

Caring for churches and chapels in England: *the long view*

with a 100-year longitudinal study of the condition of medieval churches

Trevor Cooper

AN URGENT APPEAL FOR £750
TO ALL THE MANY
FRIENDS OF BURPHAM.

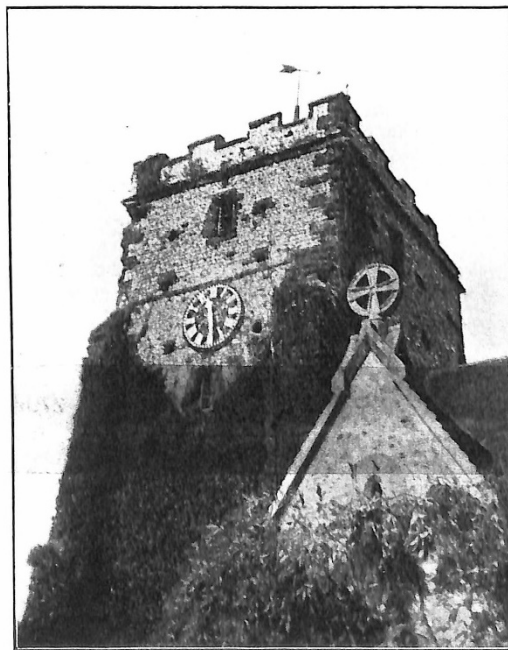


Photo by Mrs. Lyne.

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Caring for churches and chapels in England: *the long view*

With an appendix detailing a 100-year longitudinal study of the condition of 800 medieval churches

Trevor Cooper

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The centre of the cover shows an appeal leaflet for the repair of the tower of St Mary the Virgin, Burpham, West Sussex in 1936 (see page 8). Clockwise from left are: detail of etching of the church from the south east (R. H. Nibbs, 1851); detail of oil painting of the church from the north west; detail of print of the church from the south east (1850). (All images from private collections.)

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About the author

Trevor Cooper is Chair of the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance. Although he made his career in business, he has had a long-standing interest in church buildings and their future.

Some years ago he wrote *How do we keep our parish churches?* which collated facts and figures about Church of England church buildings, and later he jointly edited *Pews, benches and chairs*, looking at the history of church seating, and discussing its future development. He has also edited *For public benefit: churches cared for by Trusts*, looking at the variety of Trusts caring for churches no longer needed for regular worship.

His historical research focuses on the interior of the English parish church after the Reformation, most recently with an extended consideration of the Jacobean communion seating at Deerhurst, Gloucestershire.

He has been an external member since 2002 of the Historic England Places of Worship Forum and its predecessor, and sat on Southwark DAC between 2003 and 2013. He was Chairman of Council of the Ecclesiological Society from 2000 to 2018.

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Note: The following paper evolved from a number of talks and lectures on the topic given by the author over the past six years, after an initial foray in 2012. It includes material which appeared in Trevor Cooper, 'How many seats in church' (in Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown (eds.), *Pews Benches and Chairs* (2011), 37–66); the subject was further developed in an article in the Friends of Friendless Churches magazine in 2021 with the title 'Churches and chapels: the long view', which is here expanded and updated. The earlier published material is re-used by kind permission. The appendix is completely new.

Caring for churches and chapels in England: *the long view*

Trevor Cooper

Summary

This paper identifies **five long-term pressures** which make life difficult for those working for a secure future for historic churches and chapels in England. They are:

- for 'institutional' denominations, which own the majority of historic religious buildings, competitive over-building in the Victorian period, and the consequent need to deal with excess church buildings
- for many of these denominations, a continued reduction in average attendees per church building, with an increase in the number of small – sometimes very small – congregations
- for the Church of England, a huge imbalance in the burden of care across the country, with large number of churches in the care of small communities
- for the Church of England, the move in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from compulsory to voluntary financial support
- for very many churches and chapels, Victorian investment in church buildings often reaching the end of its natural life

On the other hand, the author's personal opinion is that taking the long view shows there are **grounds for optimism**, and still everything to play for to keep these valuable buildings and their contents available for public use, enjoyment and well-being.

Three important caveats . . .

First, the following discussion is of what might be called 'institutional' denominations, which own the very great majority of historic churches and chapels. Some other denominations and groupings, not discussed here, do not face the same long-term pressures; but they tend not to own the buildings which are of interest to us in this paper.

Secondly, this paper often refers to averages. It needs to be emphasised that many churches will be different from the average, in both good and bad directions.

Finally, this paper refers only to England: a separate treatment would be needed for Wales and Scotland, though some of the same themes would emerge.

Notes to the text are at the rear of the booklet.

The need for the long view

Here is the puzzle. Previous generations seem to have managed to look after historic churches and chapels, and we are much richer than they were, and there are more of us. Why then are we struggling, especially in rural areas? If our great-grandparents managed to build churches and look after the ones they had, why do we find it so hard?

To understand this, we need to take the long view, going back a couple of hundred years.

Competition and overbuilding

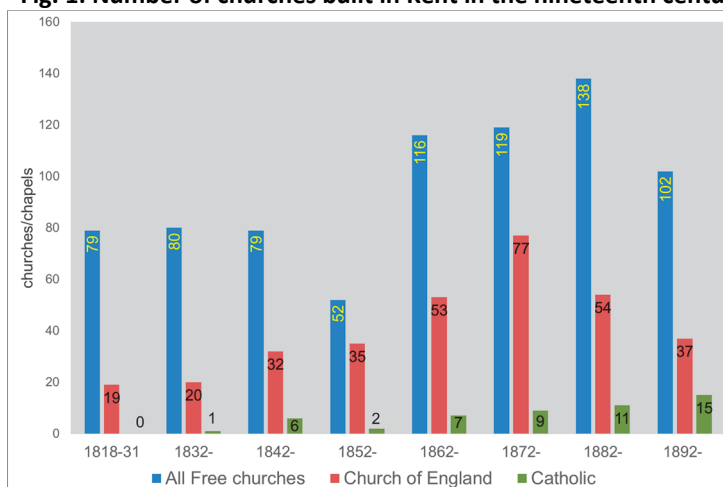
Throughout the nineteenth century there was great concern to build new churches to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population, particularly in industrial cities. We can see how this worked out in Kent, as in this county a systematic attempt has been made to track down every new church built in the nineteenth century. As can be seen in Figure 1, the free churches – Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists etc – were building from the beginning of the century, and outbuilt the Church of England (CofE) in every decade. The CofE had a relatively slow start, then peaked in the 1870s. The Catholics were far less active, but gradually increased their rate of building throughout the century.

Crucially, there was competition between Protestant denominations. Some denominations kept track of their ‘market share’ and could build ahead of actual need to get in first, ensuring they had a presence as fast as new housing was created.

This competition meant that too many chapels and too many churches were built. Worse still, this was a period when churchgoing as a percentage of the population was in decline – as, broadly speaking, it has been ever since. This was not understood at the time, as at first this decline in the proportion of habitual church attenders was masked by fast population growth. But by the later nineteenth century people were noticing that churches were not as full as they once had been.

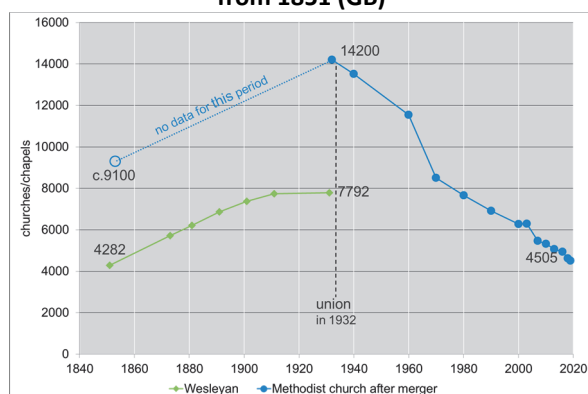
This competitive over-building, and the consequent need to deal with excess church buildings, is the first of our long-term pressures.

Fig. 1: Number of churches built in Kent in the nineteenth century



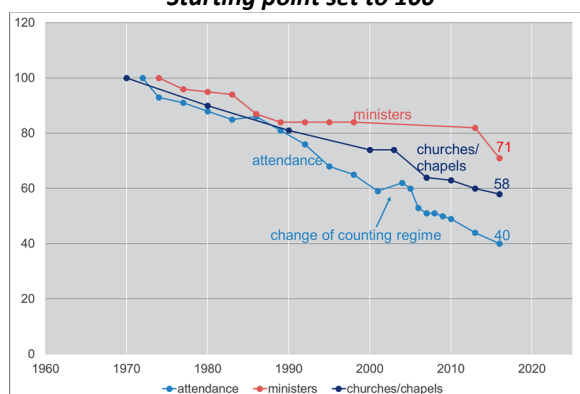
The Free churches built more than the Church of England in every decade of the nineteenth century. The Catholic church built far fewer, but in increasing numbers.

Fig. 2: Number of Methodist churches and chapels from 1851 (GB)



The number of Methodist churches and chapels rose substantially during the nineteenth century, but has fallen sharply since the union of 1932.

Fig. 3: Methodist changes, c. 1970 onwards (GB)
Starting point set to 100



Methodist attendance has fallen since 1970. The number of churches and chapels has not entirely kept pace.

Methodism

For the Free Churches there was a rapid rise in the number of buildings in the nineteenth century, followed by a very rapid fall in the twentieth century to below the early nineteenth century figure, as the consequences of overbuilding were dealt with. As a result, one comes across large numbers of closed and repurposed chapels.

For example, Figure 2 shows how the number of Methodist places of worship rose and then sharply fell over the past two centuries. Competitive overbuilding and a decline in churchgoing meant that by the time the various groups of Methodists merged in the 1930s they had far too many chapels, often more than one in the same village, as now in Scotland with Presbyterian churches. Since the union, the number of these buildings has fallen quickly, from more than 14,000 to about 4,600, which is half of the approximately 9,100 in 1851 (the first year for which we have reasonable data). Approximately ten percent of Methodist churches are listed, so over the past decades there has been a significant transfer of listed Methodist churches and chapels to new owners.

It is only relatively recently that many denominations have started routinely to collect attendance figures (in the past there was more interest in the figures for membership). The Methodists, however, have collected attendance figures since the 1970s, if not before. These are plotted in Figure 3, from which we can see that for every 100 attendees in about 1970 there were 40 in 2016. Note, incidentally, that all the graphs in this paper look at the situation pre-pandemic, in order to pick up long term trends.

Each denomination has its own processes for closing churches, and, for obvious reasons, it is often not an easy matter. There can therefore be a tendency for the number of church buildings in use for routine worship to fall less swiftly than overall attendance, as is the case for the Methodist church. This can be seen in the graph, where for every 100 church buildings fifty years ago there were 58 in 2016, a smaller fall than in the attendance figures. This 'lag' in removing churches from the system means that fewer people are available to support each building.

It also decreases the average size of congregation, and will inevitably increase the number of small congregations. Thus, despite the Methodists' steady closure of churches, in 2016 the smaller half of their churches, about 2400 churches, had an average attendance during the week of 17 people. Conversely, there were, of course, a significant number of large congregations in the other half of their churches.

Catholics

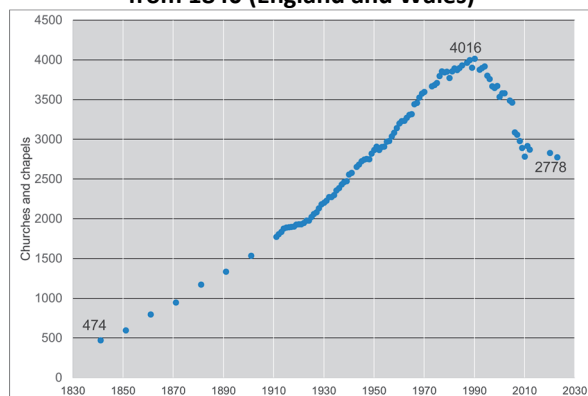
The Catholic story is *very* different from that of the Free churches. For obvious historical reasons the number of mass centres (churches and chapels) started from a very low base. As shown in Figure 4, in 1841 there were 474 churches and chapels open to the public (and a number of private chapels). From then on, Catholics were building new churches throughout the nineteenth and until near the end of the twentieth century (Fig. 4), as the number of Catholics increased, not least through immigration. By 1990, there were about 4,000 churches and chapels. (Approximately one fifth of Catholic churches are listed.) Only at the end of the twentieth century did there begin a net loss of buildings, driven partly by a shortage of priests, and partly by a decline in churchgoing, and there was then a sharp fall.

In Figure 5 we can see in more detail how the picture has developed over the past fifty years. For every 100 attendees at Mass fifty years ago, there are now about 36, whereas there are more than 70 churches for every 100. In 2010 (the most recent year for which data was to hand) the number of priests was roughly in line with the number of churches, though this may since have changed.

Closing churches for routine worship is difficult

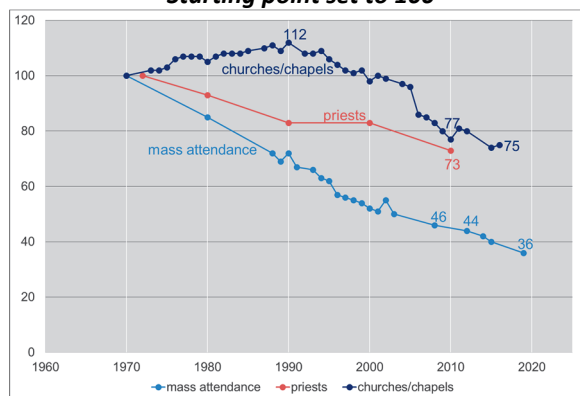
The human difficulties involved in closing churches for routine worship is one of the reasons why many denominations are feeling under pressure. Conversely, those concerned with the future of historic religious buildings have a growing concern that there will be a surge of delayed closures in England, reflecting the situation in both Wales and Scotland where the number of churches which will no longer be required for routine worship over the next few years seem likely to be of the order of several tens of percent.

Fig. 4: Number of Catholic churches and chapels from 1840 (England and Wales)



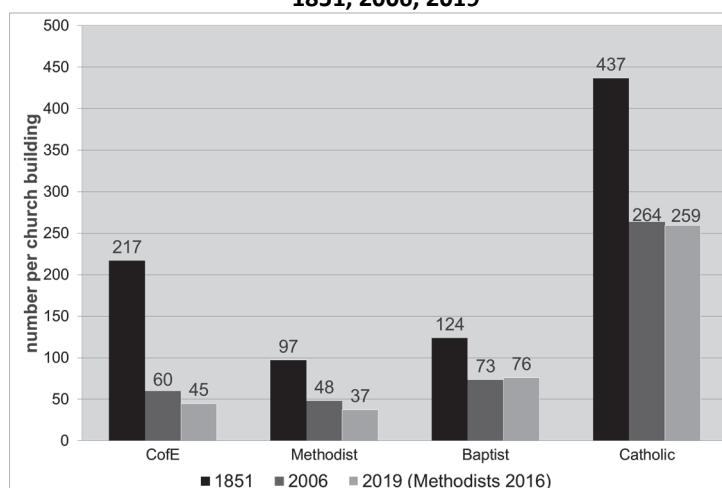
The number of Catholic churches and chapels rose substantially from a very low base, increasing until the 1990s, then falling sharply.

Fig. 5: Catholic changes, c. 1970 onwards (E&W)
Starting point set to 100



Catholic attendance has fallen since 1970. The number of churches and chapels took no account of this at first, and subsequently has not kept pace.

**Fig. 6: Number of Sunday attendees per church building (England)
1851, 2006, 2019**



There have been significant changes in the number of Sunday attendees per church building for all the denominations shown here, though the patterns differ as discussed in the text.

People per church building

What is the net effect of this two hundred year sequence of optimistic overbuilding followed by sometime-delayed closure in response to the decline in churchgoing? One useful measure is the average congregation per church building. We can establish a reasonable estimate for 1851 using the results of the Church Census of that year, and compare that with recent figures.

The results are shown in Figure 6. It is immediately obvious that the situation for Catholics is very different from that of the Church of England and Free churches. This is because typically each Catholic church building is used many times over a weekend, and each one serves many more people than for Protestant denominations. Thus in 1851 the Catholics had many more attendees at mass per church building in 1851 (437 per building) than other denominations. Despite falling attendance, there has been a smaller percentage drop since then than for some other denominations, due to the closure programme of recent decades. Indeed, there seems little change since 2006. Although there are very definite pressures on Catholic church buildings, they are not identical to those of other denominations.

We discuss the CofE situation in some detail below, but at this stage we should merely note that for CofE churches, the average number of people per church building has dropped from 217 in 1851 to about 60 in 2006, with a further drop to 45 immediately pre-Covid. Thus on average – not always, but often – CofE congregations are rattling around in a much larger space than they need.

Methodists have been more successful than the CofE in adjusting the number of buildings they use, but they too are often occupying buildings designed for larger congregations. For Baptists, the change is noticeably less extreme, no doubt because being organised as independent congregations means they have been quicker to close down when in difficulty. But they face similar pressures: in 2005, for example, about 500 Baptist churches had membership of 20 or less.

Thus many congregations – not all, but many – are having to look after buildings much larger than they need, with consequent pressure on finances, and probably also on morale. **In general as congregations have continued slowly to shrink there has been a large and continuing reduction in average attendees per church building, with an increase in the number of small – sometimes very small – congregations. This is the second long term pressure.**

Covid

All of the above applied before Covid-19. Not surprisingly, even when churches were re-opened, the years 2020 and 2021 saw a sharp fall in attendance compared to previous years, typically of some tens of percent.

There were probably two reasons for this. First, some habitual churchgoers may have fallen out of the routine of regular attendance, or may have been too nervous to attend (particularly if they were elderly or vulnerable), or may have believed that an online service fulfilled their needs. They could, of course, return. Secondly, whilst the loss of existing attendees through incapacity or death continued, the recruitment of new members probably stalled – though it is possible that to some extent these potential new members were only delayed, not lost for ever. So to some extent, this sharp decline is in theory at least partly reversible.

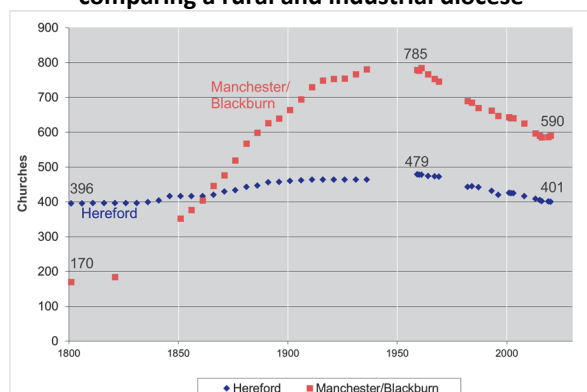
In line with this analysis, the figures available for 2022 from various denominations do suggest significant pickup. The CofE has reported its preliminary attendance for 2023, and this too shows an increase over the 2022 figures. Attendance in 2023 was still about 7% below the long-term trend, suggesting that Covid has brought forward the general downwards drift in attendance of some 2% per year by some three or four years. The shock of severely reduced congregations in 2021 and 2022 may also have accelerated attitudes, and perceptions about the need to plan for decreasing attendance in the future.

Church of England

We will now look in greater depth at the Church of England. The CofE has about 12,200 listed churches, a little over 80% of the total number of listed religious buildings in the country. Of these, it possesses the overwhelming majority (about 95%) of those listed Grade I or Grade II*, where it has about 8,500 churches. One of the satisfying features of the last twenty years has been the growing appreciation of the heritage importance of the buildings of other denominations, shown, for example, by a more intentional approach by Historic England to listing these buildings, often on the back of a systematic study of their significance and prevalence. Nevertheless, given the proportion of highly-listed buildings in their care, the future of Church of England churches understandably dominates the policy landscape.

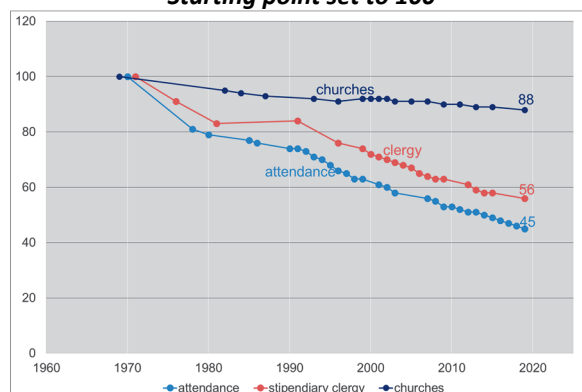
As regards the number of buildings, the Church of England shows historical differences between industrial and rural areas. Take, for example, the combined industrial dioceses of Manchester and Blackburn (Fig. 7). In the nineteenth century there was huge growth in the number of churches and mission chapels as these urban areas expanded, then a drop in the mid twentieth century as it was realised there were too many buildings. But this drop is nowhere near as steep as for other institutional denominations.

Fig. 7: Number of CofE churches from 1851, comparing a rural and industrial diocese



In Manchester/Blackburn there was a great increase in churches in the 19C, now falling away. In Herefordshire, the change is less marked.

Fig. 8: CofE changes, c. 1970 onwards (England)
Starting point set to 100



CofE attendance has fallen since 1970. The number of churches and chapels is a long way from having kept pace.

The rural diocese of Hereford shows a more muted pattern. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century some churches were built in market towns, together with mission chapels in the countryside. The mission chapels – fairly easy to close for routine worship – have now largely gone, and the total number of churches is about the same as in the early nineteenth century.

What is relatively new is that medieval Church of England buildings have been coming under real pressure. To understand why, it will be helpful to look in more detail at the CofE since about 1970 (Fig. 8). By 2019, all-age usual Sunday attendance had dropped to 47 for every 100 people present in about 1970, a drop of more than half. (A very similar graph is obtained by looking at rural dioceses alone). The *average* current rate of loss is around 2% per annum. Of course, there are large numbers of growing churches. But there are also a large number of shrinking ones, and on average numbers are drifting down.

As with other denominations, there are many small congregations. In 2019, one quarter of CofE congregations had attendance of 14 adults or less, and one half had 26 or less. In about 600 cases, attendance was 7 or less. These tiny congregations are, of course, a direct result of inheriting a set of buildings scattered amongst some very small communities. Astonishingly, nearly ten percent of CofE churches – 1,400 churches – are found in communities where overall about one-third of one percent of the population live. Three thousand churches are found in places where just 1.1% of the population live. **There is a huge imbalance in the burden of care, and this is our third long term pressure.**

The number of stipendiary clergy has also fallen significantly over the past fifty years, to about 56 for every 100 in 1970. However the number of church buildings has fallen far, far less, to about 88 for every 100 fifty years ago. Thus the number of churches supported by congregations has hardly changed, whilst about half as many people are paying for these buildings. A further difficulty for the CofE is that each stipendiary member of the clergy is having to serve more churches. This of course is the context for the drastic reorganisation of parishes in some areas.

Church of England transitions

For the CofE, there were two very definite transitions whose effect is with us today.

The first was a change to the way repairs were financed. Until 1868, the repair of CofE churches, especially in rural areas, was often funded out of local taxation, called the church rate. Payment was compulsory, and it bore some relation to ability to pay as it was based on land ownership or the value of one's home. This system survived until 1868, though had been widely contested for some time before that. After 1868, churches could still send out a rates bill, but no-one was obliged to pay.

The general effect of this appears not to have been studied, but the author's village of Burpham in West Sussex provides a revealing and possibly typical case study. A voluntary rate demand was sent out in 1869, and raised a substantial amount – but only from a few of the ratepayers, the wealthiest people in the village! The attempt to raise a rate was subsequently abandoned, and these individuals and their immediate successors subsidised the church building and running expenses informally for the next few decades. It is probably not a coincidence that in 1870 the wealthy vicar paid for the church to be thoroughly restored – since his arrival in the mid 1840s he had carried out some improvements, but one wonders if no longer having to answer to ratepayers but merely to a few like-minded friends in the village gave him the freedom of action he was looking for. But this was not a stable solution: by the early twentieth century money was becoming tight. Consequently when in the 1930s it became clear that the tower needed major work the parish launched an appeal across the diocese (see cover image). This failed – until an anonymous donor stepped in, and paid for the bulk of the work, though he soon revealed his identity and made himself a considerable nuisance by interfering with the project.

Over the country as a whole, this change from mandatory rates must have meant that it suddenly began to matter how many people there were in the congregation, how rich they were, and how willing to donate. For congregations in small rural communities in particular this could become a huge burden. We are still living with the effects.

A second distinct moment of change was in 1936. Until then a CofE vicar in a rural parish was typically paid, at least partially, directly from a local tax called tithe, which they or their agents collected. From 1936 onwards there was a complex interim arrangement, and this had faded away by the 1960s or 70s. So it is only within living memory in many parishes that vicars have been paid for from money raised by congregations, a growing pressure as congregations slowly shrink, again especially for rural congregations which tend to be smaller.

Thus CofE buildings, and the stipendiary ministers to provide services in them, have relied for most of their history *not* on people deciding individually whether to opt in, but on one form or another of compulsory tax, based largely on land and property. Those sources of income have gone. Of course, every other religious group in Britain relies on voluntary giving – but those groups choose when and where to build or close their churches and chapels, based on their resources and needs. They have not inherited ancient buildings in virtually every village in England. **This move for CofE churches from compulsory to voluntary financial support is the fourth long-term pressure**, putting smaller communities permanently on the back foot.

Buildings

What about the buildings? Of the approximately 14,800 listed places of worship in England, some eight or nine thousand are of medieval origin, most in the care of the Church of England. The majority of the remainder are Victorian, but with a fair number of twentieth- and eighteenth-century buildings.

It is a commonplace amongst those working in the field that Victorian churches are often now reaching that stage in their lives when serious money needs to be spent on them. Unfortunately in many cases access to high levels was not built into the design, further adding to the expense of renewing spires, roofs, and rainwater goods.

As regards medieval buildings, during the nineteenth century there was a burst of restoration activity. For example, between 1840 and 1875 approximately 5,300 medieval parish churches were restored or rebuilt (only counting those cases where the cost of the work was more than £500). The 100-year longitudinal study (in the appendix) shows how in the early decades of the twentieth century, the 'Good' condition of a medieval building was often related to it having been restored in the Victorian period. Again it is a commonplace that many of these restorations now themselves need renewing, for example by replacing the Victorian roof.

This is the fifth and final long-term pressure: Victorian investment in church and chapel buildings is often reaching the end of its natural life.

The longitudinal study had some good news. Of those medieval churches which had problems with the fabric a century ago, most were repaired and have remained in parish use and available for the benefit of the public, and are not now 'at risk' – that is, are not on the Historic England Heritage at Risk Register.

So the repairs done after the RCHME survey have provided up to a hundred years of use and enjoyment of a building which might otherwise have been lost. One frustration for many of us in the past has been the way grant schemes sometimes underplayed the huge multi-decadal benefit obtained simply from repairing a building to keep it available for both its current beneficiaries and many subsequent generations.

Secondly, the longitudinal study shows that of those churches that are 'at risk' today, there was almost always no warning sign a century ago. That is, the faults of one hundred years ago were mostly dealt with, and it is almost always *new* ones that now cause concern – so the good news is that it is very uncommon for churches to have been causing continual worry for the same reason for a hundred years. On the other hand, however well they are looked after, medieval buildings will develop new problems, and require significant expenditure, perhaps once every generation or so. Despite this, today it can probably be said of large swathes of historic churches and chapels that they have never been in better condition.

Long term pressures – summary

So the long view explains a good deal. Our Victorian forebears were looking after these buildings at a time of rising population, when a much higher proportion of people went to church, and could provide the necessary funding. Competitive over-building during what turned out to be a time of declining attendance meant that by the end of the nineteenth century there were too many church buildings. And although our grandparents began closing

churches and chapels, and this has continued, with the decline in institutional church going the average congregation in each building has shrunk, and continues to shrink. There is a consequent increase in the number of small congregations.

In addition, the Church of England – which looks after the great majority of highly-listed churches – has had to face a move from compulsory to voluntary funding. There is a huge imbalance of care, with many of its churches in small villages, with the buildings relying on voluntary donations from what can be tiny congregations. There is often both a shortage of money, and a shortage of people. Rather few church buildings have ceased holding routine worship in the past fifty years, so there is now considerable pressure on stipendiary clergy as they look after multiple congregations.

Many congregations of all denominations – not all, but many – are having to look after buildings much larger than they need, with consequent pressure on finances, and probably also on morale. To add to this burden, Victorian investment in new church buildings and repairs to medieval ones is often reaching the end of its natural life, and will at some stage require capital expenditure.

On the other hand . . .

What follows are my personal views – so are written in the first person.

On the other hand, and still taking the long view, I believe that during the last few decades we have seen some encouraging developments, quite different from what has gone before.

It is an important development, for example, that government has shown a willingness to become involved. The earliest sign of this was in 1977 when it begun providing grants for major repairs, either directly or through its agencies. (Unfortunately later the government stepped back, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund then carried on with similar schemes until 2017.) An important legacy of these and similar programmes are the formal assessments of their impact and effectiveness. To the best of my knowledge, these all show positive results: large grants attract private funding, revitalise congregations facing unaffordable repairs, and ensure the building remains available for long-term public benefit. The long view confirms how desperately we need a replacement scheme.

The government's Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme (LPOWGS) for refunding VAT was introduced explicitly because the government of the day recognised the positive social impact from churches, an impact which has been more widely recognised since the pandemic, and which has been usefully quantified by the National Churches Trust. The scheme is now twenty-five years old, and its predictability and straightforward nature make it very popular. In many ways it can be seen as a classic 'nudge', encouraging the desired behaviour at relatively low cost. I think that this communication channel could be used more systematically by government to convey its appreciation of what is being done by volunteers to care for these buildings, and to offer a wider vision of the importance of these buildings.

The government's engagement was also demonstrated by it commissioning the Taylor *Review* which reported in 2017, and by later investing in a pilot scheme to test out some of the support mechanisms which the *Review* proposed, including for the first time the provision of advice and support at government expense. The pilot was successful, but events meant it never moved forward beyond that stage. This was very disappointing: at the very least,

further government involvement would have sent a much-needed message to the volunteers in the sector that they are not alone in their efforts to care for these historic buildings.

The long view also shows how there can be fresh thinking around the very serious and growing problem of the shortage of people (particularly in small congregations). For example, over recent decades the idea of a local Trust looking after an individual historic church building has reached the mainstream since it was first proposed in, I believe, the mid 1980s. Its latest evolution are experiments with diocesan trusts; although the funding of these may turn out to be an issue, they are a good example of local innovation. I sense too that there is now an increasing interest in learning from the example of secular building trusts.

Again, in the last few decades Friends Groups have multiplied, a wonderful example of activists on the ground taking matters into their own hands with no central direction. A recent study in the diocese of Ely suggested that about a quarter of rural churches already had Friends Groups, and others were thinking of starting them. Another positive change is that denominations now see the value of Friends groups when once they were rather doubtful.

Another piece of the people jigsaw has recently fallen into place, after a number of years of confusion – clarification of the law to confirm that Local Councils can support the use of places of worship for community purposes. These Councils have democratic legitimacy, continuity, fund raising powers, a love of place, and access to people, and I believe could make a tremendous difference over the long term if they were encouraged to get involved.

A significant development on the people front in the last two decades has been the introduction of support officers for groups of churches, often part-funded by Historic England. Recently – in a very welcome development – the Church Commissioners of the CofE have allocated an £9m fund to support church buildings, to be spent over three years; some of this has been allocated for thirty support officers, and some for small building grants.

Again, the long view emphasises how successfully CofE parish churches have moved to an open-door policy in the last hundred years or more. Before Covid the majority of rural churches (where there is good data) were open daily to visitors, which I believe was not the case two hundred years ago. Of course there is room for improvement here, and still some work to be done recovering to the pre-pandemic position, but these churches have probably never been so accessible.

Despite this, the long view does, unfortunately, highlight a failure systematically to capitalise on the tourist potential of historic places of worship. There have been a large number of local tourism schemes over the past few decades but these have been funded by grants lasting three years, after which things grind to a halt – the website frozen in time, the leaflets not reprinted, the participating churches left in limbo. The fundamental issue is that although church tourism can provide economic benefit to local service industries such as pubs and overnight accommodation, it is hard for an individual church to make money from it, and thus for churches as a group to contribute to the necessary long-term strategic marketing. Public money will be needed to develop this opportunity.

The long view also shows us how innovation can apply to the use of church buildings, and ideas can be tested and successful ones widely disseminated. Today the cartoon shown in Figure 9 (overleaf) will immediately be understood by everyone reading this – which would not have been true fifty years ago. Of course, this menu of possibilities will not be appropriate for every church building or every denomination, and it certainly will not solve every problem. But its very existence represents a huge success for innovation and fresh thinking over the

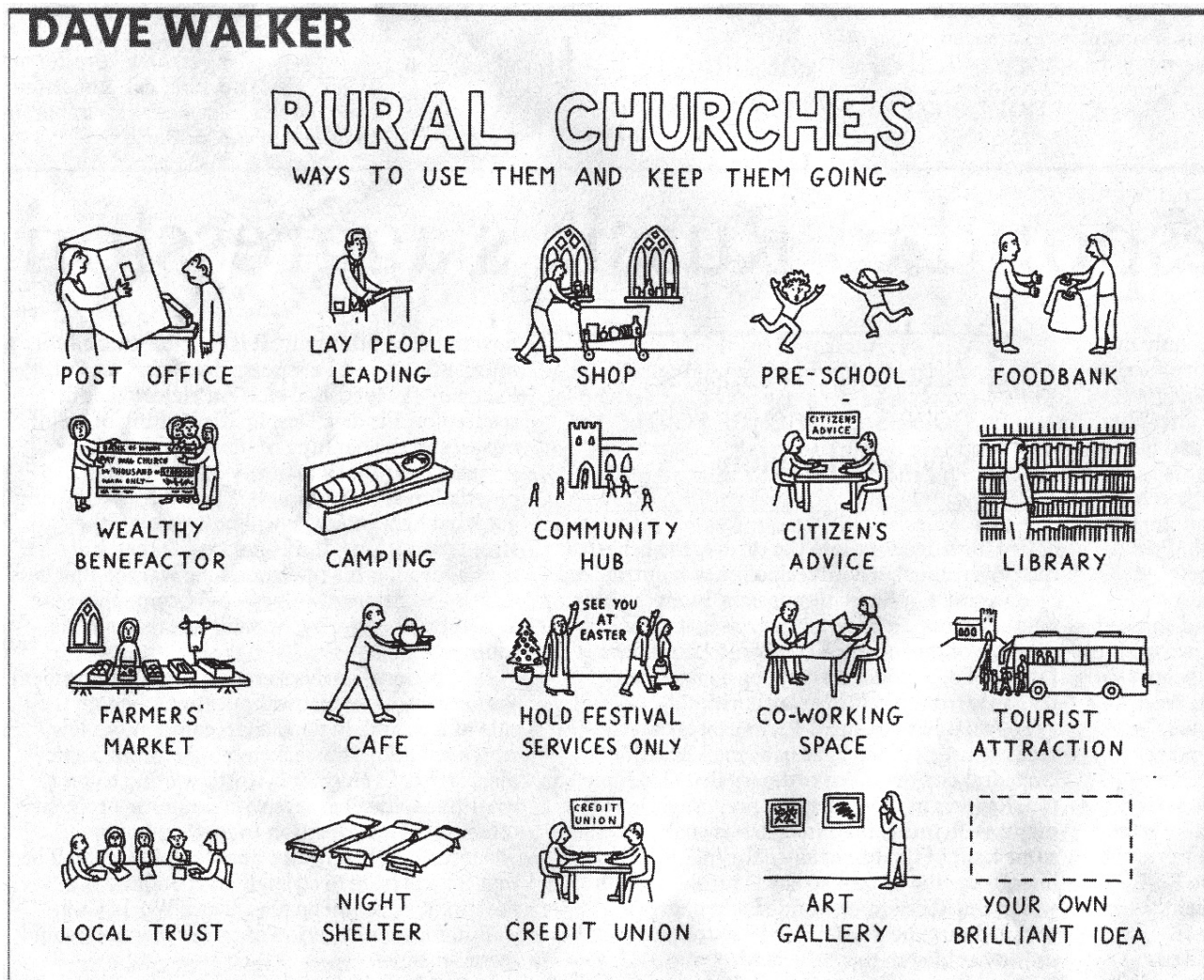


Fig. 9: Rural churches: ways to use them and keep them going

(© Dave Walker (<https://cartoonchurch.com/>), reproduced by kind permission.)

last few decades. Alongside these ideas, and fitting well with them, we have seen a change of understanding – that ceasing to hold regular services in a CofE parish church need *not* mean closing it. This insight has been steadily growing in influence.

So taking the long view enables us to appreciate that there have been major changes for the good over the past few decades, and this does give some grounds for optimism – though I fear the difficulties are accelerating more quickly than I expected ten years ago, and not just through Covid-19. There is still time, I think, for a more permanent settlement to emerge: as both the CofE (in 2015) and the National Churches Trust (this year) have suggested, we need a national debate, and the UK government needs to be involved.

And so . . .

We began by asking, why are we struggling to look after our historic churches and chapels, when previous generations managed? It turns out that we have inherited deeply-embedded problems, the result of long-term trends and slow-burn transitions over the last two hundred years. Perhaps, though, the long view also gives hope that we will find new ways to handle these continuing pressures. As was said two years ago, ‘History will not thank us if we do not [get] this right’.

Appendix: a longitudinal study of the condition of 800 medieval parish churches over the period of a century

This appendix compares the condition of more than 800 mostly medieval parish churches a century ago with their condition today. There are two main findings. First, of those churches which had problems with the fabric a century ago, most were eventually repaired and remained in parish use and open to the public, and have thus provided up to a hundred years of use and enjoyment. They did not have a recurring or unfixable problem. Secondly, of those that are 'at risk' today, there was almost always no warning sign a century ago – which confirms that these old buildings have a long, slow cycle of new repair needs appearing.

Introduction

This appendix is a longitudinal study of the condition of more than 800 medieval parish churches over a period of roughly a century. It compares the condition of the churches in the early years of the twentieth century with those known to be at risk in 2023.

We will first describe the two data sources, and then the longitudinal study and its results.

The RCHME: an early twentieth-century data source

The early twentieth-century data sources are the *Inventory* volumes published by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England (RCHME). This body was founded in 1908 and aimed to compile a detailed inventory of ancient and historical monuments across the country. Until 1946 the terminal date for recording monuments was 1714; so as regards places of worship, most of those recorded were medieval Church of England churches.

In the first decades of its work the RCHME recorded the condition of the buildings, and it these condition statements which provide a snapshot of the state of churches in the first part of the twentieth century.

Using the RCHME data

This study used the *Inventory* volumes for Buckinghamshire, Essex, Herefordshire and Westmorland, published between 1912 and 1936 (see Table 1). These provided condition reports for more than 800 churches, mostly medieval. This sample set of counties is not intended to be representative, but probably provides some idea of the range of condition of these buildings which would have been found across England at the time.

Table 1: County *Inventory* volumes used in this analysis

County	Date(s) of <i>Inventory</i>	Number of parish churches for which condition was stated *
Buckinghamshire	1912, 1913	198
Essex	1916, 1921, 1922, 1923	371
Herefordshire	1931, 1932, 1934	202
Westmorland	1936	51
Total =		822

* Excluding ruins

The RCHME usually graded condition using the categories Good, Fair/Fairly good, Poor and Bad. As far as is known, these statements are nowhere defined.

This lack of definition or specificity is particularly frustrating for those graded 'Poor' or 'Bad'. For example, we know that the chapel at Yatton in Herefordshire was in 'Bad' condition in 1932 – but not why. However further information is quite often given for these two lowest grades, in the form of a short phrase explaining the reason for the grading. Thus, for example, at Bobbingworth in Essex the entry said 'nave poor, owing to subsidence of S. wall'.

Similarly in a large number of cases, churches are simply described as being in 'Fair' or 'Good' condition without any indication as to why they have been distinguished in this way. Quite often, however, there is a comment about the church having been restored, with the implication that this is a contributory factor to it being in acceptable condition.

However, confusingly, with quite a few 'Good' and 'Fair' condition statements there is a short phrase qualifying this overall assessment. Many of these are red flags to the modern reader, overturning whatever comfort one might have derived from the initial 'Good' or 'Fair'. For example, at Hanslope at Buckinghamshire, the church is described as 'Fairly good; much restored in parts; *roofs of chancel and nave leak* [my italics]'. At Eastwood in Essex we have 'Fairly good, *but roofs defective*'. And at Llanveynoe in Herefordshire the assessment is 'Fairly good, much restored, *crack in E. wall*'. It follows that in these cases the 'Good' and 'Fair' categorisation should be taken with a pinch of salt as indicative of overall condition.

There are other difficulties. Based on the pattern of results, there seems to be variation both between, and possibly within, counties as to the approach to the grading of condition. There is sometimes ambiguity about whether it is the condition of the building which is being described or its originality as a medieval artefact. And there is considerable focus on the presence of ivy and cement rendering, it not being clear whether it is the actual or potential damage of these items which is being taken into account. Finally the condition assessment was probably not carried out by a professional architect or surveyor.

Summary of RCHME data

It was originally hoped to be able to compare the general condition of churches today with that of one hundred years ago, but – rather sadly – it was concluded that the imprecise nature of the RCHME data makes that impossible.

Table 2: Percentage of parish churches in our sample falling into each condition band of the RCHME assessment

	Number of parish churches	Percentage of parish churches with each assessment of condition					Total **
		<i>Good</i>	<i>Good, but *</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Fair, but *</i>	<i>Poor or Bad</i>	
		%	%	%	%	%	
Buckinghamshire	198	66	22	3	6	4	100% = 198
Essex	371	68	10	11	6	6	100% = 371
Herefordshire	202	89	6	1	0	3	100% = 202
Westmorland	51	98	2	0	0	0	100% = 51
OVERALL	822	74	11	6	4	4	100% = 822

* 'Good' condition, but with one or more serious qualifications (ivy or cement rendering are not treated here as serious), or 'Fair/Fairly Good' with one or more serious qualifications

** Rounding errors may mean that the figures in the table do not add up to 100%

For what it is worth, Table 2 shows the breakdown of the different one-word condition summaries, though for the reasons given above, the figures should not be taken literally, and great caution should be exercised in trying to draw any general conclusions. Nevertheless, it is striking that just 74% are in good condition with no caveats.

The Heritage at Risk Register: a modern data source

The modern data source for condition being used in this survey is the Historic England (HE) Register of Heritage at Risk (HAR). This is updated annually, the most recent edition being of 2023.

Places of worship are assessed on the basis of condition only. If the place of worship is in 'Very bad' or 'Poor' condition it is added to the Register. To be considered for inclusion a place of worship must be listed and used as a public place of worship at least six times a year.

Once on the Register, places of worship can move through the condition categories (e.g. from Very bad to Poor, to Fair, even Good) as repairs are implemented and the condition improves, until they are fully repaired and can be removed from the Register. It follows that being on the Register does not of itself mean that nothing is being done – or has been done – about the problems identified.

Coverage of places of worship is not complete, although for Anglican parish churches in use it seems likely that a very high proportion of those at risk were identified in the 2023 register. The Register is updated annually, so will fail to include buildings newly at-risk, and will include those where the problem has been resolved since the Register was published.

The Register contains an image of the church, with a few sentences describing the building, followed by a sentence or two summarising the current problems, and what has been done about these or is planned. It is thus a far richer resource for understanding the condition of these buildings than the RCHME volumes of a century ago.

Table 3 shows (bottom row) that of the 822 churches in the RCHME sample, some 5% are on the current HAR Register (actually 5.1%). This is slightly lower than for the country as a whole, where just under 7% of listed Anglican churches are on the Register (6.9%). As might be expected there is considerable variation by county in our sample.

It is notable how little correlation there is between the proportion in a county being 'Bad' or 'Poor' on the RCHME assessment a century ago, and the proportion on the HAR Register today. This is the starting point for our longitudinal analysis, for which two questions were asked.

Table 3: Number of churches in our sample appearing in the 2023 HAR Register

	Number of parish churches	Churches on HAR Register (2023)		RCHME: 'Poor' or 'Bad'
		<i>number</i>	%	
Buckinghamshire	198	5	3%	4%
Essex	371	11	3%	6%
Herefordshire	202	21	10%	3%
Westmorland	51	5	10%	0%
OVERALL	822	42*	5%	4%

* Of these 42, three are no longer parish churches (one ruin, one Local Authority museum (closed), one disused with lapsed planning permission to be a house)

The longitudinal study

What was the subsequent condition and trajectory of churches?

For the longitudinal analysis the first question asked was whether the condition of churches in the early twentieth century affected or predicted their subsequent condition and trajectory?

To put it more generally, is there any indication that some churches are in parishes which over the period of a hundred or so years have consistently shown they have reduced capacity or desire to handle ongoing problems with their building, for example because of lack of resources, or having little need for the building, or because the building itself is in some way unusually problematic.

The most obvious point to establish was whether churches in Bad/Poor condition in the RCHME assessment are more likely to be on the HAR Register a hundred years later? The answer is a straightforward 'no'. Of the 35 churches in Bad/Poor condition, only one is today on the HAR Register, as would be expected by chance.

We need to go on to ask whether the RCHME grading was at all indicative of future condition – for example, are RCHME churches which were in Fair condition more likely to be on the HAR list than those graded Good?

We can also ask whether RCHME grading helped predict which churches would cease use as parish churches. To answer this, the current status of all 822 churches was established in various ways: by working through the relevant Pevsner *Buildings of England* volumes, checking the HAR status, and comparing with the list of buildings cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) and Friends of Friendless Churches (FoFC). Inevitably there will have been mistakes in this data trawl, and there will have been changes since the Pevsners were published, but the results are likely to be accurate enough for our purposes. They are shown in Table 4 below.

Remaining as parish churches. It will be seen (bottom row of Table 4) that 94% of the 822 churches in the sample are still parish churches one century on. As usual with parish churches no longer required for worship, the others have been taken into care by the CCT or FoFC, or are used for other purposes, whilst a tiny number (four) are ruins. However the likelihood of still being a parish church does seem to be related to the condition of the building in the early twentieth century – those rated Bad/Poor or Fair by the RCHME are less likely to be parish churches today. Some caution is needed as the numbers in the sample are relatively small, but this finding is probably reliable.

Table 4: Current state of the churches in our sample

RCHME condition grading	Number of parish churches	Buildings currently a parish church		Current parish churches on HAR	
		Number	%	Number	%
Bad/Poor	35	28	80%	1	4%
Fair, with qualification	35	30	86%	2	7%
Fair	48	43	90%	2	5%
Good, with qualification	94	89	95%	6	7%
Good	610	581	95%	28	5%
OVERALL	822	771	94%	39	5%

This is, of course, hardly surprising, as the condition of a church building may reflect the ability of a congregation to look after it, which will be related to the long-term viability of that congregation, which itself will affect the future need for that building.

[On the HAR register.](#) A more interesting question is the relation between condition a century ago and being on the HAR register today. Table 4 shows that of those which are still parish churches, 39 are on the HAR Register. (Three other buildings, totalling 42, are no longer parish churches, so are not in this table.)

How does condition a hundred years ago affect the likelihood of being on the HAR Register today? To answer this, the final column of the table shows what proportion are on the Register for each RCHME condition. Because there are relatively few HAR cases to be shared amongst the various grades of RCHME condition, chance will greatly affect the results, and (apart from the row for 'Good', which has the bulk of cases) no individual entry in that column should be taken too seriously. But there is nothing there to suggest that condition a century ago affects being on the HAR Register today (for those buildings which remained parish churches).

This is an important finding. It implies that if past problems are dealt with, then that building does not have an increased risk in future.

Thus, of those churches which had problems a century ago, most were eventually repaired and remained in parish use and open to the public, and have provided up to a hundred years of use and enjoyment, with 95% of them not being on the current HAR Register.

[Are today's problems the same as one hundred years ago?](#)

The second question is how often a church is at risk in 2023 from a problem of the very same nature as it was suffering from in the early 20th century. That is, that how often does it look as though a particular problem lingered unresolved for a hundred years or more?

Here the answer is unequivocal: hardly ever. Of the 39 parish churches on the HAR Register, in only two cases are there problems that seem similar if not identical to those present in the early twentieth century. One is Ludgerhall in Buckinghamshire, where there was a leaky roof in 1912, and a similar problem today. Another is Wing, in the same county, where the stonework of the tower is delaminating.

Of course it is possible – perhaps even likely – that in both these cases the initial problem was fixed, but has since reappeared (it has not been possible to do the archival research necessary). An example of such recurrence would be Manuden in Essex, where in 1916 the RCHME reported the north transept as being in bad repair; this was repaired in 1930, but in 2023 the church was on the HAR because tiles on the north transept were slipping, causing mould on the interior.

Thus, of those churches that are 'at risk' today, there was almost always no warning sign a century ago. So the good news is that the faults of one hundred years ago have mostly all been fixed, and are not today putting buildings at risk. They were not recurring or unfixable problems.

The bad news is that it is *new* faults that now claim attention. This is not surprising: however well they are looked after, medieval buildings will develop new problems, and require major expenditure, once every generation or so. Watching over and caring for these buildings requires long-term commitment; the job is never done.

Conclusion

There are two main findings. First, of those parish churches which had problems with the fabric a century ago, most were eventually repaired and remained in parish use and open to the public, and have thus provided up to a hundred years of use and enjoyment. They did not have a recurring or unfixable problem.

Secondly, of those that are 'at risk' today, there was almost always no warning sign a century ago – which confirms that these old buildings have a long, slow cycle of new repair needs appearing.

Although, sadly, we cannot directly compare condition today with that of a hundred years ago, this longitudinal study drives home the fact that today relatively few parish churches are 'at risk', and that carrying out major repairs will typically buy many decades of use for the building before a different repair need is apparent.

Notes

For the comparative position of some non-institutional churches, see e.g. David Goodhew, *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the present* (2017). For overbuilding within the nineteenth century, see Trevor Cooper, 'How many seats in church', in Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown (eds.), *Pews Benches and Chairs* (2011), 37–66, which makes extensive use of the groundbreaking and detailed work of Robin Gill in *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (2003).

For number of churches and chapels at various grades of listing, Charlotte Dodgeon, *Sustaining historic churches: what does recent research tell us?*, a report issued by HRBA in 2022

Graphs. Note that in many cases, irregularities in the data will be due to issues with gathering information, and do not represent abrupt and reversing changes. **Sources:** In general, for 1851 figures, Horace Mann, *Census of Great Britain 1851. Religious Worship in England and Wales. Abridged from the Official Report* (1854). **Fig. 1:** Cooper 'Seats', Graph 23 **Fig. 2:** Methodist *Annual Reports*, various years (the number of buildings in the latter years has been adjusted to allow for multi-site churches) and *Annual Returns of Accommodation of the Wesleyan Chapel Committee*, various years **Fig. 3:** Methodist *Annual Reports*, various years (the number of buildings adjusted as in Fig. 2); attendance data for 2018 and 2019 is available, but used a different counting technique so has not been included **Figs. 4 and 5:** Catholic *Directory*, various years **Fig. 6:** Cooper, 'Seats', Graph 2, updated from the same sources **Fig. 7:** Hereford and Bath & Wells 1851: Mann, *Religious Census*; 1800–1876: add or subtract consecrations from Lower house of Convocation of Canterbury, *Report of committee of deficiencies of spiritual ministration, 1876*; 1876 to 1937: add 'new churches' from Church of England *Yearbook* (various eds); 1958 – 64: *Facts and Figures*, 1958, 1962, 1965; 1967, 1969: *Church Yearbook*; 1982 on: *Church Statistics, Statistics for Mission* (various eds). Manchester as Hereford, except 1801, 1821: *Church of England Yearbook*, 1889, page 15 (Manchester historic figures); after 1927, add in Blackburn. The Hereford pre-1950 series has been uplifted by 15 to correct for the lack of match pre and post 1950. **Fig. 8:** *Church Year Book, Church Statistics, Statistics for Mission, Ministry Statistics* (various years); Gordon Kurht, *Ministry issues for the Church of England: mapping the trends* (2001), 94. Attendance is all age usual Sunday attendance.

For Baptists, Peter Brierley (ed.), *Religious Trends No.7 2007/8: British Religion in the 21st Century* (2008), Table 9.2.1; annual Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) summary of membership for 2019; BUGB *Small Churches Project*, 2005.

For CofE preliminary 2023 figures, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/weekly-church-attendance-five-cent-third-year-consecutive-growth>. For CofE size of congregations, *Statistics for Mission*, various years. **For many CofE churches being located in small communities**, data provided to author by the Archbishops' Council, 2018. **For restoration of CofE churches** in the nineteenth century, Cooper, 'Seats', 43.

For examples of assessments of grant schemes, see <https://www.hrballiance.org.uk/resources/policy-documents-etc/general-repository/> scrolling down to 'Assessment of impacts of grant schemes'. **For the National Churches Trust evaluation of the social impact of churches**, <https://www.houseofgood.nationalchurchestrust.org/>. **For the Taylor Review and pilot**, the same web page (search for 'Taylor').

For Friends Groups in the diocese of Ely, the *Audit Report* of the Reach Project, at <https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/5f0f7281dadce/content/pages/documents/reach-ely-audit---short-report---february-2023-update.pdf>.

For the Church Commissioners' £9m fund, the press announcement of 9 November 2023 at <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/church-england-announces-ps9-million-help-parishes-repairs-and-specialist>.

For rural churches being open, the analysis based on data within the Keyholder app published by the National Churches Trust in their *Every Church Counts* (2024), available at <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/everychurchcounts>.

For a suggested six point plan to secure the future of church buildings, including a national debate, see the National Churches Trust, *Every Church Counts*, link given above. **For the CofE calling for a national debate**, see the *Report of the Church Buildings Review Group* (2015). The quotation is from Charlotte Dodgeon, *ibid*, 4.

Appendix

For the RCHME, see Andrew Sargent, 'RCHME 1908–1998: a history of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England', *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*, 45 (2001), 57–80. The RCHME volumes are available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_History_Online. It is possible that the RCHME archives, in the care of HE, would provide further information on the condition of churches. This has not been investigated.

The Heritage at Risk Register is available at <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-Register>

Hulcott in Buckinghamshire **is a further possible case of a problem continuing, or re-appearing a century later**, but from the information available it is not possible to be sure. It is surprising that the concentration of such cases should be in Buckinghamshire. This might be a random effect, but the total number of HAR cases in the county is very small, and perhaps these cases are the few that have been particularly intransigent in a county that has otherwise looked after its buildings well.

For Manuden, see <http://www.manuden.org.uk/mhsChurchHistory.asp>.

The Historic Religious Buildings Alliance brings together those working for a secure future for historic religious buildings.

The HRBA is an independently-funded group within The Heritage Alliance. This is the biggest alliance of heritage interests in the UK and was set up to promote the central role of the non-Government movement in the heritage sector.

We are independent of any faith group or individual heritage body. Since our foundation in 2008 we have built up an enviable reputation as a trustworthy and fact-based advocate for the future of historic churches and other places of worship.

We provide briefings to members on matters of mutual interest and help them share information and best practice with each other, and move toward a common mind on the issues of the day. We engage directly with a much larger constituency through our newsletter, public meetings, website and publications.

Views expressed in the publications of the HRBA are those of the author, not of the HRBA or The Heritage Alliance, nor any individual or body associated with them.

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