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## **NATIVITY SCENE FORCED OFF STREETS**

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A festive scene that has been a popular city-centre feature for more than 50 years has been forced off the street by vandals.

Since 1949 a Roman Catholic organisation, The Knights of St Columba, has put up a nativity crib near Bath Abbey each Christmas and has raised more than £36,000 for local good causes.



But after countless attempts to damage it - including the theft of the Mary and Joseph figurines and an incident where the ox's head was severed - the organisation says the responsibility is too much for its ageing members.

The news has saddened city residents, many of whom have visited the scene for years.

A local priest has offered a lifeline to the crib by promising to restore it to its former glory in time for display next year.

In the meantime, an empty shop window in New Bond Street is providing shelter for the homeless figurines.

Gillian Green, 56, from Melksham, has been coming to the city to see the crib ever since her now grown-up children were babies. She said: "I thought it was such a shame when I walked along Stall Street and saw it wasn't there.

"I used to bring my children in every Christmas to see the lights and we would make a detour to walk past the crib."

Members of The Knights of St Columba crafted the stable, which is 8ft long, 5ft wide and 6ft tall, on being demobbed from National Service in 1949.

Originally no money was collected but passers-by kept slipping coins through the roof so a money box was installed underneath the crib. Since then Ray Ricketts and John Bloomfield have organised transport and repairs for the hefty nativity scene every year.

But Mr Ricketts, now 78, says the order's dwindling membership and the age of its core group has made the task too difficult.

"We were very reluctant to do this but had no option as it has been getting more and more difficult and you need a lorry to transport it. Back when we started there were about 50 members in Bath and now there's just 25 of us left across a huge region," he said.

"In recent years we've had lots of incidents of vandalism, with people stealing Mary and Joseph and even trying to steal the collection box.

"I'm too old to get phone calls from the police in the middle of the night and the stable needs some alterations because I'm getting worried about the health and safety aspect."

The Knights were pessimistic about the stable's future until Father Bill McLoughlin, a parish priest at St Peter's and St Paul's Church in Combe Down, stepped in.

He said: "Last year alone £1,233 was collected for local charities. So after repairing the damaged figures and a bit of hunt for an empty shop, premises were generously made available.

"Local textile artist, Paula Widdicombe, has tastefully set the crib figures on a rich purple sari material."

The stable is currently in storage under St John's Church in South Parade, but members of the local priesthood hope to recruit volunteers to manage it in time for next Christmas.

Anyone who would like to be involved with the nativity scene in the future can ring 01225 425653.