



Historic Building Was Already In Poor State

A MEMBER of the town's Baptist congregation has said the group does not deserve blame for the demolition of a building dubbed Swindon's St. Paul's Cathedral.

Beryl Harris, who volunteers at the Pilgrim Centre, which is in Regent Circus on the site of the former chapel, said the group was unable to stop the Baptist Tabernacle destruction in 1978 because it was already on the verge of collapse.

The Tabernacle was torn down by Thamesdown Council after it was fell into disrepair.

Beryl said she feels the Baptists have received undeserved criticism over the building's destruction.

She added that had it not been replaced it would have only been left to rot by those in charge – citing the Mechanic's Institute and Cocarno as proof.

Beryl was responding to last week's article in the Star's sister paper, the Swindon Advertiser, on what lies in the future for the building's remains, which Swindon Council bought three years ago for £360,000.

The stones were to be included in the council's failed £215m Granville Street car park development, but now look set to remain in storage at the Science Museum in Wroughton.

The Eldene resident said: "A lot has been said about the Tabernacle, and about how beautiful it was, but at the time people must understand that we had little option.

"Sure John Betjeman said great things about it but I didn't see him turning up with a cheque book.

"It annoys me that there is criticism in terms of the Baptists and this building but at the time it was in a state of disrepair and no one had money, no one came forward to help – we tried.

"When I first moved into the congregation in 1969 we had almost 800 members, but at the end there were only 200 – we couldn't afford the repair costs."

Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman described the Tabernacle as Swindon's St. Paul's.

Beryl, whose husband Kenneth a former deacon at the Tabernacle, said that although she understands people's anger she believes Swindon residents need all the good work at the Baptists' current Pilgrim Centre home.

“People need to know we need support right here right now.

“We give free meals to the homeless, people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and alcohol problems.

“We also provide them with information along with clothes, socks and toiletries.”

Anyone wanting to provide assistance or find out more about the church or café can call 01793 537642.

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