

EL 7 SET ENGLISH - by Brenda Cundell

Celebrations in Alcala to mark the restoration the Bell Tower and the statue of the town's patron saint

The Bishop of Tortosa, Xavier Salinas, blessed the statue of Saint John



ALCALÀ DE XIVERT

For the second time, after more than one hundred years, the statue of Saint John the Baptist has been blessed following its restoration. This enduring statue, carved from wood from the best cypress in the Alcala de Xivert Calvary, was first placed in its position one hundred and seven years and three days before we saw the scene which was presented by Xavier Salinas, the Bishop of the Diocese of Tortosa, the Mayor, Francisco Juan Mars, the Heritage Director General, Paz Olmos, and Parish Priest Mosen Pere Añó, when, to music played outside the Church by the Alcala Band, they slowly went up to the top of the tower in a builders lift attached to the scaffolding to bless the statue of the town's patron on Saturday, 1st November 2008, All Saints Day.

A great number of residents had gathered in the Church Square so as not to miss being present at an event which was unanimously declared as a unique historic occasion. Also present at the blessing of the statue were the Director General of the Culture Department, Francisco Baila, the Provincial Deputy, Esther Pallardó, the architect for the work, Rafael Soler, as well as members of the municipal corporation and local organisations.

A landmark on Alcala's skyline

Rafael Soler, architect for the project, and his team were charged with planning the operation on a structure which was already showing signs of serious deterioration due to the action of the elements, the passing of time and the wearing away of the stone. The alarming state of the upper floor was, in the words of the architect, Reason for Action. The falling stones, well-known to local residents, had become a powerful reason to carry out the restoration of this Baroque monument.

The first step was to install a spectacular scaffolding cladding around the Bell Tower, so that

an in depth study of the state of the monument could be carried out. To do this, laboratory tests were carried out on stones from the Bell Tower and on samples taken from the La Coma quarry from which the stone used to build the Bell Tower had been extracted. The conclusion was that the stone is of a very good quality, although there are some seams in it which cause cracks. Rafael Soler said that because of its comparable size, the problems of conserving the Bell Tower could be compared to the problems of conserving cathedrals. The architect wanted to point out how important everyone was who had participated in the restoration, from him himself, as his job description indicates (head of works) down to the last labourer, who had used "effort, trade, love and strength" in their restoration work, applying every means from age-old quarrying methods to the latest technological advances to the restoration work "with the greatest of respect amounting almost to veneration". The result is clearly satisfactory.

Like a ship in a storm, faced Soler, the Alcala de Xivert Bell Tower had stood up to the elements, had found itself battered by wind, cold, rain, heat and even lightning strikes - the lightning conductors have been improved to prevent these - rising up like a mast pushing the town forward. The work, complicated and very dangerous, was also a tribute to those who originally had carried out the even greater task of raising this pile into the sky over Alcala, without recourse to today's modern methods, for whom he stated profound respect and admiration.

Symbol of the search for the way

Xavier Salinas, Bishop of the Diocese of Tortosa, was impressed by his ascent up nearly 70 metres, and in spite of his vertigo, recognised that the sacrifice was worth it "because of the splendid view there is from up there". For the prelate, it was a great day, because of the restoration of the Bell Tower, as Alcala's landmark,

and the statue of its patron Saint John the Baptist, who is an example for all those who are always looking for new paths in life.

Accompanied by the Mayor and the Heritage Director General, Bishop Salinas ascended, fighting his vertigo, to proceed with blessing the statue and the restoration work. On his return to the ground, the nuncio joked saying "I thought we would never get down". The Diocese head all the time had shown himself to be very close and caring to the people of Alcala. He was also grateful "as Bishop" for the promise of the Autonomous administrations, both provincial and local, for the conservation of the monument whose value is inestimable, "the great things in life cannot be quantified in material terms". The bishop stressed the symbolism in the statue of Saint John the Baptist, as patron of Alcala de Xivert and guide for the locality "always on the path, always searching". Bishop Xavier Salinas also made an amusing comment when he said "there is much talk now of historic rises and falls on the stock exchange, but this was indeed a historic rise", before then making his farewell to those present with a blessing.

The pride of the people of Alcala de Xivert

The mayor of Alcala de Xivert, Francisco Juan Mars, was clearly happy and proud to have been able to tackle the restoration of a monument which was so loved by all the "gaspaxeres y gaspaxeres" (men & women of Alcala de Xivert). All those who were present at the blessing of the restoration work agreed that it was Paco Juan's determination and drive which had resulted in the restoration work being started as an urgent matter, including his promise that the work on the Bell Tower should continue using funds from the Diputación Provincial.

The mayor told how the architect responsible for the restoration had spent some days dedicated exclusively to technical information about the work carried out. In the same way, he spoke of his pride in the result obtained, saying that, regrettably, the passage of time had been about to destroy the fruit of the effort of all those who had worked with such determination to build the Bell Tower, and that was why he had urged this speedy action.

The mayor emphasised that for more than 200 years no maintenance had been carried out on the Bell Tower, and thanked particularly the Generalitat Valenciana and Castellón Diputación Provincial for their involvement and the investment "which together amounts to over 600,000 euros" made by both administrations in the conservation of Alcala's monumental and architectural heritage, "so that it can be a landmark for many more years". He also stated his intention to continue working on the local heritage, such as the work which is being carried out together with the Diputación to restore and maintain the Castell de Xivert.

Alcala de Xivert Council signs up to the Generalitat's strategic Housing Plan to encourage Social Housing

On the 8th October, Alcala's mayor, Francisco Juan Mars, signed an agreement in Castellón with the Department for the Environment, Water, Town Planning & Housing to promote the building of Social Housing (VPP) in the area.

The signed agreement falls within the Generalitat Valenciana 2008-2011 Strategic Housing Plan, and aims to provide land suitable for Social Housing which is required in Alcala. This is to guarantee that all those who need it will have access to appropriate housing. Alcala Council has given its total support for the Generalitat Valenciana's scheme.

The signed agreement means that the Council and Generalitat promise to prepare planning schemes to cover the housing needs in our town. 14 other municipalities in Castellón Province have signed the agreement as well as Alcala.

New base for the Parque de la Brigada Rural de Emergencias

Alcala Council has announced that it will soon start the construction of a local base for the Rural Emergencies Brigade Fleet. Planning for the base had started during the previous 1999-2003 PP Legislature, but had not progressed under the PSOE government, risking losing it to another municipality.

Mayor Juan Mars said that building the base in Alcala would ensure that the services remained in the town, retaining 14 direct jobs and other indirect positions. A plot of land adjacent to the N-340, next to where the Punto Blanco is being built, has been allocated for the project and will cover an area of some 2,400 square metres. Following approval of the plans, the base could be completed in 2009, and will be financed by the Diputación at a cost of more than 600,000 euros.

New motorcycles for Alcala de Xivert Local Police Force

They will help to make the force's work more effective

Castellón Council has handed over to the Alcala de Xivert Local Police Force four high-powered motorcycles to optimise the work carried out by this body and to improve the quality of their working lives.

They are four Honda vehicles, equipped with flashing lights and sirens. The bikes will enable the officers to get around the town more easily. This addition to the fleet of vehicles available to the Local Police will be particularly useful for the officers when they have to move around Alcossebre at the height of the tourist influx in summer or Easter week.

As local mayor Francisco Juan Mars commented, the new vehicles "provide more resources and, therefore give us better security cover in the town". Thanks to actions taken by the Council, the new motorcycles have cost the town nothing.

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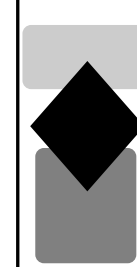
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