



The Old Sunday School, St James' Church, 92 Somerset Road



The Sunday School was photographed in 1944.

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This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.

Our last article covered the risks of leaving a lifetime interest in a property to a person not the ultimate beneficiary of a will. This one looks for solutions to historic and perhaps listed buildings falling into disrepair and for which no obvious current use exists.



The former St James' Sunday School, seen from the graveyard, is still a handsome building.

The prime example of this is the old Sunday School at St James' Church in Sandys. The vestry minutes of April 14, 1865 include "This was the first meeting held in the above named Sunday School Room, a building erected and completed though the exertions of some benevolent ladies of Sandys aided by liberal contributions by gentlemen of the parish and other individuals. Independent of it being used as a Sunday School, all vestry and parish meetings will in future be held therein."



The entrance to the former Sunday School from the main road was designed for pedestrians.



A handsome little building in the style of the simpler lodges of the period but with arched Gothic windows, it is listed Grade 2. In the southeast corner of the churchyard, it is easily visible from the main road. However, once the new church hall was built in 1964 on the north side of the property its usefulness was in doubt. Access to the toilets was from the exterior, there is no easy wheeled access to the entrance and because of this the building was difficult to rent.

The roof and some windows were severely damaged in Hurricane Humberto in 2019 and presumably the insurance was not adequate to cover the repairs. Having adequate insurance to cover repairs to listed or historic buildings is critical, so that money available when disaster strikes.



The south side of the building has suffered hurricane damage.

The last tenant was a workman who did not remove his equipment, so the building is not only in an extreme state of disrepair but requires clearing out, particularly of items that could increase fire risk. Risk reduction is another important thing for historic buildings which may help reduce insurance premiums.



An interior view shows that the last tenant did not even remove his materials. The ruined toilets show through the open door.

One answer when a building is architecturally significant but owners cannot afford to keep it up or have no current use for it is for the building to be sold to someone who can repair or find a use for it, but in this case the building is undoubtedly an integral part of the church property so cannot be sold. Perhaps the leaders and congregation of St James' Church can come together to agree a new church and community use for the listed building, and to collectively fundraise for the conservation and restoration needed.

Otherwise, the Church with the help of the media might actively seek a group or individual willing to take on a lease and restore the building. If a lease is long enough it may become worthwhile for a tenant to spend money bringing the building back into good condition. Perhaps a youth group of some sort would be interested, or an artist seeking a studio. Perhaps even a philanthropist such as one of the benevolent ladies who originally built it would be willing to make repairs and then return the building to the Church to look for short-term tenants.

Passively waiting for this listed and highly visible building to deteriorate further is no solution.