

# Rural churches: the wider picture

A talk for delivery 10 November 2005 at the conference in York: *Shaping the future of rural churches: how do we save our church buildings?*

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## COBBETT

In 1826 – nearly 180 years ago – William Cobbett went on one of his famous rides through rural England. August the 31st found him in Wiltshire, making his way up a narrow valley.

The little vale [he wrote] runs up three miles. In those three miles there are four churches; namely, Stapleford, Uppington, Berwick St. James, and Winterborne Stoke. The present population of these four villages is 769 souls, men, women, and children, the whole of whom could very conveniently be seated in the chancel of the church at Stapleford. [And he goes on.] What were these four churches *built for* within the distance of three miles?

The following day Cobbett comments:

A journeyman parson comes and works in three or four churches of a Sunday;

So in 1826 there were too many churches. The churches were in the wrong place, compared to where most people lived. Many church buildings were larger than local people needed for worship. And the churches were sharing a parson. Some problems, it seems, never go away. The good news, of course, is that our church buildings are in much better condition today than ever Cobbett saw.

## Introduction

My aim is to present some key facts and figures about rural church buildings today, and the volunteers who support them – the church congregations – so that you can make your own mind up about things. I will be looking only at Church of England

churches, which form by far the majority of listed rural places of worship.

Incidentally, I shall take rural not just to mean remote countryside – but to include larger settlements such as market towns – indeed, with the government’s recent definitions, any settlement with fewer than ten thousand inhabitants is rural.

**SLIDE** The talk falls into two parts. First some basic facts and figures about church buildings. Then a look at four aspects of rural churches.

You’ll notice that there are certain areas I’m not covering. One falls under the general category of legislation – such things as the Disability Discrimination Act, the Child Protection Act, the costs associated with protecting bats, the changes to the licensing laws, the likely removal of exemption from churches having to register as charities, the possible impact of priests gaining pseudo-employment rights, albeit through an unusual route, the impact of the Health and Safety Act on doing work at heights, and perhaps other I know not of. They certainly add to the burden of being a church volunteer. Perhaps they are a necessary burden – a step towards the professionalisation of the role of churchwarden. Or perhaps they show the need for a degree of church-proofing in government policy, to help maintain the health of these rather unusual voluntary groups, who have responsibility for such a large chunk of our built heritage. I don’t know enough to comment.

Another area I am not really competent to deal with is the government’s overall policy towards these buildings. There are some very good things, like Gift Aid and the VAT scheme for repairs to listed places of worship. And it is encouraging that Defra are funding a significant piece of research into the community value of church life.

Various central government publications have acknowledged the role of the church in helping define a neighbourhood, and providing a social hub. Regional authorities, too, seem sometimes to be willing to work with churches as important players in what I think is referred to as the third sector. On the other hand, there is severe pressure on EH funding, and on the funding of the Churches Conservation Trust, and even – I believe – the relatively tiny amount needed for the VicSoc’s church case worker was not renewed. And places of worship received no mention in a recent important statement of regeneration policy – and this 25 years after *Faith in the City*. My suspicion is that there is a lack of joined-up thinking here, coupled with a nervousness

about religion, and about being seen to favour one particular religion. But I have only reached that view through reading the same newspapers as you, and don't really have the expertise to comment.

Finally, I will not be talking about grants to churches, through lack of time.

## **Basic facts and figures about churches**

First, some basic facts and figures. As you will know, there are approximately 16,000 Church of England church buildings in England today. Incidentally, throughout this talk, I'm going to use rounded numbers, as I believe they are easier to remember.

Churches in rural areas are often positioned in rather small communities. Some 500 of England's Anglican churches are in the care of hamlets of average size 80 people. One quarter of our churches are in communities of average size just over 400 people – so this one quarter of churches are found in villages and hamlets which together total only one thirtieth of the population. <sup>1</sup> **MAP OF PEOPLE PER CHURCH**

**BUILDING** This slide shows how many people there are per church in different dioceses – the lighter the colour, the more people per church building. I am not talking about congregations here, but about the entire community. At the bottom of the range is Hereford with fewer than 1000 population per church building – and only a few percent of those are likely to be in church on a given Sunday. At the other extreme, London, with seven and a half thousand per Anglican church. Of course, in an urban area like London, people who are churchgoers have a far larger selection of denominations to choose from, and support, so the comparison is not strictly fair.

Looking at dioceses to some extent smooths the picture out, as there are some large towns in every diocese. What we need is something with more granularity.

**POPULATION BY RURALITY** The data in this table is based on the 2001 census and picks up villages and hamlets wherever they occur. Under the new definition, an urban settlement is one with more than 10,000 people. For smaller settlements than this, there are three types of categorisation – town and fringe as the largest, then

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<sup>1</sup> *How do we keep our parish churches?*, Table 2.6.

village, and then hamlet and isolated dwellings. In the table the last two of these are merged. The categorisation also indicates whether or not the settlement is in a sparse area of England. **SLIDE OF SPARSENESS THEN BACK** You can see how relatively small a population there is per church church in villages. And how, although villages and hamlets hold more than 40% of our churches, they only hold 10% of our population.

Of these 16,000 Church of England churches, roughly one quarter are listed Grade I, one quarter Grade II\*, and one quarter Grade II. At present, we don't quite have a fully accurate central list of listed churches and their grid references. **SLIDE OF LISTED DENSITY** However, as you can see from the slide, we do know that a very large number of listed buildings are in rural dioceses. There are 570 Grade I and II\* listed churches in the diocese of Norwich, 500 in the diocese of Oxford, and some 400 in each of Bath & Wells, St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, Lincoln, and Salisbury.<sup>2</sup>

**COMPARISON SLIDE** It is interesting to compare the two slides. As you can see there is a lot of commonality. The smallest communities are being asked to shoulder a large burden of listed churches.

## Measuring support

We would like to be able to measure how much routine support there is for church buildings. **SLIDE OF ATTENDANCE GRAPH.** That is to say, how many people can be counted on to provide money for the building on an ongoing basis. How are we to measure that number? Is it the number who are there on a typical Sunday – an average of 63 of all ages per church? Or the electoral roll – 76 adults per church? Or those who only turn up for the great festivals. As the slide shows, these numbers are very different. Which figure – if any - best indicates support for the building?

In fact, even the figure for Sunday attendance is misleading. We now know that a good many people only attend services from time to time, and not every Sunday. As a result, the people in church on any particular Sunday doesn't include everyone, so

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<sup>2</sup> Source: *How do we keep our parish churches?*, appendix on listed churches.

understates support. **SLIDE** Different research has given different multipliers to allow for this effect, but not very different. As a rule of thumb, I double the Sunday attendance, to find the number of attenders. Incidentally, I don't know of any research which has looked at whether this pattern applies to tiny churches.

Some people think that occasional attendance, as against every-Sunday attendance, is becoming more common as a way of showing commitment to church. Others think that it may be becoming more common, but is a way of detaching slowly from church life.

So we must treat the next slide cautiously. **SLIDE** The slide refers to two types of community, using the government's new definitions of rurality. The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England has recently categorised all its parishes using this new Defra definition, and they have kindly allowed me to explore the raw data.

As you can see, the table says that there are 280 villages in England which have electoral rolls of ten people or fewer. Another 920 have between 11 and 20. These are small electoral rolls, and there are rather a lot of them. Is this worrying? It all depends how well you think that electoral roll measures support. And what happens next. On the other hand, we should notice that a very good number of village churches have good numbers on the electoral roll, and are probably in robust good health.

## **Redundancy**

A few words on redundancy. The first thing to say is that since about 1970 the Church of England has built more than 500 new church buildings, to accommodate population movements.

However, in the same 35-year period, we have lost something over 1700

One fifth have gone to the Churches Conservation Trust. One fifth of them have been demolished. The remaining three-fifths, rather more than 900, are in alternative use. I believe there has been some discussion about doing a piece of work to find out how well these various uses have worked out in practice.

**MAP OF RATES OF REDUNDANCY** As you can see from the slide, urban dioceses have typically had higher rates of redundancy than mixed and rural dioceses. All the obvious urban dioceses had higher than average rates – London, with its huge number of churches, a long way ahead at 20%; Bristol, Southwark, Manchester at 15% or more; Wakefield, Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool, Blackburn at 11% or more. Some rural dioceses also had more than the average – Lincoln, Salisbury and Canterbury noticeably so at 12 or 13%. Others have had remarkably few – Portsmouth, Derby and Truro all lost fewer than 5% of their church buildings.

What triggers redundancy? I don't really think I know. I doubt it is predictable simply from numerical data, such as attendance figures or electoral roll figures. **SLIDE** An interview survey of rural vicars in about 1990 showed that nearly two thirds felt it was impossible to give precise numbers for the minimum number of people to keep a church going. As you can see, some of them thought you could keep going with five or less. One vicar commented about a particular church, that it 'survived with two or three people for quite a long time. Some younger families moved in and the church revived.' Of those clergy who did make an estimate for minimum numbers, half said that ten attendees at church would be sufficient or more than sufficient.

The current rate of loss is about twenty-five per year. It is notable that at least two Bishops, Lincoln and Norwich, have – I believe – said they are not in favour of any more redundancies.

There have, of course, been a number of diocesan reviews which have led to proposals for redundancy, including, not long ago, one here at York. A review has also recently taken place in Chichester, and following a model pioneered in Manchester in the mid to late 1990s, English Heritage have been actively working with the diocese to ensure it takes historic buildings into account at an early stage.

## **Summary**

In summary, there are clear differences between rural churches both in terms of the size of population who might support each church, and the proportion of churches listed. Although there are various measures of attendance, it is difficult to establish

what level of support a particular church building normally receives, and redundancy can probably not easily be predicted on a mechanical basis from numerical data alone.

## RURAL CHURCHES

### Immigration

Rural immigration is running at a net rate of about one million people per decade. It can be very patchy within a given area, depending on the build of new homes. So adjacent villages and towns can have very different population trends.

Contrary to myth, only about one in seven of those moving into rural areas are over the age of 65, though I suspect they hunt out the villages rather than the market towns, so are noticed more. Given the age mix and relative wealth of the incomers, and the tendency of young people to leave rural areas in search of work and housing, in the immortal words of one government document 'the countryside is becoming more middle-aged and middle-class'.<sup>3</sup>

**MAP OF DIOCESAN POPULATION CHANGE** The effect of immigration can be seen in the population of changes of dioceses over the last twenty years. Of course, there is tremendous regional variation, with, for example, the North East having virtually no net immigration, and some dioceses actually shrinking in numbers.<sup>4</sup> So the diocese of Truro gained 16%, Hereford 20%, Gloucester 12% - whilst Carlisle stayed the same, and Newcastle lost 2%.

What does rural immigration mean for the future of church buildings? I wish I knew! Will mobile incomers provide financial support when the church building needs their help? What obligation will they feel towards the building – knowing that they may move on in a few years time. Are rural churches going to move away from a community model towards a gathered model of church thus losing historic support? Who can tell?

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<sup>3</sup> *State of Countryside* 2005, 126.

<sup>4</sup> *State of Countryside* 2004, Figure G.

There is some good news. A 1990 survey asked rural people who did not attend church how important it was for a parish to have its own church building, and 83% of them said it was important. In response to another questions, whether a church should be closed if the numbers attending it became small, only 31% said that it should, and nearly half of those qualified their agreement, indicating it was a shame or a last resort.<sup>5</sup>

A word on second homes and holiday homes. They can be an issue. Over rural England as a whole the proportion is only 2%,<sup>6</sup> but in some places there are hotspots **MAP OF SECOND HOME HOTSPOTS** which create great difficulties for church life.

## People

Let's now look at the people who support rural churches.

**GRAPH OF USUAL SUNDAY ATTENDANCE.** As we have already discussed, we have no way of measuring routine support for a church building, and these numbers certainly underestimate this. But the trend is important.

This trend is also seen in all sorts of ways of measuring commitment – for example confirmations, baptisms, electoral roll and attendance at festivals. **SLIDE.** *[This slide was omitted from the talk as given.]*

What of the age profile of these rural congregations? Here the statistical evidence is rather lacking, though there is no lack of anecdotal evidence. What data I have found confirms that deeply rural congregations are older than average, and suggests they are not renewing themselves, so are becoming older. If so this is serious.

In contrast, I do have the feeling Friends groups are on the up and up, though I cannot prove it. With typical British pragmatism, we seem to have invented ourselves a

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<sup>5</sup> Rural Church Project: The Rural Church: Vol IV: The Views of Rural Parishioners, 1990, Table 4.2.21 and 4.2.27.

<sup>6</sup> *State of Countryside*, 2005.

reasonably effective way of encouraging support for the church building without religious commitment. Those Friends Groups registered with the charity commission typically raise income of a few thousand pounds per year. I do not know whether this is typical of all the others out there – if so, it is a useful extra sum to have for looking after the fabric.

There is at least one other route by which a community can contribute financially to its church buildings. This is for the parish council to give a grant for maintenance of the church. This seems to be fairly common for churchyards, much less so for churches. Why should this be? With the increased government focus on the effectiveness of parish councils, perhaps this is something which should be floated onto the agenda. In my view, anything which gives more options for cross-fertilisation of people, money and use of the buildings is surely to be welcomed.

One pressure faced by rural churches is the reduction in the number of stipendiary – that is, paid – clergy. As you will know, a rural clergyman today, normally looks after more than one parish. **HEREFORD SLIDE**. Partly this sharing of churches is due to an overall drop in the number of clergy, partly due to a deliberate policy to focus on urban areas. This slide shows the stipendiary clergy in the diocese of Hereford in 1956. There are about 210 of them. Now look at the distribution in 1986. The number has dropped, down by about one third, and there has been a pulling in of the available resource into the city. And what has happened since then. Well, there are 144 dots on the right hand slide, representing 1986. To get to today's figure, take another fifty dots off the map.

All this change within one churchgoer's lifetime. As it has been said, there is a parson shaped hole at the centre of every parish. The continued reduction in clergy numbers poses a real risk in those areas which have not fully accommodated lay ministry.

## **Building**

Given all this, what is the condition of the buildings? There is no equivalent of the Buildings at Risk register for churches, so it is difficult to be sure.

However – the Church of England have recently asked all parishes to estimate the repair bill for their buildings. The responses will largely have been based on quinquennial inspections. These figures have recently been published, summarised by diocese. It turns out that the total outstanding repair bill is about £370m. For rural churches is about £163m, averaging around £20,000 per rural church. The outstanding repair figures are rather higher for urban churches, because of their big Victorian bangers.

**SLIDE DIAGRAM OF POSSIBLE FIVE YEAR CYCLE** Is this good news? First, we must ask, what would we hope to find. As you will know, each church is inspected once every five years. So once every five years it is told formally of all the repair needs which have accumulated over the previous five years. Let us suppose that it had cleared the previous set of repairs. Then at that moment in time it will have a backlog of five years. That backlog will stay with it while the congregation plans and fundraises. Let us assume that it takes three years to get underway, and that the work is spread over a couple of years. Then during the first three years of this cycle, if we look at their backlog, it will be five years worth of repairs. For the final two years of the cycle it will be dropping down to zero.

Now the questionnaire could arrive at any time during this cycle. On average, if you ask a large number of churches, it will be scattered over different points of the cycle. If all churches behave with this cycle, then the average backlog of repairs will be a shade under four years.

Of course, if the church is behind with everything, and takes many years to clear its repairs, or if it isn't keeping up, then the average backlog will be higher – seven years say, or ten.

Now the total average spend on repairing churches is about £100m, per year. So this means that there is – on average – a four year backlog. It is the same backlog for rural as for urban dioceses.

This seems to me to be rather good news, and show that on average churches are keeping up with repairs, which they only hear about on a five-yearly basis. Of course any average is made up of poor and good performers, and more research is needed on individual buildings. For all that, the news is good rather than bad.

There is, I think some even better news. Of the total outstanding repairs figure of £370m, some fifty million is for just eighteen specific buildings, averaging nearly 3 million each. Why is this good news – well, it is always nice when problems are localised and identifiable.

We can put the size of the outstanding repair bill into bands. **TWO SLIDES** This slide deals with villages and hamlets in the less sparse areas of the countryside. The slide shows that approximately 3,400 parishes have outstanding repairs below £50k, totalling about £45m.. Only about 500 churches are in the top bands of outstanding repairs, more than £50k, and these total about £60m.

The next **SLIDE** deals with churches in urban areas – there are many more churches with big repair bills. Perhaps we need to dwell on the fact that there are thousands of village churches with relatively small repair needs, but also relatively small congregations. What should this mean for our system of grants?

Finally how many really worrying cases there might be – where a tiny congregation faced a huge bill? The data suggests that, over the whole country, there were only 21 village churches with an electoral roll of ten or fewer people which had outstanding repairs of more than £50,000 to fix. The average cost was around £100k.

All this assumes that the figures mean what they say. That is, that parishes understood the question, and answered it accurately. I do have some concerns. Later on today we may hear about the Church Needs Survey, which may help address this question.

It is worth pointing out, whilst on the subject of repairs, that Rochester consistently comes in as the diocese having to spend least per church building, and that is probably because for the last fifty years they have had a savings scheme which encourages timely repairs. Here is living proof that a stitch in time saves nine. Would it be worth considering extending such a scheme nationally, perhaps with sticks and carrots, to encourage more churches to plan for their repair costs.

*[The following section was not delivered at the talk in York*

*We can now calculate how much it would cost the government to pay for the maintenance of all rural churches – all 9,000 odd of them, including those in country towns. This isn't going to happen, but it's fun to dream. I believe that at first this would cost around £40m per year. But if the experience of the CCT and Rochester are anything to go by, this would drop over time, perhaps to something like £30m per year or less. This can be compared to the £150m per year currently being given to the Post Office to keep rural outlets open. A lump sum of £1bn might do the trick.*

*This isn't going to happen – is it? – and anyway would we want to remove responsibility from local folk? An alternative would be to charge each church a fixed amount each year, paid into a central pot, which would be used for all repairs. The pot would be heavily subsidised by the government. This is a sort of subsidised insurance scheme. For example, if each church paid in two thousand pounds per year, the government might have to stump up £20m per year at first, perhaps later dropping to £10m. Could churches easily afford two thousand pounds? Well, some certainly couldn't. They might have to be treated as special cases, or encouraged and helped do some major fund-raising to set up a trust fund.*

*Alternatively, we could set up a savings scheme, rather like the Rochester scheme. Government could perhaps subsidise the scheme. For example, if government gave soft loans for up to ten years, and if half of all repairs to rural churches were done using such loans, then this would cost the government of the order of £5m per year.*

*I must emphasise that all these figures are for rural churches only. They become significantly larger if urban churches are included, because this not only doubles the number of buildings, but each of them tends to cost rather more to maintain.]*

### **The use of buildings, facilities in buildings,**

So how are these buildings to be used? I think that Paula will be saying a good deal about this, so I just want to touch on two points.

The first is church tourism. And I will get straight to the point. From the evidence I have seen, I think it unlikely that the average church will receive more than 40 visitors

a week. This is nice to have, but doesn't have much of an impact on finances. It is probably more useful in building community involvement. We do need to set our expectations seriously.

We also need to think whether churches are contributing a lot more to tourism simply by being there and being attractive – and if so, are they getting a fair return for this contribution to landscape value.

We also perhaps need to grasp the nettle of locked churches. **MAP OF HEREFORDSHIRE CHURCHES** The map is from a website which deserves to be better known, which shows whether churches are locked. This is for the county of Hereford. The green dots are the unlocked churches. You will see that a high proportion are unlocked. Such maps are available for nearly 20 counties. And here are the associated statistics. **SLIDE**. At the bottom are the counties with the most locked churches. The average is 56% of churches open. I wonder what one would need to do to raise that number – and would it be worth the effort?

*[The following section was not delivered at the talk in York.*

*The second topic I want merely to touch on is the use of church buildings for community purposes.*

*A recent survey in the diocese of Gloucester highlighted some of the issues with the everyday use of rural churches. The **SLIDE** shows the constraints mentioned by PCCs for not having wider use of their building. Notice that layout and lack of space / pews are almost identical categories. Facilities and kitchen facilities are another pair. Clearly, these PCCS feel that the layout and lack of facilities in their building are holding them back. We don't have an up to date survey of current facilities, but one carried out in 1994 showed that only one quarter of rural churches had an accessible toilet. That was the average figure – in hamlets of fewer than 200 people, it was only nine percent. Fewer than half the churches had facilities for hot drinks. There was a similar lack of space for social gathering at the back of the church.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> *How do we keep our parish churches?*

*My questions are these. What further encouragement, if any, do the various secular agencies need in this area. Much is happening in some places – Hereford for example - do we need to accelerate that process? Or will it just happen? And secondly, where is the money to come from to pay for these facilities?]*

## **So what?**

So what? All indicators of commitment are down, but are hard to interpret, and we do not know enough to be able to predict what will happen next. I doubt we ever will. One possibility is that attendance at public worship will continue to drift down, and that in rural areas parents of children and teenagers will drive to the nearest big church – of which there are plenty – thus hastening the decline of very small churches. I don't know. But whatever happens, to encourage community use, all churches will need a supportive environment and good leadership. And very small churches will also need a helping hand. I look forward to hearing during the course of today how these things are already being provided.

Let me finish by quoting a recent email posted by a rural vicar to a discussion group. I have made a couple of changes to preserve anonymity.

Rejoice with me! At long last I have had a breakthrough - one of my PCCs tonight agreed (albeit with protests and a strong vote against) to make a small move towards the 21st century by agreeing to install a loo! That may sound small beer to some of you, but in this very traditional rural part of the world it is a big thing. It will be the first of my [more than six] churches to have such a facility (although one has a hall next door and another a school both of which allow us access to their facilities). Bear in mind that only three of my churches has water laid on and another is to have water in the near future.

Objections to the proposal included a number of hoary ones including "There's been a church here for 1,000 years without a loo - why should we need one now?" and an absolute objection to having a loo inside the

church. I pointed out that if we wanted to put one outside, then it would have to be a mock gothic stone affair if it was to have any chance of being approved (especially as the church is grade 2 \*). The major objection, though, was to cost.

And he finishes.

Whatever will this new-fangled Rector introduce next?