

Speech by Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive, English Heritage
to
HISTORIC CHURCHES COMMITTEE (Roman Catholic) CONFERENCE
24 February 2005

HOW CAN OUR CHURCHES RAISE THEIR PROFILE IN ORDER TO SECURE HIGHER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT TOWARDS THEIR LONG TERM SURVIVAL?

I think that this is the longest title I have ever attempted to address in a short talk. Nevertheless, I want to cover other topics of mutual interest and to start straightaway by thanking you and your colleagues on the Historic Churches Committees for the enormous effort and great care you have taken to make the faculty system work. Over the last decade, you have successfully promoted the same standards that have been applied to other denominations and indeed other listed buildings, over a very much longer period of time. Critics might point to lapses, but no system is perfect and will only achieve widespread acceptance through respect and confidence. Gaining that acceptance has, I think, been your real achievement since 1994, when the current arrangements after the Ecclesiastical Exemption Order were made.

Many of you were critical of the proposals put forward last year by the Department of Culture, Media & Sport for a radical review of ecclesiastical exemption. We are told that the Department's analysis and response to that consultation will become available by Easter. There are fresh eyes looking at the issues within the Department and they are well aware that much of the criticism they received stems from the lack of clarity and definition of terms in that original paper. The really key point to remember here is that reform of the exemption is part and parcel of the Government's radical review of Heritage Protection. As that will in time change the way we designate **all** of our historic assets, whether listed buildings, scheduled monuments, conservation areas or registered gardens, the status quo cannot remain in place. Ecclesiastical sites and buildings are among the most important parts of the national heritage, so their future protection and management has to be part of that whole Review programme.

The Heritage Protection Review aims to give greater clarity to the significance of historic assets and their inter-relationship and to create a more strategic approach to their management based on partnership. The identification of the "asset" for most Roman Catholic parish churches will not change a great deal from what we know at present. There will be the church itself, plus its surrounding curtilage including any boundary walls and buildings and possibly any underlying archaeological remains too. In towns and cities though, that designated area could include an attached presbytery and any church halls and schools. If currently listed or in a conservation area, they are already subject to the secular rather than the ecclesiastical system. However, if they are in one diocesan or religious order ownership, then the intention is that in future a management agreement would be created between the owner, the parish and the local authority, with English Heritage and statutory amenity groups involved as appropriate. This negotiated management agreement would spell out works that can be done within the whole designated area without individual applications for either secular or ecclesiastical consent and more importantly perhaps, agree the future scope of works that could then become more detailed applications over a defined period. So, the big benefit is that repairs and minor alterations carried out to a certain specification or to agreed principles would not require separate consents. Areas for development would also be identified within the agreement, as would areas that were agreed to be too significant for radical change. A topic that **will** need to be addressed is the extent to which re-ordering of the interior could take place, without triggering a new application.

How such concepts can actually be applied to ecclesiastical sites and in particular, within the Catholic Church, needs to be explored in greater detail. There are currently 15 pilot Heritage Protection Partnership Agreements running on secular sites as diverse as the Darnell steelworks in Sheffield, the University of East Anglia, the Piccadilly Line here in London and the Godolphin Estate in Cornwall. They are all, of course, only dealing with secular consents - though I have to say they can be just as

diverse and overlapping as any in the ecclesiastical sector. However it is the mix of secular and ecclesiastical consents that needs to be further worked out, to remove the complexities of the current situation. With the Department, English Heritage is hoping to run pilots with two Church of England cathedrals and two dioceses. And I think it is essential that we can also arrange pilots within at least two Roman Catholic dioceses, which could include their respective cathedrals.

The other part of the Heritage Protection Review, defining significance, is, I am pleased to say further advanced in the Catholic Church. We are supporting the book you heard about this morning, because we want to popularise a national and comparative picture of the value and interest of Catholic churches and buildings. English Heritage is also commencing reviews of the historic buildings in the dioceses of Arundel & Brighton and Lancaster, in full co-operation with the dioceses. The aim is to create an up-to-date catalogue of listable buildings and to understand their relative significance in both the diocese and nationally. That catalogue is intended to inform both diocesan strategic decisions about investment of resources, as well as give local parishes a clear idea of the changes that could be made without affecting the historic and architectural significance of their buildings. This approach has proved very worthwhile in both the London and Manchester dioceses of the Church of England and English Heritage is hoping to encourage other dioceses to follow these examples.

I know that spot listings, especially those requested by external groups - or indeed individuals - with a cause to fight, have in the past been the bane of good planning and responsible building management. Their frequency is partly due to the poor quality of existing listings of Catholic churches. Of course, owners and users can themselves gain certainty by requesting the Secretary of State to make an assessment for the purposes of issuing a listing immunity certificate. However, English Heritage is not aware of any Catholic diocese or priest using this procedure themselves. After April 1st, English Heritage takes over the administration of the listing process from the DCMS. Each newly proposed listing will be consulted on before listing takes place and English Heritage will take account of the comments received before making a recommendation to the Secretary of State. Requests for formal reviews of listing decisions will also go continue to go to the Minister. The new list description will explain the reasons for listing and the significant elements that led to the decision to list.

Just as with the Heritage Protection Review management agreements, the aim is to give clarity and transparency to heritage protection, to enable owners in particular to plan and develop their property against a clear understanding of the heritage interest and significance of their building site. But closer to my heart and also the subject of my long title (which I have not forgotten about) is the work needed to convince public opinion that the built heritage of the Catholic Church in England has significance for the nation, **not just** for worshippers or special interest groups. If we can establish **that**, then **surely** greater recognition in terms of funding from public sources must follow. Forgive me if you have heard this before but what I term the Heritage Cycle has become a mantra of mine, because I passionately believe in it. 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 of the historic environment comes a greater thirst to understand it and so the whole circle begins again.

With the new designation regime currently predicted to come into force after a Heritage Bill in 2008, there is time to really get to grips with educating people – from those in the pew to politicians in government – on the merits and importance of the Catholic heritage. Members of Historic Churches Committees are surely in the forefront of such a campaign, which will emphasise your pro-active educative role. The pilot identification projects in Arundel & Brighton and Lancaster will we hope provide a template and teach us lessons on how to take such diocesan overviews further, both in terms of education and in managing the heritage they identify.

The Church of England has launched an initiative called “Building Faith in the Future” calling on Government at all levels to understand the value of churches in the community, both as historic buildings and as centres of community life. The document launched last October gives lots of examples of churches being used for community events in addition to worship and in partnership with others, from very local mother and toddler groups, to national organisations looking for a local outlet,

like the Post Office and building societies. There are plenty of similar activities already taking place in buildings owned by the Catholic Church, though I realise that your own traditions and legal canons make multiple use of the sacred church space itself less possible.

But in some respects, your church sites are more intimately connected with the Catholic communities that use them, than the established Church of England parish church, despite centuries of use. I am treading on delicate ground here, as that sense of cohesion is descended from exile and fear of persecution, but such a culture should not necessarily be shunned – it is after all part of the nation's history. But it is over 200 years since the Catholic Relief Act of 1791 legalised Catholic church building and the huge contribution the Catholic Church has made to the nation's built heritage is a story that needs to be better known and appreciated. Our book will help, as will more informative lists and the management agreements proposed by the Protection Review. Greater understanding of heritage value should help to unlock funding in national, regional and local budgets aiming at preserving heritage. But bigger budgets exist for other activities like regeneration and promoting social cohesion and all the Churches need to understand what these are aiming for so that they can then tailor their own projects, activities and buildings to benefit from these funds.

Secular authorities, especially those with money to spend on infrastructure like the Regional Development Agencies, need to be convinced that the projects they are being approached about really do benefit everyone and are not simply helping a few. Remember that the Chancellor of the Exchequer justified the introduction of the scheme to refund VAT paid on church repairs with the argument that churches were benefiting their wider community and so should have greater help from the nation. It has to be said that the ecclesiastical exemption has, until quite recently, divorced churches from the community's elected representatives in the local authorities. Even the term "exemptions" suggests churches are somehow getting away with something. Politicians may be wary of interfering with religious matters, but the result of the exemption is that they and their staff in planning departments know far too little of the needs of ecclesiastical buildings. We hope that this will change with the introduction of management agreements in the future.

Many of you tell us that you have great fabric needs and the cost of repairs remains a common reason given for the closure of churches by Bishops and Orders alike. We know of two such recent closures of highly graded buildings, both grant-aided in the past. They did not go through the recommended procedures and so there was little consultation or sense of partnership in seeking a solution. This does not inspire confidence or encourage further investment partnerships, particularly by those, like ourselves and local authorities, who are left with the problem of dealing with the abandoned building. Such events create embarrassing bad publicity for all involved and this takes forever to be forgotten or countered by good news stories. It takes time and careful discussion to find alternative uses for redundant historic churches and solutions will only be found through working in partnerships.

English Heritage does understand that some churches are no longer needed for worship and others need to be adapted for today's uses if they are to survive. Indeed, those two surveys in Arundel & Brighton and Lancaster are specifically designed to promote a strategic approach to managing church buildings, through a fuller understanding of their historic and architectural significance. The general public will not accept the demolition or degradation of important buildings anymore and this has been recognised by others – like the railways or even the National Health Service – who operate within listed buildings. They have learnt to adapt and indeed, to promote, their ownership of heritage as an **asset** and not a **burden**. Their efforts have attracted government help, nationally and locally, as well as from heritage groups, because these buildings are seen as working national assets.

Establishing the fabric needs of the whole ecclesiastical sector and trying to understand the degree of vulnerability of places of worship is part of the work English Heritage is doing over the next year or so. We will be looking for partners in all denominations, as well as with the Heritage Lottery Fund and interested voluntary groups. I very much hope that you will be willing to assist, as the results are intended to help you help yourself, from a position of greater knowledge and context, as much as to help English Heritage in its role as the government's adviser on the historic environment. The results

will also contribute to the revision of the joint grant scheme we operate with the HLF after 2007 and we hope to impress on all levels of government how much investment is needed in historic places of worship, if they are to survive for future generations to benefit, understand and enjoy.

Our task would be made a little easier if we could demonstrate that the funding available now through the English Heritage/ Heritage Lottery Fund Places of Worship Grants Scheme is oversubscribed outside the Church of England. We are genuinely puzzled by the low number of applications we have received from Catholic parishes. Just 20 out of 597 applications in 2002, 16 out of 489 in 2003 and 18 out of 451 last year. The ratio of offers actually made is similar, hovering around 3.3%. This surely cannot reflect the number of Catholic parishes with listed churches needing urgent repairs that they cannot afford themselves. I am interested to hear your views on why applications are not being made. What everyone here can do now is to encourage parishes to apply. All grades of listed church are eligible and there are two deadlines for applications, June 30th for Grade I and II* churches and September 30th for Grade II. New application packs will be available soon after Easter from our regional offices.

What I hope we are all working towards is to have England's historic churches in good condition and fit for purpose, whatever that may be in the particular circumstances. It is not about tourism or museums; few places of worship will ever earn much from visitors alone. It is about the value a community places on its past, as evidenced by historic buildings and their contents. It is above all about the quality of life we all want to have, the ability to live and work together in an environment that enhances and contributes to all our essential activities, including worship.

English Heritage must work with you to persuade the general public, and particularly the people in the pews, to understand what it is about Catholic church buildings that they want to keep and to enhance – and ultimately, pay for. Seminars, training days, books and leaflets will do much to help and the eventual changes in designation and management agreements will start to change the culture of statutory controls. But, as English Heritage formulates its plans for the future, and works out how we can help you to achieve the preservation of the best of our ecclesiastical heritage, we need to stop talking and to start listening. And that is precisely what I propose to do now.

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