

# *How do we keep our* PARISH CHURCHES?

Trevor Cooper

with speeches by

the Rt Hon & Rt Revd Richard Chartres, Bishop of London

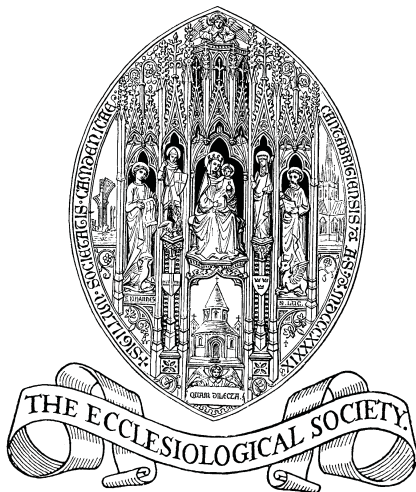
and

Dr Simon Thurley, Chief Executive, English Heritage

The Ecclesiological Society • 2004

John Piper: *Why do you suppose that we all like churches so much?*

John Betjeman: *Because they're there whatever happens, aren't they?\**



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\*Quoted by Stephen Friar in the introduction to his *Sutton Companion to Churches*, 2nd edn (Stroud, 2003, ISBN 0750934743)

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First published 2004 by  
The Ecclesiological Society  
c/o The Society of Antiquaries of London  
Burlington House  
Piccadilly  
London W1V 0HS

www.ecclsoc.org

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Printed in Great Britain by Pennine Printing Services Ltd, Ripponden, West Yorkshire.

ISBN 0 946823 16 2

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**Thanks** The Ecclesiological Society is grateful to the Rt Hon and Rt Revd Richard Chartres and Dr Simon Thurley for permission to publish their speeches, given in September 2003. Inclusion should not be taken to imply that either of them necessarily agree with the other contents of this publication.

The **Ecclesiological Society** is the society for all those who love churches. It was founded in 1879, acting as a successor to the Cambridge Camden Society of 1839. The Society has a lively programme, including lectures, an annual conference, and visits to a range of locations in Great Britain. Members receive the Society's periodical, *Ecclesiology Today*, three times a year. From time to time the Society publishes monographs, of which this volume is an example. Membership is open to all, and new members are always welcome. For further details, see our website, or write to us at PO Box 287, New Malden, KT3 4YT.

### Cover illustrations

**Front cover** The front cover shows **All Saints, Hereford**. This medieval building, listed Grade II\*, is a dominant presence in the townscape, the church spire and the cathedral facing each other down Broad Street. The church preserves important furnishings, including a fine set of stalls with misericords. The interior has undergone a dramatic and exciting conversion, introducing a restaurant at the western end and in a gallery, but the new elements not only respect the historic fabric and furnishings, but also maintain the sense of a building still dedicated for worship. The cover photograph looks south across the nave, with the restaurant gallery above. (RRA Architects <<http://rra-arch.com>> (website includes other photographs of the church); cover photograph by kind permission of Martine Hamilton Knight <[www.builtvision.co.uk](http://www.builtvision.co.uk)>.)

**Rear cover** The two illustrations on the first row of the rear cover are of the **Church of the Good Shepherd, Carshalton Beeches**, south London. This 1930 building, which is Grade II listed, was designed by Martin Travers and T. F. W. Grant in the style of a Spanish mission chapel. Betjeman had a strong affection for it, one of his poems referring to 'the Travers baroque lime-washed in light'. This is a lively and energetic church, and to provide room for its wide range of activities it has added an extension whose style and detailing match the original work, as can be seen from the first photograph. Inside there is a lobby/lounge (second photograph), small garden courtyard (glimpsed in the second photograph), kitchen, toilets, chapel, and a range of meeting rooms. (Architect: Carden & Godfrey; photographs by kind permission of the church.)

On the second and third row are three church buildings described on page 42: **Holy Trinity, Haddenham**, new meeting room screened off in the north aisle (by kind permission of Dr Digi); **St Aidan's, Cleethorpes**, computer training room on an upper storey (by kind permission of the Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber); two photos of **St Paul's, Walsall** (now **The Crossing**), showing retail outlets on the ground floor level and the 'Upper Room' worship area (by kind permission of the church).

# How do we keep our parish churches?

## Summary

*The following is a summary of 'How do we keep our parish churches?', which will be found in full on page 13. The author, Trevor Cooper, is currently Chairman of the Council of the Ecclesiological Society, but his views should not be taken to represent those of the Society or its officers.*

**T**HERE ARE ABOUT 16,000 CHURCH OF ENGLAND churches – more churches than petrol stations. More than 12,000 are listed, with two-thirds of these being in the highest grades, Grade I or II\*. This is by far the largest estate of listed buildings in the country.

This huge portfolio of buildings is kept by the efforts of church congregations: in essence small, independent, groups of volunteers. Between them they have been spending more than £80m a year on repairs, only about £30m of which has come from grants – the remainder is from their own pockets or their efforts at fund-raising. How well does this work? And will it – can it – continue?

A word of explanation. This article is about Church of England (CoE) churches, so the word 'church' will be used to refer to Anglican parish churches, parochial chapels, mission churches, etc. in England. Greater churches, such as abbeys and cathedrals, fall outside our scope, as do churches of other denominations.

Some CoE congregations are thriving. In 2001 some 2,600 parishes (20%) had over one hundred adults attending Sunday services. On the other hand, roughly 800 parishes (6%) had ten adults or fewer worshipping on Sunday, representing an estimated 1,000 church buildings (there are five church buildings for every four parishes).

The CoE continues to plant new churches, and provide church buildings for growing centres of population, and in the last thirty years approximately 530 new churches have been built. However, in common with almost all Christian denominations, Sunday attendance has been falling significantly. During the same thirty-year period, all-age attendance at CoE churches has dropped by about 40%, though the overall number of church buildings has been cut by much less than a tenth. The option taken by other networks, such as pubs and banks, of simply closing under-used buildings is not so easily available to the CoE.

In one diocese, for which we happen to have figures, only 37% of church seats are used on a Sunday. If this is typical, then across the board the CoE could remove four thousand church buildings from use, one quarter of its stock, and its average usage of seats on a typical Sunday would still only rise to about 50%. This is, of course, a grossly over-simplified calculation, but it gives some measure of the extent to which the CoE has more buildings than it needs to house its regular Sunday worshippers.

Many church buildings serve very thin populations. Almost two-thirds of those attending church (61%) do so

in just one fifth (21%) of church buildings. Given that the location of approximately two-thirds of churches was decided before the Industrial Revolution, it is not surprising that many church buildings today are not close to centres of population. The 2000 smallest rural parishes have an average population of about 200 people each, so that 12% of church buildings are today in communities with less than 1% of the population.

In urban areas, the population served by each church building can be much greater, but levels of churchgoing are lower, so that inner city and city centre churches have average levels of support only two or three times greater than rural areas, despite their much larger and more expensive buildings.

Despite these difficulties, CoE congregations spend about £80m per year on repairs, an average expenditure of about £5,000 per parish church per year. Is this enough? The evidence is weak, but may indicate that there is currently a degree of underspend, though many churches overall are probably in reasonable or good condition. More research is needed on this important topic.

Although the average spend on repairs each year is approximately £5,000 per church, in 2001 nearly four fifths of churches either spent nothing at all or spent less than £5,000. Only 2% of churches spent more than £50,000 in that year. It is this very small number of high-spending churches in any particular year who raise the average to £5,000 per church. Any one church may go for years on end without needing to spend much on repairs. This pattern of occasional, unpredictable, very expensive events must be difficult for small voluntary organizations (congregations) to handle: should they hire a youth worker, or put aside money for unknown future repairs which may never be needed?

Of the £80m spent on repairs, more than half (60%), representing some £50m per year, is found by parishes themselves, rather than from grants. State funding is mainly available in the form of VAT refunds and repair grants. English Heritage/Heritage Lottery Fund dominate the field, granting £21m in the most recent full year. Their grants are oversubscribed by a factor of about two. Any withdrawal by these bodies would have a major impact.

The CoE is not rich; indeed, many dioceses are in difficult financial circumstances. How do parishes find the money for their share of repairs? As expected, parish incomes differ enormously. About 1,500 parishes have unrestricted ordinary income of less than £5,000 per annum. For these parishes, and for many others, paying large repair bills from income is not possible.

In order to organise large repairs, congregations need to be able to raise money directly, to organise themselves to apply for grants – not made easier by the variety of application methods – and to manage the repairs. One limiting factor is therefore organisational capacity, which is less likely to be found in smaller congregations.

Looking ahead, the available information suggests a rate of closure ('redundancy') of at least 60 churches per year on average for the foreseeable future – at least equal to the previous highest rate, seen for a few years only in the 1980s. Many of these new redundancies will be buildings of the highest quality. With its grant reduced by 5% in real terms, the Churches Conservation Trust, which was set up to preserve such buildings, will be unable to absorb them.

More positively, there is evidence (mostly anecdotal) that congregations are increasingly receiving support of one type or another, as they continue to reach into their wider communities, though some of these activities are less practicable for smaller congregations.

For example, many church buildings are used for purposes other than worship, to provide income or as a means of serving the community. A majority of the general public support this type of use. Indeed, more than eight million people say they have been to a concert or similar event in a church or other place of worship in the past year, about the same as attendance at West End theatres by UK residents. One half (49%) of rural church buildings (about 4,000) host such events (note that most rural churches do not have church halls). Congregations are adding facilities to church buildings, but it is a slow process: at the current rate, it will be the end of this century before all rural churches have toilets. Urban churches have better facilities.

Church volunteers of all denominations make a very large contribution – probably worth between £500m and £750m per year – to community activity, much of which benefits those who do not attend church services.

Buildings are an integral part of this activity, but it is not clear the extent to which historic church buildings benefit from the available funding streams. Some churches, particularly in urban areas, are converting their premises in active support of local regeneration.

Another source of support is tourism, driven by the growing interest in heritage. It seems likely that church buildings play both a direct and a supporting role in the tourism industry, and this may have significant economic value, though no-one has yet carried out the necessary analysis. However churches are probably not capturing their fair share of the value they are generating.

Friends groups can also lend support to church buildings. About 3% of churches have set up separate Friends groups, and the number is increasing. There is no full-time national officer for church tourism or for Friends groups.

The Government has not articulated an explicit policy towards church buildings, but it does place value on the historic environment in general, especially when utilised for social and economic well-being. Public opinion values church

buildings: in a recent poll, six out of ten people (63%) said that they would be concerned if their local church or chapel were no longer there, and four out of ten (42%) thought the government should support the buildings.

Overall, there may be room for developing the partnership between government in all its aspects and religious groups, including the CoE. For example, listed church buildings both contribute to tourism and (along with unlisted ones) provide the base for community activity and the creation of 'social capital'; these are important aspects of government policy. Unfortunately, however, it is the church buildings with the smallest congregations which are most at risk, and would also find it hardest to develop new partnerships.

It is not the purpose of this paper to make recommendations, but it is suggested that focused research is needed to understand some specific issues better. Additionally several ways to help churches have emerged directly from the facts presented here. Most of these require funding, though in some cases the amounts are relatively small.

However, these suggestions alone are by no means sufficient to resolve all the issues. Indeed, my personal view is that there is a real risk of large-scale church closure in the medium term, and we should begin now to explore new approaches to avoiding redundancy, and new ways of handling it when it occurs. If we wait, I fear we may be taken by surprise.

Recently the CoE agreed a significant policy statement, *A Future for Church Buildings*, which will lead to specific proposals for action. In the foreword of this policy statement the Bishop of London alludes to 'a new way forward'. The time is surely ripe.

**Eight million people have been to a concert or similar event in a church or other place of worship in the past year, about the same as attendance at West End theatres by UK residents**