposal will restore and enhance this important Grade I-listed building."