

# How certain is the victory of conservation? Indeed, have we won?

Matthew Saunders



The Historic Religious Buildings Alliance

Keynote address, The 'Big Update'

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The keynote address delivered to the annual HRBA 'Big Update' on 12 December, 2018.

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*The cover photo shows the partly-demolished St Alkmund's church, Derby. Amidst considerable controversy, the church was taken down in the winter and spring of 1967/8 to make way for an inner ring road. Built by Derby architect Henry Isaac Stevens in 1844–6, this was Derby's oldest Christian site, older than the town itself. The church was dominant in the townscape, with a tower and spire more than 200 feet high; these had been pulled down some time before this photo was taken. (© Eric Chapman; reproduced by kind permission)*

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## About the author

**Matthew Saunders** retired not long before this lecture after 27 years as Director of The Friends of Friendless Churches and 41 years as Secretary of the Ancient Monuments Society (AMS). For a transitional period he remains editor of AMS/The Friends newsletter and ecclesiastical caseworker to AMS.

From 1983–2005 he was Secretary of the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies and 2005–2011, a Trustee of the Heritage Lottery Fund. He was one of the founding trustees of the Historic Chapels Trust.

He is a member of the Diocesan Advisory Committee for London Diocese, a Trustee of the Francis Coales Charitable Foundation and a Vice-President of The Ecclesiological Society. He has recently been appointed by the Secretary of State to the Church Buildings Council of the Church of England and its Statutory Advisory Committee on Closed and Closing Churches where his experience and expertise will continue to help address the challenges facing historic places of worship today.

He has been commissioned by Historic England to prepare a report on the current state of statutory listing and this will of course embrace places of worship.

Matthew Saunders was awarded the MBE for services to architectural conservation in 1998.

The following is the text of the keynote address delivered to the annual HRBA 'Big Update' on 12 December 2018.



# How certain is the victory of conservation? Indeed, have we won?

*Matthew Saunders*

Ladies and Gentlemen, I should begin with some Health Warnings.

Firstly, this is neither a true valediction nor a complete retrospect as I have not yet quit the scene. I serve on the London Diocesan Advisory Committee and am a member of the Church Buildings Council and have just been commissioned by Historic England (HE) to carry out a survey of the range and effectiveness of statutory listing, places of worship included. I am also carrying on for a transitional period as Ecclesiastical Caseworker to the Ancient Monuments Society (AMS) and Newsletter Editor to the AMS and FoFC (Friends of Friendless Churches).

In the light of those associations I ought to say that the following observations are my own. But standing down from full time employment after 41 years does offer an occasion for reflection.

I do need another vital footnote. I have for the most part swum with the flow rather than given it any particular personal direction – but it has been really exciting to feel that one is articulating and implementing a cause that is broadly supported by public opinion. There is real satisfaction too in being able to tweak the odd detailing or influence timing where there has been a risk of slippage.

## The broader picture – generally positive

Let's look first at the broader picture, ecclesiastical and secular.

A critical statistic. In 1979, at the time when the number of listed buildings was half what it is now, 693 listed buildings were the subject of an application in that one year for total demolition. In the last few years, at a time when the total of listed building entries in England alone has just passed the 400,000 mark, the number of applications for the total demolition of the listed principal rather than curtilage structure has never risen above ten, sometimes just five, a year – indeed as far as I can tell that is true of every year since 2010. Now that either means that there are a huge number of sullen owners out there who are seething at the designation but not resisting it publicly or, as I would submit is the case, it is indicative of a constructive acceptance by the great majority of owners, and their advisers, of the challenges and pleasure of owning a listed building.

'In the last few years . . . the number of applications for the total demolition [of a listed building] has never risen above ten, sometimes just five, a year . . .'

‘could I really have imagined only 20 years ago that volume house-builders such as Berkeley Homes would have been buying up historic buildings for conversion’

The emergence of the new systems of accreditation, the conservation architect, the conservation surveyor, the conservation engineer have only proved possible because of the demand for their services.

Let me not be naïve. Listing can be very unwelcome for a minority but one of the true revolutions that I have witnessed is that within the development community. Doctors and lawyers have been based in the Georgian terrace from the pages of Thackeray and Dickens onwards – but now, in the last decade or so, we have been seeing Hedge Funds consciously seek out as their office the listed town houses of Mayfair. And could I really have imagined only 20 years ago that volume house-builders such as Berkeley Homes would have been buying up historic buildings for conversion precisely because they make money and they bring the developer kudos? There are still some stick-in-the-mud Pension Funds but even in that nominally conservative bastion, fund managers are now financing the conversion of former hospitals, docks, warehouses which would have been surrounded by their notorious red lines in the Sixties. The days when Building Societies wouldn’t lend mortgages at all within defined ‘slum areas’ have completely gone. So I fear have the Building Societies themselves – but their successor banks have abolished all formal prejudice against the traditional house. The young in Leith, Hoxton, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester and the London Docks flock to the converted survivors of the Industrial Revolution like the warehouse. The retired do the same to the country house divided into flats and the retirement village grouped around the retained Victorian villa or former workhouse. The biggest loser in the huge popularity of the former rectory has been the Church of England itself as it has sold off the supposedly over-large vicarage only to see it snapped up as one of the most desirable of all places in the countryside to live – so desirable that Charles Moore has found a ready constituency of members for his Old Rectory Club.

And there is now a corpus of developers, small but committed, with whom the Church Commissioners are in regular contact who are prepared to take on the challenge of the massive Victorian church that has toppled into redundancy. The strong-stomached Simon Linford of Czero Developments has acquired the Grade II\* St Luke’s Blakenhall, Wolverhampton which is now tenanted by a loose-fit antiques emporium, following a programme of repairs.

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And the Conservation Movement has been the beneficiary of a social and political revolution in the approach to towns and cities. I remember, with dread, the Comprehensive Development Area or CDA which swept away whole areas of useable streets, assisted by the widespread use of compulsory purchase powers; the ring road and inner relief road are trials of the past (partly alas because nearly all of them have now been built). Only one brand new motorway is planned anywhere in the country in the next ten years. There used to be a flight from the inner cities – now the flight back has led to the most eye-popping house prices in some part of the country being attached to the Georgian terrace and the nineteenth-century villa set in its own grounds. The average demolition proposal now embraces not the listed building but the Sixties office block, where the inflexibility of

the low floor-to-ceiling floor plates rule them out for continued commercial use. And behind most of this revolution is a good side to the collapse in State spending. Local authorities used to have so much money for shopping centres and roads that they were the author of one in three of the applications to demolish listed buildings – last year they were responsible for precisely none. Local authorities are nowadays selling the listed library not so that they can build a larger and better one but because the service in that location has simply stopped and they need to realise the capital sale in order to survive. This is of course not a good thing for conservation but is the unwelcome flipside to the starving of the public purse that has had the benign effect of denying the notoriously philistine road engineer that assured revenue budget which would widen the road at the expense of the delightful pub on the corner. Swings and roundabouts.

And what a fabulous day it was when John Major established the HLF – the Heritage Lottery Fund, now the National Lottery Heritage Fund – in 1985. At its height it was spending £400m a year and scores of historic buildings, churches included, are now standing and in good heart because of it. In London diocese alone the HLF spend has been £65m.

Britain has always been a leader in conservation legislation as well as in the establishment of voluntary societies. Think SPAB, set up 141 years ago. And now there is no other country in the world, even Italy, to rival the 400,000 listings in England nor to match the status as statutory consultees granted to the National Amenity Societies.

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## Some grey areas

Now we move into greyer areas.

It is hard to claim the internet as an unequivocal indicator of the triumph of the Conservation Movement. It does no good at all when free online alternatives kill off the local paper, which used to be such a stimulant to local identity and pride or indeed the profitability of hardcopy publishing (which has led to the recent decision of HE to outsource its book-publishing programme). And yet even here there is a silver lining as Facebook hosts any number of petitions against unwarranted demolition, some of which have persuaded the planning authority concerned to refuse consent. And a number of conservation projects have been rescued of late through unexpectedly successful crowd-funding.

If the Internet is a classic Curate’s Egg – good in parts – that is even truer of Central Government. It remains a source of great comfort that no-one in the three main parties has, since 1947 and the birth of Listing, criticised the expansion in the regime of protection to the extent of suggesting rolling it back – it was after all under Margaret Thatcher, the great believer in *laissez faire*, that Michael Heseltine was allowed to double the number of listed buildings. But there does now seem to be a growing sense in the corridors of Whitehall that the subject is so uncontroversial that it doesn’t really need attention any more. So unimportant in fact that the name needn’t even appear in the name of the ministry there to defend it – what is it now? The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport with not a hint in the title

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that we are a country with a record in the protection of the Historic Environment that is the envy of the world. I think George Osborne genuinely felt that he was doing the Heritage proud when he found £80m to set English Heritage loose from the fetters of State funding with a view to its becoming self-financing by 2023. But if EH succeeds, that will create the astonishing situation whereby the taxpayer of the future is to be exonerated from any direct requirement to subsidise the 400 ruined abbeys and castles in State care. Is that faith in the capacity of a much-appreciated asset to wash its face financially precisely because it doesn’t need subsidy – or an attempt to cut State funding into the long term? A lot of us do fear the primacy of the latter motive. And what do we make of a Tory Government, supposedly wedded to Green issues, who persisted for years with a VAT regime that taxes careful repair and levies not a penny on alteration and demolition? George Osborne’s exemption of sorts from VAT for churches and his finding of £55m at the back of the sofa to boost the grant coffers of churches and cathedrals shows a man personally committed to our areas of concern – whilst Philip Hammond’s recent tripling of HE’s grant budget with £40m for its Heritage Action Zones does confirm a Government with some understanding for the capacity of the Historic Environment to generate economic wellbeing. And yet and yet I am still not sure as a lobby that we are sufficiently respected, understood and feared in Whitehall. Government’s assumption that HLF can step in to pick up where the State agencies have to back off is now looking increasingly risky as HLF faces a halving in its own budget and is showing itself increasingly determined to demand many more outcomes than HE. And we are now in the middle of the year where the Historic Buildings agency in Wales, Cadw, has stopped all grants (supposedly on a temporary basis).

So overall whilst there have been increasingly worrying trends in recent years, and we can never be certain of Government sympathies, we are in a much better place now than we were in 1977.

## Faith buildings

But when we narrow our focus to faith buildings, whilst most of what I have already outlined applies, there are other aspects that don’t pertain to the secular.

Now at the risk of being more contentious than I have been hitherto, there are disturbing prospects.

The gradual retreat in formal religious observance seems to be in defiance of a broader interest in Society in what has been termed the spiritual; but from our limited point of view, historic churches were built to articulate formal religion and if that is in decline then the threat to them will increase. Moreover where faith is expanding, it is within the Evangelical wing of the Church which is not always comfortable with the aged stillness of an ancient church. There are encouraging exceptions – The Churches Revitalisation Trust, set up by Holy Trinity, Brompton in 2017, has taken on a number of listed churches that would otherwise have been under threat – St Peter’s Brighton (Charles Barry), Holy Trinity, Hastings (S. S. Teulon),

‘historic churches were built to articulate formal religion and if that is in decline then the threat to them will increase’

St Nicholas, Bristol (latterly one of the country's few ecclesiastical museums), St Werburgh, Derby (that had been a shopping centre) and St Swithin's, Lincoln. But many Evangelical congregations will find it hard to live with the visual richness and symbolic focus of the Tractarian East End and feel physically constrained by choir stalls, the screen and the pew. 'The Beauty of Holiness' is associated with the High Church which is in retreat when it comes to representation at General Synod. The hundreds of young people who attend church every Sunday in The Gas Works in Brum may be worshipping in a Grade II\* listed building of great interest in the context of industrial archaeology – but I fear that for them that is its strength. Its very plainness, its complete lack of visual distraction or stimulation concentrates attention wholly on worship and preaching. For me churches are a powerful stairway to God through their sense of tradition, their maturity, their striving after beauty, their devotion to art and craftsmanship and their soaring architectural ambition. If I am honest, I do find it hard to share the enthusiasm of those committed to stripping away the architecture, the music, the colour and the sheer dexterity of hand in ecclesiastical art forms, in order to approach God directly and without 'diversions'.

It cannot help too that where raising money for churches, or carrying out the repair and rebuilding, used to be regarded as a social duty of the squire, now there is little that is automatic about it. In the City of London commercial companies used to give thousands of pounds to a City church in the limited expectation, by return, of a carol service or two. Now more companies have international perspectives and feel nervous about being seen to grant-aid 'faith'. Hardly any cathedral has closed its fundraising campaign without reaching its target and the capacity of even small villages to raise thousands I still find rather humbling. And yet I get the clear sense that raising sums for churches as a generality is much more of a slog than it used to be.

It is possible to wake in the wee small hours and feel that the Churches Conservation Trust, The Friends and all of us could not cope if the long-projected tsunami of closures materialised.

But there are real reasons for hope.

What I call the Simon Jenkins school of thought – that we love the churches as buildings but may admit to trouble with the belief system behind them – is growing. I suspect that that ambiguity lies behind the hundreds of 'Friends of...' groups formed in recent years and it certainly explains the scores of moving comments left in the visitors' books in Friends churches – all of them by definition in churches that were closed because they failed to attract sufficient numbers of formal worshippers.

Such remarks prove to us that people are no less moved by the peaceful experience of Eternity in a church that is termed redundant by officialdom than they are in a church that remains 'open'.

There is the sense that churches are still the place to express permanence and a devotion to life. Melvyn Bragg received a rough time from the Diocesan Advisory Committee, as it happens, but he did choose to express his devotion to his hometown of Wigton in Cumbria through the commissioning of several stained glass windows in the Georgian parish

'What I call the Simon Jenkins school of thought – that we love the churches as buildings but may admit to trouble with the belief system behind them – is growing'

church. Ed Sheeran (a popular singer, Mi Lud) and David Beckham and Posh Spice acknowledge no public faith but both chose to embellish their celebrity estates with brand new 'private chapels', each modelled on historical precedent.

The church as a building type is alive and well. New churches are naturally not part of the Conservation Movement but Heritage is always strongest when it is part of a continuum. So I take huge comfort from the fact that major religious buildings are still being constructed – for those of you who don't know it, the new chapel at Cuddesdon Theological College near Oxford is always open. It is a memorable, truly numinous space. It is no surprise that the architect, Neil McLoughlin originally wanted to be a monk. There are also highly significant windows being made for churches by gifted artists like Tom Denny and Helen Whittaker. Thank Heavens for Art and Christianity Enquiry (ACE) which encourages Modern Art in Ancient Churches. Hats off too to 'Memorials by Artists' which tries to involve professional artists in the commemoration of loved ones in churches and churchyards.

The greater interest being shown in Mixed Uses is encouraging. It used to be the case that churches either flourished exclusively as places of worship or were handed over to all embracing new uses. Now there is greater trust in that good Anglican commitment to the Via Media – the Mixed Use. If your building is too large, open it up to the broader community whether by a Citizens Advice Bureau or Post Office in the north aisle, or a shelter for the homeless in the crypt. And there is also much greater truck with that even more benign option, the shared use of space – a service in the nave on the Sunday, a concert the night before, a hustings in the aisle or lecture by the Local History Society in the west gallery. We need to avoid any evocation of Jesus having to clear the money changers from the Temple, but there is nevertheless scope for a wide gamut of additional uses. After all it was established practice for the church to double as the village school.

'there is . . . scope for a wide gamut of additional uses'

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Where does this all leave us?

Are we in a better place than we were forty years ago – most certainly. Have we won? Well a fatuous question deserves an emphatic No – because we will never achieve such a Nirvana.

However I would say that in an increasingly unchurched society, and one where non-Christian faiths are comparatively healthy, that the affection for the historic church held by most Britons is surprisingly undented.

I think I still remain more nervous over the fate of our ecclesiastical heritage than I do the secular – although there too townscape faces sizeable threats from the renewed confidence in the tower block, the seemingly inexorable march of the plastic window and market collapse in areas like Stoke on Trent.

'the affection for the historic church held by most Britons is surprisingly undented . . .'

‘... but I can see increasingly tough challenges ... on the horizon’

But I can see increasingly tough challenges for churches and chapels on the horizon – the recent return of the metal thief is hugely depressing and there is no easy method of tackling this crime: the chances are that the rate of closure will, despite the confidence of recent years, speed up, especially in Wales; we really do need the revival of an equivalent to the old English Heritage grant stream for churches, with a strong focus on repairs whilst we must ensure the survival of the Historic Chapels Trust, which faces a very uncertain future. We need to continue the reinvention of churches as centres of the community as well as the powerhouses of art and music that they were in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. How I long to see historic churches once again in the mainstream. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the next Tom Denny window in a church were the subject of a review in the *Guardian*? And wouldn't it be satisfying to see supportive editorials not just in *Country Life* but in *The Times* or indeed *The Huffington Post*? Wouldn't it be great to see another great exhibition at the V&A on the Historic Church to follow that of forty years ago? And I really do hope that when Prince Charles ascends the throne he doesn't feel obligated to bury all his passion for our work.

Above all I hope that nobody in this room will have to witness the destruction of a great church. I shall never quite forget the sense of loss and outrage at witnessing the bulldozing of St Erkenwald, Southend or Holy Trinity, Rugby.

Now to the business of the day when we will learn how to avoid such calamities in the future.

The above is the text of the keynote address delivered to the annual HRBA 'Big Update' on 12 December 2018.

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**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.

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