

Historic Places of Worship

The English Heritage strategy for historic places of worship

Richard Halsey *Places of Worship Strategy, Implementation Manager*

English Heritage will be working with many partners to support local communities caring for places of worship in order to secure a future for these buildings.

There are well over 18,000 listed places of worship in England, nearly 13,000 in the care of the Church of England. The buildings range in date from the 7th to the 20th century; many stand on sites that have a much longer history of human activity, and they contain some of the country's best art and craftsmanship. As active support declines in some areas, denominations are rationalising available human and financial support to maintain their core activities of mission and worship. Many congregations struggle to maintain these historic buildings, which are their sole responsibility and which have no realisable financial value until they cease to be used for religious purposes. Such specialised buildings are not easily converted to other uses, however, without the loss of the intrinsic architectural and historic interest for which they were listed. Of at least equal importance, their value as the central focus of a community and the embodiment of its history is also threatened.

It is now widely recognised that keeping these buildings in use for worship, in whatever form that takes, and possibly in combination with another subsidiary purpose, is most likely to secure their future (see Derrick, 12–13). There are many national and local organisations devoted to maintaining historic places of worship, which help congregations or trusts financially, but as congregations fall, concerted action is needed.

Securing the future

A recent survey revealed that 42% of people think that central taxation and Government are responsible for funding what are, in effect, publicly accessible buildings (see Griffiths, 7–9). In fact, from the abolition of Church rates

in 1868 until the introduction of Government grants for places of worship in 1977, no regular funding came from taxation. Neither do the central denominational bodies regularly support fabric repairs, though a few grants and loans can be arranged locally. In particular, the Church Commissioners of the Church of England have no responsibility at all for existing parish churches; they essentially fund the clergy, new churches and central functions.

We all need to work in partnership to harness the huge support that exists within the general population.

It remains the task of thousands of volunteers to maintain and repair their places of worship, using whatever grants and advice they can get and, most importantly, seeking the active, as well as financial, support of the wider community.

That support is often readily given, but there is an uneven spread of historic church buildings in the population; eight rural Church of England dioceses contain 25% of the nation's churches set within only 11% of the population. Something like 12% of parish churches are in the smallest communities representing less than 1% of the population. They cannot organise fundraising and repairs alone.

Already, many professional people, such as architects and accountants, give freely of their time, but their help ought not to be presumed to continue forever. Others volunteer to help in many ways (see Cooper, 10–11). They need guidance and support to ensure that their aspirations are fulfilled. Running a medieval parish church is quite beyond the normal working experience of most people, and mistakes can be very expensive to correct, however well intended. English Heritage would like to help train and fund people to ensure that



Church of All Saints, Newborough, Staffordshire (Grade II), by J Oldrid Scott, 1889–1902, on a medieval site. An integrated designation system will in the future facilitate recognition of the whole site value.

volunteers make the most of the support and resources they already have.

Rising costs

Since the introduction in 1977 of state-aid for places of worship in use, between 350 and 450 buildings have been offered major repair grants each year. Since the establishment in 1996 of the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage has worked in partnership jointly to offer a total of over £193 million (at 2003 prices), an average of £24 million per year for major works to all listed places of worship. In recent years, the number of buildings in receipt of grant-aid has remained steady at around 400, with almost the same number of applicants being turned down for lack of funds. Many of these grants, however, are awarded to places that have received them before – inevitable, perhaps, if small congregations are tackling a backlog of work. It is clear, though, that many more congregations should be applying.

According to a survey conducted in 2001, £98 million is the best estimate for annual expenditure on repairs and maintenance to places of worship per year. The same survey pointed up the wide variation in expenditure between denominations and types of buildings, but it also showed that a large number of congregations spent less than £10,000 per year. In one respect, this could be seen as encouraging, indicating that small-scale maintenance and cyclical repair are being addressed. On the other hand, it could indicate that only the symptoms, not the causes, of fabric problems are being attended to.

It is notoriously difficult to discover the size of the national bill for repairs or the timescale for getting them done. Estimating urgency and cost is not an exact science, being subject to an individual surveyor's philosophy of repair as much as any technical ability. In 1973, it was estimated that, if Government offered grants to the value of £1 million per year to listed places of worship, congregations should be

able to tackle the backlog of repairs. In *Church Needs Survey*, published by English Heritage and the Council for the Care of Churches in 1998, an estimation was given – based on an inspection of 119 Church of England and 18 non-Anglican places of worship (not all listed) in five representative areas – that annual grants of £38 million were needed to keep listed places of worship in good repair. Our Commissioners recently agreed to support initial work to establish these immediate fabric needs.

Adapting to change

Ensuring that a historic building has a viable and, therefore, sustainable use is the key to keeping it in good repair. One of the great joys of visiting churches is to understand how they have been adapted over time to match contemporary forms of worship and interests. Today's congregations also need to adapt their buildings to current needs, though re-orderings of interiors and external additions have always been controversial. To achieve changes that enhance rather than damage the architectural character, without losing important historic fabric or fittings, requires both knowledge of the significance of what exists and the skill to design and make new work worthy of its setting (see Pordham, 14–15; Serjeant, 16–17; O'Donnell, 18–19; Velluet, 20–21; Barter and Hatton 26–7; Durran, 28). Such issues are, of course, common to all historic buildings in use, but they become more critical for places of worship because these buildings are often the most significant in their locality and are seen to be part of the surrounding community.

English Heritage, as the lead body in the historic environment sector, wants to secure the future for as many historic places of worship as possible. It is the duty of English Heritage to protect the historic environment, but we need to have an eye on the future as well as the past to offer advice on what needs to be done now. We are, therefore, working with many partners to provide better information on the state of the historic places of worship in England. Money continues to be needed to pay for essential repairs, but where should the available funds be targeted? So far, grant schemes have been successful in putting many places of worship all over England into a good state of repair. Will those that have been repaired, however, be kept in good order (see Russell, 35)? How many buildings that require repairs have *not* been included in grant applications and for what reasons? Is it practical to expect the denominations to keep and use far more buildings than they need or to ask the

gallant few to shoulder the burden of building maintenance without strong external support? Can new uses be found for these buildings to ensure that they continue to play a key role in the community?

New strategy

The first stage of our strategy, to be developed jointly with a number of partners, will include:

- Taking stock of the condition of the historic fabric, as well as the number of buildings with 'fabric at risk of loss'
- Examining the feasibility of running a maintenance grants scheme alongside established grants for major repairs
- Training people to help congregations understand the history and significance of the buildings in their care
- Creating a network of advisers to help congregations maintain the fabric of their place of worship
- Guiding congregations on the re-use and adaptation of historic places of worship, based on the experiences of the last 30 years.

If people understand their building, they will value it; by valuing it, they will want to look after it; in caring for it, they will help others enjoy it. From enjoyment comes a greater thirst to understand it and the 'virtuous circle' begins again.

With their graveyards, rectories and parish halls, the parish churches of England embody the social memory of communities.

We cannot expect congregations to have the same needs today as they did in the 1840s. Liturgy, like any other form of etiquette, is always in a state of subtle change. Today's ordering certainly wasn't yesterday's and is very unlikely to be tomorrow's.

We need to work out how we can help the daily worshipper and user of the church to understand just what it is about the building that they cherish and enjoy – what drives them to care for it.

Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive, English Heritage, from a speech to the annual conference of the Council for the Care of Churches, Canterbury, 11 September 2003