



**STATEMENT FROM ROCHESTER SQUARE  
SPIRITUALIST TEMPLE CHURCH OFFICIALS  
OPPOSING THE DEMOLITION AND  
REDEVELOPMENT OF OUR PROPERTY**

**7 August, 2017**

We, the undersigned, all of whom held positions of authority and were actively involved in the running of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple at the time of its closure for refurbishment (date?) are taking legal advice about the factual inaccuracies and misrepresentations that have been made to Camden in documents that form part of the Planning Application and about which we have not been consulted.

We need to make you aware, before any decisions are taken, that the issues we are raising – as part of our campaign to have the property repaired and returned to its role as a place of worship and spiritual development – are of great importance not only to Spiritualists in Camden but to the wider community throughout the UK, many of whom are supporting our stand.

These are the errors or misrepresentations that we need to bring to your attention as a matter of urgency. They are to be found in Nicholas Taylor + Associates' Planning Statement June 2017 FINAL document.

### **1. "The church closed in 2012."**

**WRONG!** The church operated normally throughout 2013, culminating in a Christmas Party on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2013, and continued into January 2014. On the 9th January 2014, Helena Breen, its president, made this statement on the church's Facebook page: "Dear Members, Associates and Friends of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple. Due to recent bad weather conditions, the church, as a result, has been declared an out of bounds area until further notice. We are currently addressing this issue and apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused some of you in your weekly spiritual practice. The weather conditions have also highlighted the need for Member, Associates and Friends to take extra care outside."

In fact, the weather was only partly to blame. Camden Council Planning Department had given approval for the construction of a building next door. That developer, however, had right onto the church's side wall without permission. Church president Helena Breen drew the SNU's National Executive Council's attention to this misdemeanour, which had caused damp and damage to the church's internal wall. On examining this, Camden Planning brought the neighbouring construction to a halt.

Also of great significance is the fact that despite the closure of the church for essential refurbishment, its members continued to support it and paid their membership dues. It had 26 paid-up members to 2015, eight of whom formed the church committee, and a Special Members Meeting was held at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple at 2pm on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2014, for full members only. Church membership renewals were also accepted at the church on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2014, between 12:00-16:00. So the claim that the church closed in 2012 is demonstrably wrong, giving the false impression that it had not operated as church for up to five years, whereas it held services and committee meetings for two more years until urgent refurbishment was needed. For example, the president, Helena Breen, arranged inspection of the church's electrics in July 2014 and was advised it needed total rewiring.

It was at the September 2014 meeting that Helena Breen tendered her resignation due to personal problems. The committee expressed its support and understanding of the issues that she was dealing with at that time by declining to accept her resignation. Nevertheless, the SNU appointed a supervisor to assist with the running of the church and the former president handed over her keys to him.

### **2. The Spiritualists' National Union has now found "alternative premises in the Borough and therefore the Temple was surplus to requirements".**

**WRONG!** The church committee has never been informed that "alternative premises" have been found. Where are these premises and why is the church not using them? Also, how can a church be "surplus to requirements" when it consists not just of the building in which its services are held but also of a congregation? Are they surplus to the SNU's requirements, too?

Since no one at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple has been told where the "alternative premises" are, it is necessary for us to make an informed guess. The suspicion is that the SNU is thinking of the North London Spiritualist Church (at 425 Hornsey Road, N19 4DX) and its plan – not shared with the congregation of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple – is

to “merge” the two. If so, this is strange. The North London Spiritualist Church is a former Primitive Methodist Chapel and it does not have the rich history or connection with Spiritualism’s pioneers that Rochester Square enjoyed. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the supervisor who was put in to help Rochester Square is the president of North London Spiritualist Church. It proved not to be a successful intervention for reasons that the SNU are aware but which it would not be appropriate to explain here.

### **3. The SNU “had hoped to raise funds to undertake much needed improvement work”.**

**SO WHY DIDN’T IT DO SO?** Surely a Union with its assets and responsibilities doesn’t “hope to raise funds” – it gets on and does it or it dips into its considerable wealth to assist a church in need. The church committee and members had done their own fund-raising but had not raised enough to carry out essential repairs. They decided to apply for a grant from The Spiritualists’ National Union Trust – a mutual building society for churches. Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple’s president and treasurer signed the necessary papers and gave them to the building trustee, and also began making payments. Members were told that the church was closing “for refurbishment” at the beginning of 2014 but the SNU has not carried out any of the promised remedial work which would allow the church members to return.

One possibility that was discussed by the SNU and the Temple membership was erecting a building at the back of the church that could be rented out to provide a regular income and finance repairs and upkeep. What happened to that excellent idea? Camden Council appears to have no record of planning permission being applied for in order to provide a solution for the church’s maintenance costs. What happened to that proposal and why did the SNU not follow through with it?

### **4. “The Church was placed on the open market”**

**IF TRUE, WHY WAS EVERYONE CONNECTED WITH THE CHURCH UNAWARE OF THIS?** At no time has the SNU informed the church president or committee that the property they own was being or had been sold to developers. They only became aware of this when a tiny reference to it was spotted by a member in a local newspaper in July 2017.

### **5. “As a record of the activity of the Spiritualist movement, the Temple has some local interest which, given the cessation of worship at the site, is now purely historical”**

**WRONG!** The documentation supporting the Planning Application grossly undervalues the history of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple and its wider importance to Spiritualism. Most of the top mediums demonstrated there, some of them on a regular basis. Doris Stokes, the country’s top medium, for example, was filmed giving a demonstration of mediumship at the Temple before she departed for a tour of Australia. That film was shown on Australian TV during her visit. Her “welcome home” party, attended by leading Spiritualists from around the country, was held at the Temple. And if Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple is of such little significance historically, as suggested by Built Heritage Consultancy in its *Heritage Statement*, then why would the Spiritualists’ National Union have held its annual general meeting there in 1949? We provide at the end of this Statement a far more detailed potted history of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple than the *Heritage* authors Edmund Harris and James Weeks offer in their report. They clearly did not speak to any Spiritualist historians who would have been pleased to assist them.

**6. On the final page of Nicholas Taylor + Associates Planning Statement, you will see (26. Certificate) that Rhodi Rees (solicitor acting for the SNU) certifies that:**

I have/the applicant has given the requisite notice to everyone else (as listed below) who, on the day 21 days before the date of this application, was the owner (*owner is a person with a freehold interest or leasehold interest with at least 7 years left to run*) and/or agricultural tenant of any part of the land or building to which this application relates. The date the notice was served is shown as 22nd December, 2016.

*The following declaration is then made:*

I/we hereby apply for planning permission/consent as described in this form and the accompanying plans/drawings and additional information. I/we confirm that, to the best of my/our knowledge, any facts stated are true and accurate and any opinions given are the genuine opinions of the person(s) giving them.

**WE CHALLENGE THOSE STATEMENTS!** At no point in December 2016 were any members of the church or its executive committee – *the owners of the church* – given notice of the impending planning application. Nor were we informed in April 2016 of the Unilateral Notice and Beneficiary Charge made on our property on the 20<sup>th</sup> of that month, following a contract dated 24 March 2016 between the SNU and Camden Land Partnership Ltd. We also find it odd that the SNU entered into an agreement with Camden Land Partnership Ltd just three months after that company registered with Companies House on 11 December, 2015, suggesting perhaps that the two parties were in touch much earlier. It would be interesting to know how that came about.

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### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

It is important for Camden Council to bear in mind that each church is a legal entity in its own right. That means the land and buildings of Rochester Square Spiritualist Church are vested in the Union (the trustees) to be held on trust for the charity. We believe that the Union's actions in attempting the sale and redevelopment of our church without proper consultation with the president and committee breach its responsibilities to us.

The church was established as an independent Christian Spiritualist church before later becoming affiliated to the Spiritualists' National Union. In taking legal advice about PLANNING APPLICATION - 2016/7088/P we will also be asking our legal advisers to review the advantages to us of withdrawing from the SNU and returning to independent status, which is just one of the alternatives open to us. Until those decisions are taken, the proposed redevelopment of our church should not proceed.

### **A POTTED HISTORY**

#### **... and prominent Spiritualists involved with the Temple**

**ERNEST W. BEARD.** An undated typed history of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple by an unknown author, found in a cabinet at the church, sheds some light on its activities and achievements over the years but it only begins to scratch the surface and, in some instances, does not give a full picture. For example, it says this of Ernest W. Beard, who laid one of the foundation stones: “[Mr Ellis] had already solicited the help of Mr. Ernest Beard of the

Westbourne Park Building Society, who had said that, if they were to purchase the freehold, then his society would be prepared to advance money sufficient to build a Temple for the cause.” It offers no explanation of why he would do that. But we know.

The reason is that Ernest was a non-practising medium and one of three brothers who were all Spiritualists. They are best remembered as the founders of the London Spiritual Mission (13 Pembridge Place, Bayswater) – known to many as the LSM – which they were instrumental in building and opening in October 1912, having bought land that was previously a stables and setting up a fund. Ernest is described in some sources as a prosperous estate agent and chartered surveyor. Another Beard, J. Stanley, was the architect of the LSM building which is now 105 years old and still a very active Christian Spiritualist Church. Ernest Beard was its first president and Richard Ellis clearly knew him well (in order to approach him for funds) and it seems the Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple was modelled on the successful LSM. It is, perhaps, significant that when Ellis approached the owner of the land in Rochester Square and on which the Temple was built, he also referred to the proposed building as “a Mission”.

**ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE.** Interestingly, on 21st January 1926, nine months before he laid one of the foundation stones at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle hosted a house-warming party at the London Spiritualist Alliance’s new premises at 16 Queensberry Place, South Kensington, of which he was president. The freehold was bought with donations from those who, in their war bereavement, had received consolation from the knowledge and experience of Spiritualism. The Alliance later changed its name and is now known as the College of Psychic Studies. Its prestigious headquarters, therefore, are an actual memorial donated as an expression of gratitude by the bereaved of the First World War. Ernest Beard’s son, Paul Beard, the youngest of six children – the others all being daughters – who had joined his father’s business, also became a prominent Spiritualist and psychical researcher. He was author of the book *Survival of Death* which contains communications from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after his passing. Paul Beard was appointed president of the College of Psychic Studies in 1968.

**HANNEN SWAFFER** was an English journalist and theatre critic, widely known and respected. He worked for various publications owned by Lord Northcliffe. He was Editor of the *Weekly Dispatch* and helped develop the *Daily Mirror*. He became a Spiritualist after Lord Northcliffe died and the newspaper tycoon’s secretary told him she had spoken to her dead boss. He decided to investigate, also speaking to Northcliffe through various mediums. After revealing this publicly and championing Spiritualism he became known as “the Pope of Fleet Street”. His foundation stone at the Rochester Square Temple was laid four years after Northcliffe’s death, and just a year after Swaffer told the story in his book *Northcliffe Returns*.

**MAURICE BARBANELL** (often referred to later as “Mr Spiritualism”) accompanied Fleet Street journalist Hannen Swaffer to the laying of the foundation stones at Rochester Square on 30 October 1926. Barbanell and Swaffer founded the weekly Spiritualist newspaper *Psychic News* six years later, with Barbanell becoming its editor. He liked to tell the story in its columns of the Rochester Square ceremony. Richard Ellis, it seems, embarked on what became a rather long-winded introduction, appealing for funds to help build the church. “Swaff whispered to me that he would donate £100,” Barbanell wrote. “As the president kept speaking, Swaff began reducing his donation, ‘£99 ... £98 ... £97 ...’ until it reached about £60!”

**WAR DAMAGE:** on Whit Sunday, 1944, a flying bomb which fell in the vicinity rendered the Temple doorless and windowless.

**POST-WAR BOOM.** Spiritualist churches were reporting huge attendance after World War Two. A report in *Psychic News* in December 1945 reported that “at a recent meeting at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple, where George Daisley gave clairvoyance, the hall was filled half an hour before the service started. When extra chairs were taken and all available standing room occupied, the doors had to be shut. Even then, there were people outside clamouring to get in.” Mr Daisley later moved to the United States where he was a very successful medium.

**ROLE IN COMMUNITY** In January 1949, 160 children from the surrounding district attended a party given by the Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple. A conjuror entertained them and there were presents for all.

**SPIRITUALISTS’ NATIONAL UNION’s ANNUAL CONFERENCE** was held at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple in October 1949. This was an adjourned conference following one held earlier in the year at Edinburgh.

**MATERIALISATION** A profile of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple, written by Philip Paul, was published in *Two Worlds* in February 1955. He was told of a remarkable séance in the 1930s when “a party of church officials witnessed an astonishing materialisation of a former church officer, a Mrs Quiney. The medium on that occasion was Mrs Louisa Singleton. The 30-or-so sitters plainly heard the voice of Richard Ellis but, to their astonishment, it was the figure of Mrs Quiney that was built up.”

**LEVITATIONS** In the same 1955 *Two Worlds* report, Philip Paul writes: “The levitations of Colin Evans during mass meetings in the church provide other stirring memories. Infra-red photographs of these phenomena were secured by that ace lensman of the séance room, Leon Isaacs.” [These images are well known and often used, to this day, to illustrate stories about Spiritualism and physical phenomena (see below)].



**DIRECT VOICE** The same *Two Worlds* report also refers to the fact that during the reporter's visit the church was preparing for a demonstration by William Olsen, well-known direct voice medium.

**RAPS HEARD** Each year, Spiritualist churches celebrate “Hydesville”, commemorating the birth of Spiritualism in 1848 in Rochester, New York, which followed rapping sounds that spelt out messages to the Fox family. [The name Rochester is therefore highly significant to Spiritualists and the church members regard it as a happy coincide that they share the name.] The 1963 Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple “Hydesville” event was coming to an end

when loud rappings on the wooden roof were heard by the packed church. They came just as Leslie Davey, president of the Spiritualists' National Union's London District Council, which arranged the mass open circle, was in the process of thanking the 30 mediums in attendance, led by Louisa Garland, who had given some 200 spirit messages.

**LEN ALGER**, a well-known London healer, held weekly healing sessions at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple during the 1960s.

**HARRY EDWARDS**, world-famous healer, gave a demonstration of his healing powers at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple in May 1975. So many people attended – an estimated 300 – that some had to stand and others were crammed into the porch. One of the healings involved a woman who got her hearing back after 30 years of deafness and was so overcome that she fell on Edwards' shoulder and cried.

**DORIS STOKES**, one of the UK's best known platform mediums (who once demonstrated at the London Palladium) made a very successful tour of Australia in 1978. An enthusiastic welcome home reception was held at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple for her and her husband, John. Before departing for Australia, Doris was filmed giving a demonstration of her mediumship at Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple. This film was shown on Australian TV when she was interviewed about her work and involvement in Spiritualism.

The above outlines just a few pages of the Temple's rich history which does not deserve to be dismissed so lightly (through lack of proper research) by the *Heritage* authors.

We endorse and corroborate all the statements made in this Statement and trust that the Planning Department recognises that there are many reasons why Planning Permission should **NOT** be granted to Application 2016/7088P, chief among them that the SNU has not acted according to its own bye-laws by keeping the church membership – the true owners of Rochester Square Spiritualist Temple – in the dark about proposals and plans relating to their property, and that we are considering taking legal action against the SNU to preserve the church, restore it and continue to provide Spiritualist teachings and evidence of an after life, as we have since 1926, at Rochester Square,

SIGNED

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