

New Research on Places of Worship

'Open Thou Mine Eyes' • Psalm 119

Sarah Brown *Head of Research Policy for Places of Worship*

Research supported by English Heritage will inform decisions affecting historic churches and their furnishings.

Places of worship are central to our cultural and national identity and offer a place of contemplation (see Griffiths, 7–9). The skylines of our towns and cities are dominated by the towers and spires of churches and chapels, and the ancient village settlement clustered around the church is an iconic image of English life. England's historic synagogues are now attracting the appreciation that they deserve (see Kadish, 29–31), and, in many neighbourhoods, the distinctive presence of the Muslim mosque, Sikh gurdwara and Hindu mandir is testimony to other established faith communities. The future of these historic places of worship must be built on knowledge and an understanding of their significance. Research undertaken and supported by the Historic Buildings and Areas Research Department, some of it outlined here, will contribute to our appreciation of these buildings and the communities they serve.

Religion and Place

Religion and Place is a project designed to increase our understanding of the importance of places of worship in shaping the built environment of the past and in helping to reshape it for the future. In Liverpool and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, English Heritage has undertaken rapid surveys of buildings of all faiths and denominations, examining the architectural expression of religious observance and cultural diversity, and forging relationships with communities hitherto unfamiliar with our work. A booklet on places of worship in Liverpool, a contribution to the HELP project, will be published in 2005, and we are working with the Buildings Exploratory on a model-making project involving schools

in Tower Hamlets. In November 2004, a conference, Religion and Place Today: Buildings and Urban Communities, organised in partnership with the Buildings Books Trust, will be held at the new London Muslim Centre on Whitechapel Road (see News, 44).

The Commissioners' Churches

In the early 19th century, concern for the godlessness of the rapidly growing population in the new industrial towns of Britain was coupled with a realisation that Anglican church accommodation in many of them was totally inadequate. Without a seat in an Anglican church, it was feared, vulnerable members of the Church of England could fall into the hands of non-conformists or political radicals.



© NMR, English Heritage

St George's German Lutheran Church, Alie Street, London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Joel Johnson and Company, 1763, Grade I), photographed c 1928. Significant numbers of German Protestant refugees fled to London before 1700, but the arrival of the Hanoverian Court in the 18th century was not the only factor that encouraged further immigration. St George's, the oldest surviving German church in Britain, was built to serve Whitechapel's close-knit community of German sugar refiners. St George's is now in the care of The Historic Chapels Trust, with extensive recent restoration supported by English Heritage.

Consequently, between 1818 and 1856, two government grants totalling the then enormous sum of over £3 million were spent on building 612 churches to accommodate over 600,000 people. Built to a budget, these buildings generally received a bad press: A.W.N. Pugin's view was that 'a more meagre, miserable display of architectural skill never was made', and 'Commissioners' Gothic' became a term of derision. The Commissioners' Churches remain one of the least appreciated aspects of the Church of England's architectural inheritance. Their construction, however, was one of the most significant church building initiatives since the Middle Ages, coinciding with the early stages of the great 19th-century church building boom and bridging the Regency and Victorian eras, a period of rapid change in the architectural history of the 19th century.

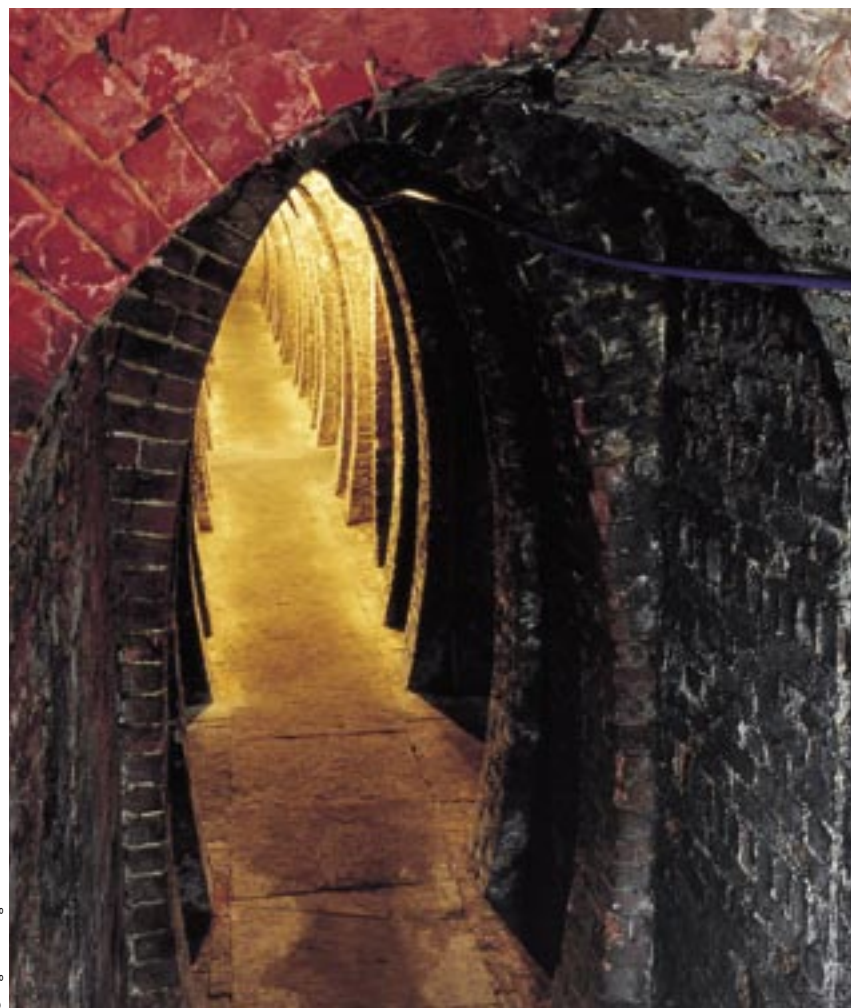
Despite the poor reputation of the Commissioners' Churches, many nationally important architects (Sir John Soane, Thomas Rickman, and George Gilbert Scott, for example) were employed on Commissioners' projects. Many other buildings were the work of less well-known local builders and architects, the subjects of recent regional studies.

In 1961, Professor M.H. Port's *Six Hundred New Churches* (London: SPCK) provided an invaluable inventory of the Commissioners' Churches. A relatively small number of churches had already been lost and many more altered, most commonly by the addition of a chancel extension and vestry, the removal of galleries and the addition of late 19th-century furnishings. Many more are feared to have been lost or altered beyond recognition during the last 40 years.

The study of 19th-century church building during the last 40 years, however, has progressed significantly, and a new survey of surviving Commissioners' buildings is long overdue. Most Commissioners' Churches are in inner-city areas increasingly vulnerable to the consequences of rapid demographic and commercial change. In January 2004, English Heritage commissioned the Architectural History Practice to undertake an investigation of these under-valued churches. A national database of churches lost and surviving will soon be available for public consultation.

Benches and pews

The 16th-century Reformation accelerated the tendency to fill churches with fixed seating for the laity. Benches had first been installed in parish churches in the late Middle Ages, but, for much of the medieval period, only a few



© English Heritage / Peter Williams

stone benches along the walls, and occasionally around the piers, had been provided for the elderly and infirm. The Reformation's emphasis on preaching and teaching – the ministry of the word – made seating for the congregation far more important. The pulpit and reading desk replaced the altar as the focal point of the church interior, with benches and pews arranged around the pulpit to ensure maximum visibility and audibility.

Features were introduced to increase comfort during long sermons in unheated churches, such as doors to exclude draughts and provide privacy, cushions, fabrics and even fireplaces for the private family pews of those who paid pew rents. As the seating arrangement reflected the social hierarchy of a parish, competition for the best seats was fierce and could provoke discord. Locks added to pew doors safeguarded the claims of pew proprietors, and sextons were required to usher them to their seats, though clearly not quickly enough for Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys, parishioners of St Olave's Church, Hart Street, in the City of London: 'In the morning to church, where at the door of our pew I was fain to stay, because the sexton had not opened the door' (Samuel Pepys, 25 December 1661).

The appropriation of the most prominent church spaces by the wealthier families of the parish forced the poor to the margins. By the 1820s and 1830s, the inadequacies of

The atmospheric but little-known crypt of St Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, Scotland Road, Liverpool (John Broadbent, 1833, Grade II). Built on the site of the so-called French Chapel, St Anthony's is Liverpool's earliest Roman Catholic church to survive in use.



© English Heritage / Jonathan Bailey

The tower of St John's Church, Bethnal Green (Sir John Soane, 1826–8). The eminent and elderly Sir John Soane designed three of London's Commissioners' Churches, though the final designs for St John's attracted criticism. The original designs of 1825 were similar to those for St Peter's Church, Walworth (1823–5) but exceeded the budget of £16,000. Consequently, Soane submitted two variants for the tower; unsurprisingly, the short cheaper design was constructed, attracting criticism from pundits and local residents. Bethnal Green's dominant local politician Joseph Merceron described the eccentric tower as having 'mortified and disappointed the Expectations of almost every individual.'

church provision in rapidly expanding and industrialising towns, particularly for the poor, caused considerable concern in the Church of England. The Incorporated Church Building Society, founded in 1818 to support the building and enlargement of Anglican churches, required that all churches in receipt of ICBS money should provide free seats in some, if not all, of the church. Non-Conformist chapels, in contrast, were plentifully supplied with seats set within interiors of majestic, even theatrical character, enhancing the eloquence of the highly regarded preachers of their day.

For the Anglican reformers of the 19th century Ecclesiological movement, private box pews (or 'pues') were a potent symbol of the decadence of the Regency church: 'For what is the HISTORY OF PUES, but the history of the intrusion of human pride, selfishness and indolence into the worship of God?' (JM Neale, 1841). A campaign for their removal and replacement with open, eastward-facing benches, to emulate what was believed to have been common medieval practice, was launched by the Cambridge Camden Society, and war was waged in the pages of their influential journal, *The Ecclesiologist*. By 1847, the Society could claim that 'if we cannot yet announce that every battlemented enclosure, every towering partition has been levelled with the dust... so many breaches appear everywhere... that no

reasonable doubt can now be entertained of a complete and speedy victory.' In successive decades, many thousands of parish churches installed new pews, or replaced old ones, in the Ecclesiological style. As a result, the box pews, for example, of St Anne and St Lawrence Church, Elmstead, Essex, once a commonplace, are now a cherished curiosity (opposite below).

Many late 19th-century pews included refinements such as a book slope for Bible and hymnbook, a kneeling board or hook to support a suspended hassock or a gentleman's hat, and a rack with a small tray for wet umbrellas. In many new 19th-century churches, pews were part of an harmonious scheme. The architect William Butterfield, for example, designed pews for many of his churches and published articles on their utility and comfort. A fierce opponent of the hassock, he advocated kneeling boards as a more sanitary alternative to the infested kneeler found in many an impoverished city parish.

The habit of pew proprietorship was hard to break. Pew rents continued to be charged well into the 20th century, and pews continued to be treated as the property of their regular occupants. Pews were often numbered or painted with the name of the family or the estate to which its occupants belonged. A small brass plate might hold a discreet card with the occupant's name. In England's increasingly popular seaside resorts, proprietors of the better boarding houses maintained a private pew for the use of their church-going guests. Pews, therefore, contain valuable evidence of the devotional and social lives of our church and chapel-going predecessors.

In the 21st century, many thousands of churches and chapels face further transformation (see Serjeant, 16–17; Barter and Hatton, 26–7; Durran, 28). With declining congregations, few now require the historic fixed seating that accommodated many hundreds of regular Sunday worshippers. Changing styles of worship, as well as the desire to include new religious, secular and even commercial activity, mean that many congregations now prefer a flexible interior to the constraints of fixed pews. The most endangered seats are often the finest: chancel seats intended for the choir and clergy. In many churches, the altar has been brought out of the chancel to the east end of the nave or even placed in the midst of the congregation. In these circumstances, choir stalls and clergy seats seem stranded and redundant.

For these reasons, English Heritage is commissioning a study of the history and typology of historic church seating,

Stanmer Church, Brighton (Ralph Joanes of Lewes, 1838, Grade II), one of the churches threatened with closure in the recent Brighton and Hove deaneries review.



© English Heritage / Sarah Brown

Some historic elements, such as the late-18th-century box pews, pulpit and reading desk that add much to the character of the early-14th-century church of St Anne and St Lawrence, Elmstead, Essex, are now considered a constraint by many 21st-century worshippers.

particularly of 19th-century and early 20th-century developments. What are the basic pew designs, and can they be dated? How rare are particular forms, and are there regional and denominational characteristics that ought to be taken into consideration in deciding about future use, re-use or disposal? What

can be done to adapt historic pews, retaining their character and quality of materials and craftsmanship, while providing greater comfort, especially for the elderly, infirm or disabled? The next few decades may well witness a transformation of church seating every bit as far-reaching as that of the 1840s and 1850s. This research will inform all those involved in the process.



© English Heritage / Patricia Payne

The Churches of Brighton and Hove

In June 2003, the Pastoral Strategy Review Group's report was met with dismay by many in the deaneries of Brighton and Hove (Chichester Diocese). The report made a number of recommendations for church closure, merger and redevelopment, affecting churches both of national significance as well as local importance. The plans envisaged, among other things, drastic changes for the churches of Barry's St Peter's (1824–8, Grade II*), Emerson's St Mary, Upper Rock Gardens (1877–9, Grade II*) and Pearson's majestic All Saints, Hove (1888–91, Grade I).

To ensure that the architectural and historical significance of each building is taken into account, English Heritage has commissioned Teresa Sladen to undertake a thorough assessment of the churches of the two deaneries. Her work will inform guidelines for similar diocesan and deanery reviews in the Chichester Diocese and beyond.