



ENGLISH HERITAGE

**CHURCHES AND CLOSURE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND  
A Summary Report**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1) Since 1969, 1795 closure schemes have been made. This represents approximately 11% of the Anglican building stock. However, of these 1280 were made between 1969 and 1989; by contrast 514 have been made in the last 20 years.
- 2) In the last twenty years the trends in closure have changed. In the 1970s and 80s the average number of closures was 79 and 49 respectively. In the 1990s the average number of churches closed was 28, and since 1999 this figure has fallen again so that now the average figure is just less than 24.
- 3) For over half of those buildings closed a new active use is found for them.
- 4) Future options which most obviously have a community, other Christian or cultural dimension account for 46% of closed buildings, with 27% vested (with CCT or other body) and 27% for more commercial uses (here including residential, office or shopping, storage and light industrial).
- 5) Since 1969 just over a third of all closed churches are highly graded listed buildings (either grade I or II\* ); a quarter are grade II; Just over a third are unlisted. However, since 1989 9% of closed churches have been grade I, 14% Grade II\*, 35% grade II and 42% unlisted, demonstrating a trend away from closing highly listed buildings.
- 6) One fifth of all closed churches have been demolished, although three-quarters of these were unlisted, indicating that listed status is an effective protection mechanism in preventing complete loss. Almost three-quarters of these took place within 20 years of the implementation of the Pastoral Measure.

## INTRODUCTION

The Church of England carries a significant burden of responsibility with regard the management of a large estate of church buildings, the majority of which are designated on the statutory list.

Changing requirements in the provision for worship is a feature of the combination of population and religious belief. Examples of the ebbs and flows of church provision can be found throughout history. Some periods have been characterised by huge explosions in church building – the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century might be thus described. The great building boom of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was as a result of the establishment and formalisation of the parish system still used today in combination with the approach to rebuilding introduced by the Norman invasion. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century acts of toleration and ultimately emancipation enabled the construction of places of worship for previously illegal Christian doctrines in England. Population expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was significant and urban centres experienced enormous and rapid growth. This dual circumstance of an increase in sheer number of people and the competition in providing for their souls that resulted from the growth in dissenting chapels galvanised the Anglican Church into a spate of church building. Much of this expansion therefore was concentrated on urban centres.

Closure is equally not a new or isolated phenomenon. Although selected areas suffered rural depopulation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century resulting in the abandonment of a few church buildings, a more significant wave of closures occurred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The causes of these abandoned buildings might have some familiar resonances for today. It has been suggested that financial burdens were one significant cause of closure. In essence the burden on the tithe paying community became so large that the stipend for the rector could no longer be covered. The modern equivalent of course is perhaps maintaining the parish share. Ultimately this was caused by a reduction in the number of parishioners. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century this was a result of depopulation across the board; now this might instead be the result of a reduction in the worshipping population rather than the population itself, but the outcome, of too few people attempting to maintain a church as place of mission arguably has some resonance. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there is more evidence that long periods of neglect resulting in decaying buildings was a factor in the decision to abandon or demolish. In other areas closure was as the result of the abandonment of entire settlements. By 1600, for example, Norfolk had lost about 16% of its parish churches.<sup>1</sup> Then as now perhaps, migration, was the most significant factor affecting the relationship between a parish church and its community.

The difference between this history of peaks and troughs in the history of closure or abandonment and the present day is the future of the church buildings. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a significant proportion of those buildings that were left have now disappeared. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century (since 1969 anyway) demolition affects about 1/5<sup>th</sup> of closed buildings and some sort of future use is found for the rest, this process has been the result of more formalised procedures for making informed decisions about closing church buildings and setting their future. An analysis of this is set out in more detail below.

Whilst in some parts of the country closure of churches may be lower now than in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, overall it is generally acknowledged that rate of closure in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was cause for concern. This concern is not simply about the number of churches that are closing but the related issue of what to do with them in a society

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<sup>1</sup> R. Morris *Churches in the Landscape*, 1989.

that no longer finds total loss acceptable. Arguably current cultural attitudes towards the value of these buildings have changed more drastically than the number of closures. As a result of this issue of closure has taken on a particular resonance in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## SCOPE OF REPORT

The issue of church closure is and long has been a controversial one. In 1976 Marcus Binney stated that 'unless positive steps are taken there is real danger that the second half of the twentieth century will be remembered as an age of destruction of religious art and architecture comparable to the ravages of the Reformation and the Civil War...'.<sup>2</sup>

Binney's aim was to provoke, but it raises a real question about the debate surrounding church closure. The nature of the debate about closure tends towards the alarmist. The question is not – is church closure an issue – it demonstrably is – the questions may be - how large an issue is closure within the context of other risks to the significance of church buildings. This can only be fully understood if closure is set within a context of the movement of faith communities, the impact of migration and demographic trends. At its simplest people move faster than buildings and therefore the impact of demographic trends on the historic environment will always exist. The broader picture would analyse closure, therefore, within the context of new buildings as well. The Church of England opens as well as closes churches and together these trends would provide a fuller picture of the issues and the state of the Church.

This brief report does not attempt to elucidate this broader context but an awareness of it is essential.

Equally English Heritage has an interest in understanding the extent of closure (how big an issue is it?) and the impact of closure (how does closure affect the special characteristics of church buildings?). The corollary of this is of course, what can be done to mitigate against this impact. This issue is not the subject of this report.

The following analysis instead attempts to set out the facts of the closure issue with regard to those church buildings owned by the Church of England in order to provide a basis for an evaluation of the extent of closure question.<sup>3</sup>

Closure does not uniquely affect the Church of England. In fact there is some evidence to suggest that closure is a more significant issue for some other Christian denominations.<sup>4</sup> However there are two reasons for focusing on the Church of England in the first instance.

First of all the Church of England has a large estate which constitutes not only by far the largest responsibility compared to any other faith group, but also because collectively this estate accounts for a significant proportion of buildings listed as of special interest and therefore requiring greater protection from change and alteration.

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Binney and Peter Burman, *Change and Decay: the future of our churches*, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> This report is wholly dependent upon the generosity and assistance of staff at the Church Commissioners in providing access to their data set.

<sup>4</sup> See for example P. Brierley *Religious Trends* 5, 2005 which suggests that the Methodist Church has experienced a more dramatic impact from closure than either the Anglicans or indeed the other non conformist denominations.

Specifically the Anglican Church's estate accounts for 45% of all grade 1 listed buildings in England and about 20% of all grade II and II\* buildings. This is unmatched by any other single asset type or single estate owner in the country.

Secondly, the Church of England has a rigorous process in place that determines whether or not a church should be closed. The Pastoral Measure requires the Commissioner in most cases to seek a suitable alternative use. If one cannot be found, the Commissioners then have to decide, following the advice of the statutory advisors, between the alternatives of preservation by vesting in the CCT or demolition. This takes place in the context of wide public consultations and referral, in certain contested demolition cases, to the Secretary of State on whether or not s(he) wishes to hold a non-statutory public inquiry.

In the late 1950s a commission led by Lord Bridges reported on the state of church closure after a number of high profile cases. As a result closure was no longer possible through extant legislation but instead a new Measure was introduced by the General Synod of the Church of England to deal exclusively with the issues of pastoral reorganisation and closure. The Pastoral Measure 1968 enabled greater flexibility in the range of options available for re-use, set up an advisory board to inform the process of closure and re-use and set up a Fund into which churches of particular merit and for which no alternative use could be found, could be vested for preservation.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand therefore the Measure resulted from recognition of the fact that closure was a significant issue and on the other it acknowledged that the future of the buildings was best served by enhancing the options for alternative use. This system for closure was augmented by the revised Pastoral Measure 1983.<sup>6</sup> It is worth commenting that this system is concerned with the future of the parish as a whole rather than exclusively the church building.

This system has resulted in the Church Commissioners, who are responsible for settling the future of closed churches, holding fairly comprehensive data on their history of church closure since the first year of operation of the Measure (i.e.:1969) and on the future uses to which their buildings have been put. This centralised resource is not matched in any other denomination at this time.

This report has primarily been produced in order to providing supporting information for the Heritage at Risk agenda which will launch with a focus on Places of Worship in July 2010. It forms a preliminary part of an anticipated larger project on closure in churches and chapels across the exempt denominations.

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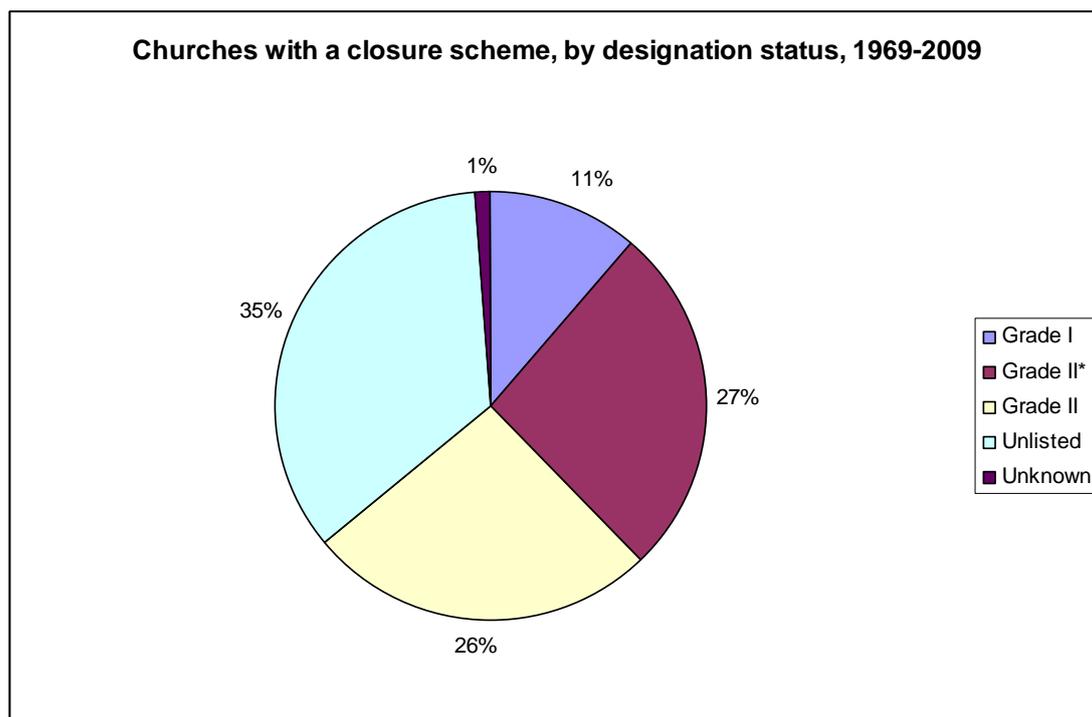
<sup>5</sup> Redundant Churches Fund, since 1994 known as the Churches Conservation Trust.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Bianco and Linda Monckton in *Archaeological Resource Management in the UK*, 2006.

## EVIDENCE OF CLOSURE SINCE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PASTORAL MEASURE

### Total Number of Closures

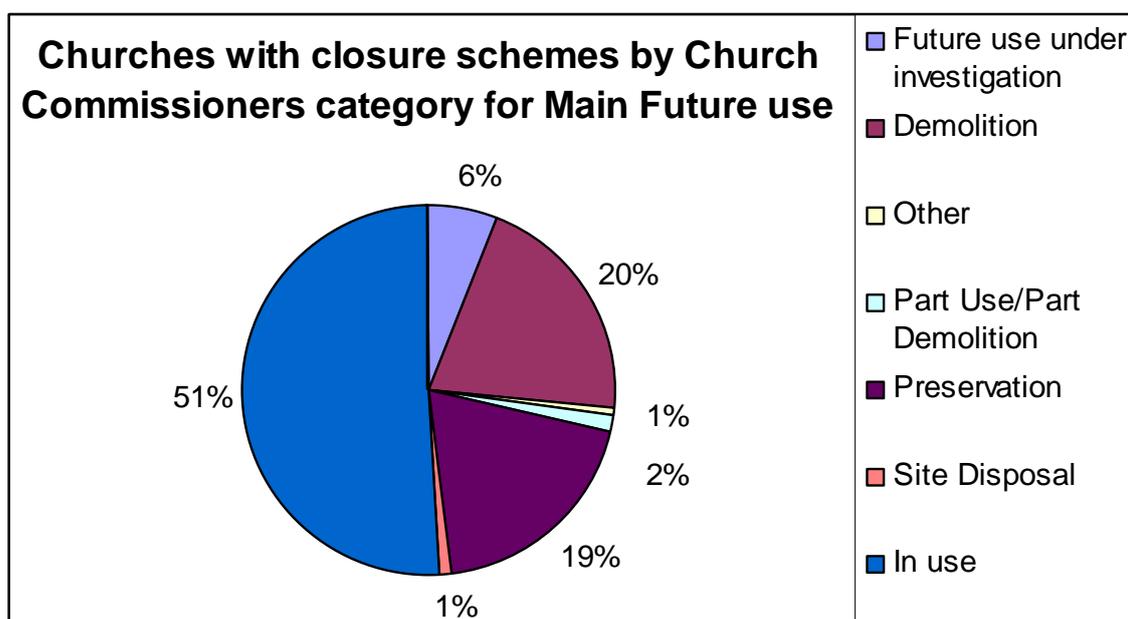
- 1) Since 1969, 1795 closure schemes have been made.<sup>7</sup> This represents approximately 11% of the Anglican building stock.
- 2) Of those buildings closed the following can be said with regard to their listed status:
  - i) 11% of these closures affected grade 1 churches
  - ii) 26.5% of these closures affected grade II\* churches
  - iii) 26% of these closures affected grade II churches
  - iv) 35% of these closures affected unlisted churches
- 3) One could slightly simplify this to say that
  - i) Just over a third of all closed churches are highly graded listed buildings (either grade I or II\* )
  - ii) A quarter are grade II
  - iii) Just over a third are unlisted.



<sup>7</sup> Note this is schemes made which is not identical to closures that have happened it is based on the number of closure schemes in process not closures that have been made effective – the advantage of this is accuracy of number of cases that have been initiated in any one year.

- 4) Three facts emerge from this – <sup>8</sup>
- There is not a close correlation between unlisted status and closure.
  - Closure is a real risk for listed as well as unlisted buildings.
  - Listed status is not a factor which prohibits closure.
- 5) Most significantly, however if the last twenty years are considered the figures are that since 1989 only 9% of closed churches have been grade I, 14% Grade II\*, 35% grade II and 42% unlisted.

### What happens to closed church buildings?



The majority of closed churches have a future use secured. This future use may change over time. The Commissioners record includes information on the successive uses of a church building, although an analysis of this has not been attempted here. The below evidence is based on the latest use authorised.

Breakdown of main future use <sup>9</sup>: this represents the outcomes of closure schemes as they stand at present for all closed churches. This is based on the high-level categories used by the Commissioners that identify the kind of scheme in operation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Although see trends in closure and designation status below.

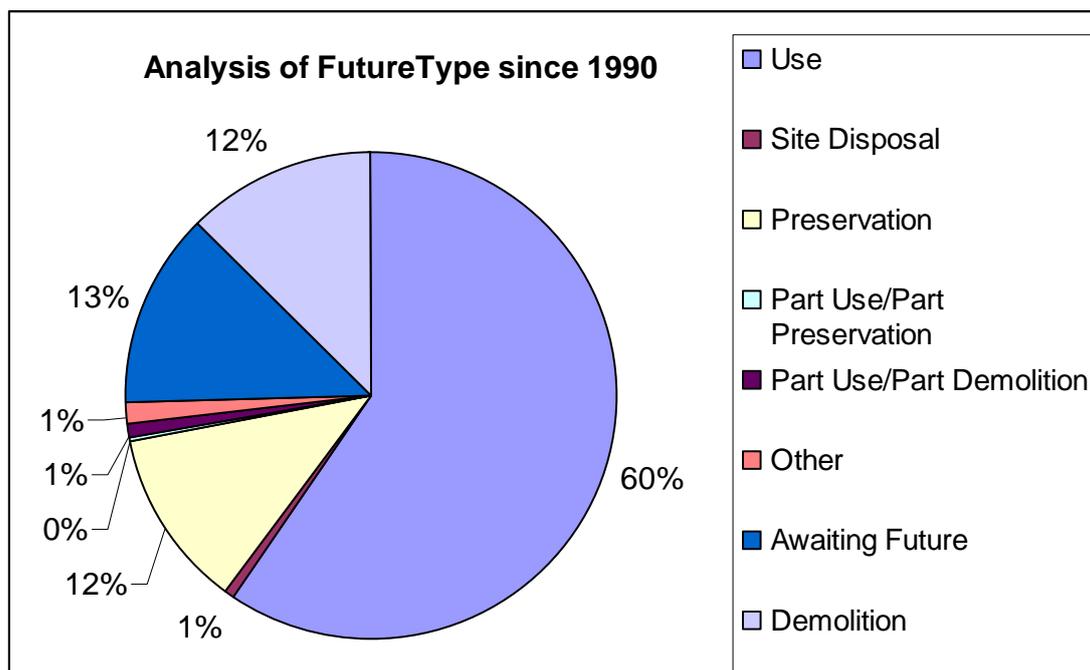
<sup>9</sup> Please note the following – ‘preservation’ in this case includes all churches preserved *and* those that are part use and part preserved (which accounts for an almost negligible amount). There has been at this time no detailed assessment of what part use/part demolition means in individual cases and therefore it is retained in this chart in line with the categories used by the Church Commissioners in assigned main future use.

<sup>10</sup> To note: Site disposal means disposal for sites where the church was demolished under the Pastoral Measure rather than being received as a site.

From this one might extrapolate the following:

- 1) For over half of those buildings closed a new active use is found for them (a breakdown of this is provided below)
- 2) 20% of all closed churches are demolished
- 3) Approximately one fifth of all closed churches for which no suitable use could be found have been preserved (nearly all in the CCT)

A similar analysis of what has happened to closed buildings since 1990 reveals the following:



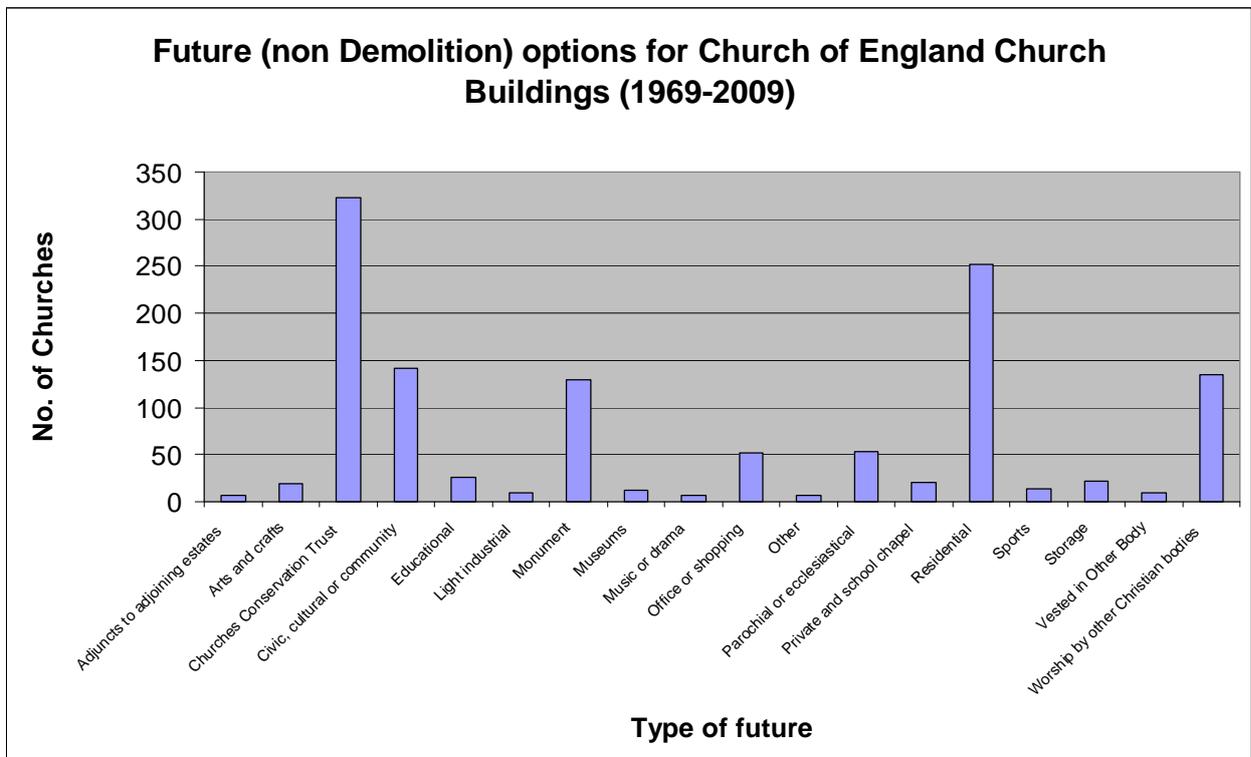
- 4) For 60% closed a new active use is found for them
- 5) 12% of all closed churches are demolished
- 6) 12% of all closed churches have been preserved
- 7) However bearing in mind that almost three-quarters of all demolitions occurred in the first 20 years the proportion of buildings for which a future use is now found is significantly higher.
- 8) Therefore the proportion of churches for which a new use is found has been higher over the last 20 years.

#### **What are the options for closed parish churches at the current time?**

The Church Commissioners must first seek to find an alternative use for a church building that is closed. If that is not achievable then a decision is made, following

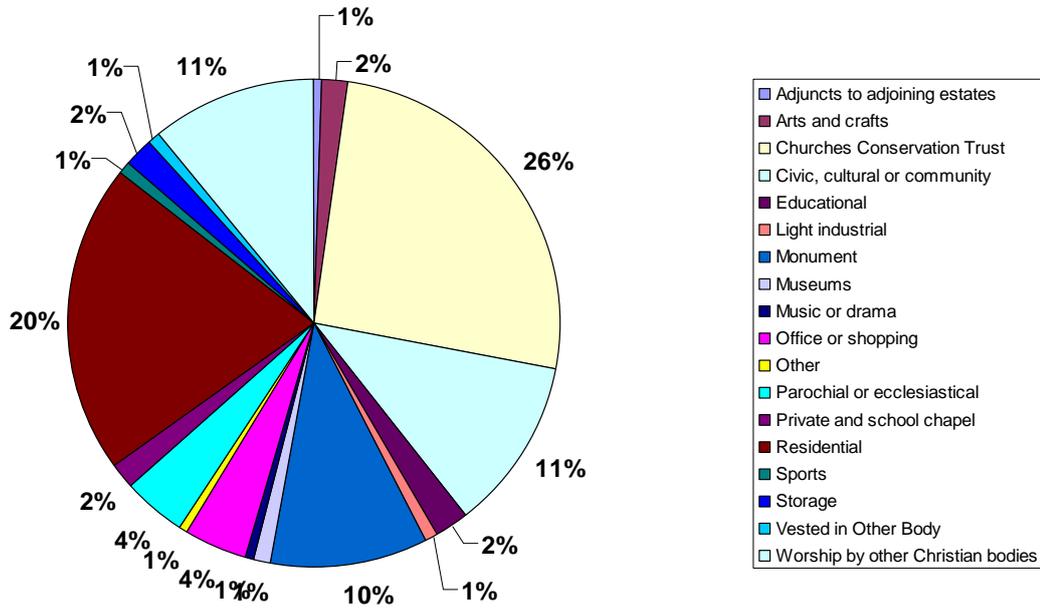
advice of statutory advisors between the alternatives of preservation, between vesting a church in the CCT or demolition. English Heritage equally has an interest in keeping listed buildings in use as the best way for them to be maintained, however, the preservation solution does, from our perspective also provide for the maintaining of the significance and character of that building and therefore we have included preservation through vesting in the analysis below to get a feel for what happens to church buildings that are not subject to demolition or part demolition. This analysis reveals that:

- 1) Over a quarter of all churches have been preserved through vesting with the Churches Conservation Trust.
- 2) Worship or Community uses account for a further quarter.
- 3) The range of other uses found for much smaller numbers of buildings here suggests the efforts that are made to find and accommodate new uses in historic churches and suggests that there are a possible range of options, although each building is taken on a case by case basis.<sup>11</sup>
- 4) One fifth is converted into residential accommodation.
- 5) Therefore future options for maintaining or preserving church buildings can be described as follows: those which most obviously have a community, other Christian denomination or cultural dimension account for 46% of this data set, with 27% vested (with CCT or other body) and 27% for more commercial uses (here including residential, office or shopping, storage and light industrial).



<sup>11</sup> This analysis makes no attempt to consider the success or otherwise of these schemes at the current time with regard (a) maintaining the special character of listed churches and (b) sustainability. It is simply a mechanism to get a picture of the range of re-use options and the proportions of churches finding themselves thus used.

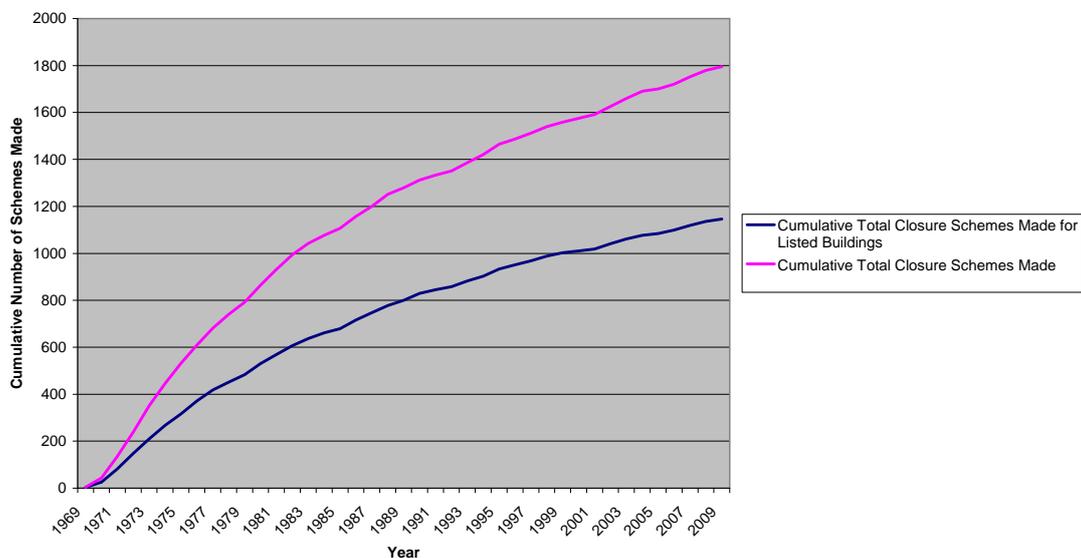
### Future Options for Church of England Church Buildings (1969-2009)



### Trends in Closure

- 1) Significantly of the 1795 church closure schemes initiated since 1969, it is important to note that 1280 of these were made between 1969 and 1989, and by contrast 515 have been made in the last 20 years.
- 2) Overall this suggests a reassuring trend away from the large numbers of closure that dominated the first 20 years after the introduction of the Pastoral Measure.

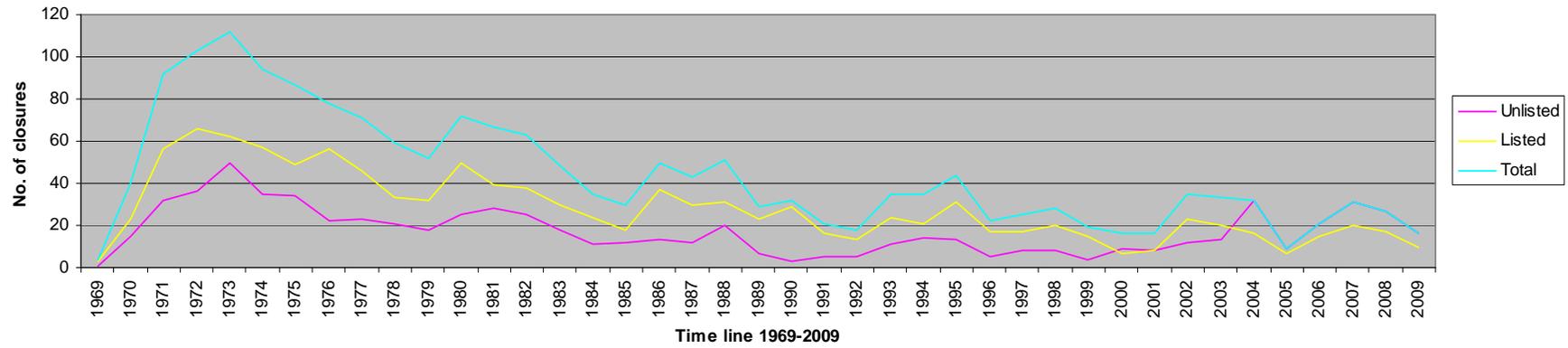
Cumulative Closure Schemes Made for Listed Buildings Against Cumulative Total Closure Schemes Made 1969-2009



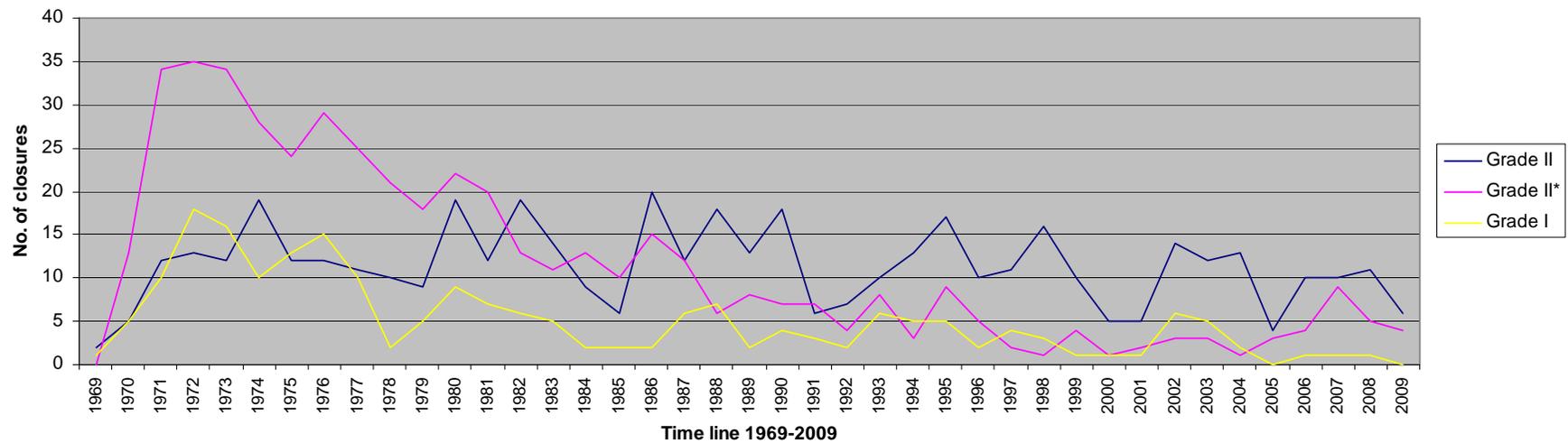
*Trends in relative designated status*

- 1) Grade I buildings have experienced a downward trend, and have consistently remained the lowest numerically in terms of closure. From 1969 to 1989 153 grade I churches were closed, in the subsequent 20 years this number was 53.
- 2) Grade II\* buildings accounted for the bulk of the early closures, especially in the 1970s, although this level has dropped significantly there are slight signs of a recent upward trend. From 1969 to 1989 391 grade II\* churches were closed, in the subsequent 20 years this number was 85.
- 3) Grade II buildings have followed a more constant path; as this has remained numerically constant it now means that grade II buildings account for a larger proportion of closures than the highly graded ones. From 1969 to 1989 259 grade II churches were closed, in the subsequent 20 years this number was 208.
- 4) This last point rather reinforces the hypothesis that, over the last 10 years, particular care has been taken to close unlisted or grade II buildings with an overall reduction in the proportion of highly listed buildings.

Trends in closure in listed and unlisted buildings



Trends in closure of listed buildings at all grades



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