

Anger as historic panels are removed from miners church

An investigation has been launched after historic panels marking the fight by miners to be allowed to worship in a local church were removed.

Newton Parish Church, which has links to notorious grave robbers Burke and Hare, is at the centre of a bid by the local community to take over ownership.

The Friends of Old Newton Parish Church have launched a community buy out after the Church of Scotland put it on the open market.

But they reacted angrily after they discovered the panels, which date back to the mid 1700s, had been removed by the Church ahead of any sale.

Now Midlothian Council has confirmed it has launched an investigation into the removal of the panels from the Category B listed building.

The panels were installed after the local miners won the right to attend services after agreeing to build their own hidden gallery above the main congregation so they could not be seen.

The miners paid for their own staircase at the back of the church to a separate entrance to ensure they were not seen by others and installed the panels carrying the names of those who helped build the first gallery in 1732.

The Friends group was visiting the church with Scottish Land Fund representatives as part of their funding application to buy it when they spotted the panels were gone.

They said they contacted Midlothian Council's planning officers as well as Historic Environment Scotland and were told they would be returned but they came back on a 'heart breaking state'.

A spokesperson said: "There are history books written about those panels. They are taught about locally and the struggles they signify are immense.

"They have been returned but are in a heap in pieces. This disrespect for listed and treasured historical pieces is heartbreaking."

A Midlothian Council spokesperson said: "We can confirm we are investigating the removal of the panels from Newton Church."

The Church of Scotland said it is working with Midlothian Council's planning department to restore the panels, which are believed to be part of the listed building's significant interest, however did not give a reason for their removal in the first place.

A spokesperson said: "The historic colliers' panels will be reinstated. This will be done in consultation with Midlothian Council's planning department to ensure the restoration is carried out sympathetically and in keeping with the historic importance of these items, which date to the first half of the 18th century"

The church was known as a regular target of notorious grave robbers Burke and Hare who used to steal freshly buried bodies from graves to sell to Edinburgh surgeon Robert Knox.

The Friends group has raised concerns that the building was put on the market despite claims the community had raised

their interest in taking it on as early as November 2022.

The Church of Scotland has put the kirk on the market for offers over £98,000 with a closing date of August 23.

The Church spokesperson said: "A closing date has been set for noon on Friday 23rd August as there has been some interest in the property. However, the Church of Scotland welcomes interest from community groups.

"Releasing a building on the open market does not preclude a local individual or group making an offer to buy it. It should also be noted that the proceeds from the sale of any church or hall building are reinvested into other local Church of Scotland buildings for the benefit of the congregation."

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter