

HISTORIC CHAPELS

The Cornish chapels survey

A new survey of Cornish chapels has led to improved understanding which can inform decisions about the future of this important resource

Chapels, along with the distinctive buildings that housed industrial activities and their workforces, had become a prominent feature of the Cornish landscape by 1851, when Cornwall had the highest percentage of dissenting places of worship in England. The strongholds of Cornish Methodism, in mining heartlands of the centre and west of the county, found no national parallels – with the notable exception of the mining valleys of south Wales – for the dominance that Methodism held, as a popular evangelical movement, over other forms of Christian worship

Need for dialogue

Over 80% of approximately 700 chapels that survive in recognisable form today are of Methodist origin. They cover an enormous span of architectural types and ambition – far broader than Anglican buildings – from the most modest vernacular to successive levels of aspiration and prosperity within chapel communities. However, historic chapels – particularly in rural areas – now represent one of the most threatened building types in England. The Methodist Church and other denominations have had little choice but to sell off chapels where there are too few members to carry the cost of maintenance. To inform its pastoral strategy for dealing with changing circumstances, the Methodist Church needed clear guidance about how statutory protection through the listing of important chapel buildings might affect its ability to alter, extend or even demolish its properties.

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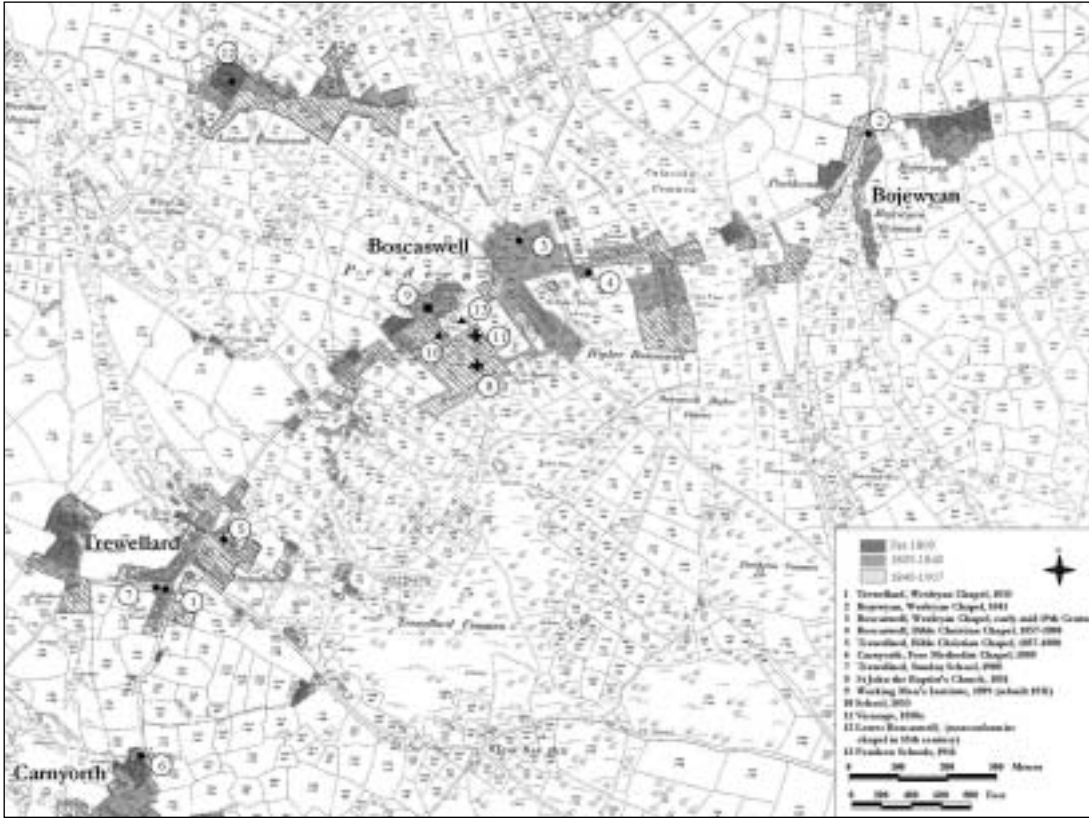


This need for guidance was particularly strong in Cornwall, where many chapels had been listed following the Historic Buildings Resurvey of 1984–8. At that time, English Heritage had become aware of the need for discussion, based upon accurate information, with churches, local authorities and other potential users. The Cornish chapels survey, based on rapid survey of over 90 % of surviving examples, was the first attempt to tackle this problem on a regional scale. The survey also analysed the relative rarity and importance of fixtures and fittings and drafted selection criteria to help secure the proper stewardship and protection of the historic environment. The reasons for the extraordinary architectural diversity and high rate of alteration of the chapels are explored in detail in *Diversity and Vitality: The Methodist and Nonconformist Chapels of Cornwall* (2001), jointly supported by English Heritage and the Methodist Church. Launched in July 2001 at the Truro conference, 'Bane or Blessing: the Future of Historic Chapels in Cornwall', the book covers the importance of chapels to the Cornish landscape and culture, the evaluation of their significance as historical buildings and the dynamic role of liturgical and community change in determining both their historic character and future.

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Above and right: Interior and exterior of Penmennor Chapel, Stithians. Built in 1865, this chapel is a remarkably complete example of one of the larger rural chapels, built for 800 seats. One of 23 chapels in Cornwall now listed at Grade II following the chapels survey, it has received a 70% grant from English Heritage towards major works, including re-roofing and repair to windows and the interior



Chapels in Trewellard and Boscaswell, one of Cornwall's distinctive rural industrial landscapes. Over 650 chapels have now been included on a map-based computer database, held at Cornwall Archaeological Unit, that forms the template of the characterisation of both rural and industrial areas. CAU, in partnership with English Heritage, is developing frameworks for managing the historic environment

Managing change

There are now 160 chapels of all denominations in Cornwall that have been listed as buildings of special architectural or historic interest, the chapels survey having resulted in the loss of 28 altered or unlistable chapels from the statutory lists, the addition of 13 at Grade II and the listing of 23 of the most outstanding examples at Grade II*. Cornwall has the highest number of listed chapels of any Methodist District, the Methodist Church owning 92 listed at Grade II and 14 at Grade II*, a total of 12% of all its listed chapels and 42% of its II* chapels in England. For the great majority of chapels that have retained interior features and fittings of interest, their conservation is best managed through their remaining as chapels, in line with advice in PPG 15: Planning and the Historic Environment. This, however, is a difficult challenge for many chapel communities faced with declining financial resources and often prohibitive repair costs. Two examples of II* chapels with a current membership of only 21 are Carharrack, built to seat 530, and Ponsanooth, built to seat 630. For those chapels with larger and more dynamic congregations, there is a greatly increased need to accommodate people with disabilities, to provide lavatories, cooking facilities, new entrance areas and spaces for dance, drama and music.

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English Heritage and the Methodist Church will continue to work together to ensure that the greatly enhanced understanding of these chapel buildings and their fittings will continue to inform the process of change. □

Jeremy Lake
 Inspector of Historic Buildings
 English Heritage Listing Team

Ian Serjeant
 Conservation Officer for the Methodist Church

The exceptionally fine interior of the 1863 Bible Christian Chapel at Wheal Busy, Chacewater, now listed at Grade II*, one of only six wayside chapels that have retained their original box pews

