

## Change or Decay

Trapeze artists suspended above the nave of a Bristol church; pensioners enjoying a community whist drive in a well-heated side chapel in the Marches. Nick Jones assesses the diversity of the growing church reordering movement

**I**N THIS country there are presently around 16,000 church buildings or places of worship, around 14,500 of which are owned by the Church of England (CofE). Annually it spends some £110 million on their maintenance and more than 12,000 of them are architecturally listed.

Set against CofE national attendance figures – there are currently about one million churchgoers each Sunday (less than 2% of the adult population) – the ratio of buildings to worshippers seems puny, although attendances have remained stable for at least a decade. Even so, 70 weekly worshippers per church is a worrying statistic. Herefordshire fares less well: here we have over 400 churches, serving a population of 278,000. These attract a ‘usual’ (CofE terminology for not counting Christmas and Easter) weekly attendance of 9400, or 20 per church.

Cathedrals and urban-based churches are probably the best supported in terms of established congregations, while country churches – especially in sparsely-inhabited rural counties such as Herefordshire - fare less well,

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Sir Roy Strong

both in terms of bums on pews and the ever present worry about the maintenance of these buildings’ often fragile fabric.

Since the beginning of this millennium ‘church reordering’ have been popular buzz-words, certainly in the vocabularies of concerned dioceses and parochial church councils. Church conversions, where large under used religious buildings have been taken ‘out of service’ and transformed into other uses, are nothing new. The impressive Lincoln College Library (formerly All Saints Church, Oxford), the spacious OAP’s day care centre contained within York’s Church of St Sampson or the music performance space within St John’s Smith Square in Westminster are all exemplars which go back more than a quarter of a century.

The American historian Katherine French’s absorbing study of community life in an English medieval diocese (‘The People of the Parish’) revealed that within many town churches, activities other than conventional worship would frequently be encountered. Here, the writer tells us, people might meet to trade, complete business deals or consult lawyers. Scriveners were always on hand, on the lookout for work.

In the last five years, 123 of the CofE’s church buildings have been deconsecrated and put to other uses, residential being the largest (22%). A further 29 have been demolished and six were transferred to the Churches Conservation Trust for repair and preservation.

Transforming church interiors whilst retaining their primary use as places of worship and introducing an extended community use (‘reordering’), is a fairly recent phenomenon which has been gathering pace in this 21st century. The Hereford Diocese, which has advised on or overseen nearly 40 transformations across the county, is now recognised by conservationists as being in the forefront of this movement. Within this diocese there are 425 churches, 90% of which are listed.

### V&A exhibition

One of the first people to draw attention to the problem of the dichotomy between our under-used places of worship and opportunities for their transformation, was Sir Roy Strong. During his 13 year tenure as Director

of the Victoria & Albert Museum, he was instrumental in setting up three major ‘themed’ exhibitions. These focused on the plight of great English country houses, major landscaped gardens and parklands, and the threat to architecturally important churches in our towns and cities. By Sir Roy’s own admission the last - ‘Change or Decay: the future of our churches’ in 1977 – was the least successful. It was accompanied by a special book by Marcus Binney (co-founder of the conservation pressure group Save Britain’s Heritage) and the architect Peter Burnham. The 70’s had been a climatic time for church architecture, with no fewer than 529 churches being de-consecrated between 1968 and 1976, many in urban areas due to a combination of structural neglect and poor congregations.

Reordering operations in urban areas are usually easier to identify than those for under-used parish churches in rural areas. Community meeting spaces, adult learning centres, lending libraries, field study centres, local history information centres, sub post offices, even pilgrimage retreats have been identified as potential new uses for country churches.



Happy clients at an infants' playgroup session in St Peter's, Peterchurch (photo: Infinity Unlimited)



Mezzanine eating area in All Saints' 1997 award-winning conversion, with Tardis-like vestry beneath (photo courtesy Martine Hamilton Knight / Builtvision)

Although funding is invariably the main stumbling block with reordering exercises, there was encouraging news at the end of last year from the Heritage Lottery Fund. In England, £25-million (of the Fund's annual distribution of £375-million) is now to be earmarked for projects involving essential structural repairs and adaptations. The scheme replaces the former Repair Grant Scheme administered by English Heritage.

Founded in 1968, the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) cares for 342 churches vested in it by the CoE's Church Commissioners, repairing the damage from years of neglect and working with local communities to bring them back to life. Its reordering schemes range from a new cultural centre in the Chapel of St Nicholas, King's Lynn to Circomedia's award-winning training school for aspiring circus artists inside St Paul's, Bristol.

CCT's sister charity, Friends of Friendless Churches, owns 21 former places of worship in England, maintaining and keeping them open for visitors. Its two current Herefordshire buildings are the medieval church at Llancillo and the 12th century castle chapel of Urishay.

One of the earliest manifestations of church reordering in Herefordshire was local architect Rod Robinson's imaginative transformation of All Saint's Church, Hereford, completed in 1997. It went on to win both an RIBA and Civic Trust Award. But the £1.7-million conversion, which included repairs to the spire, the insertion of toilets, kitchens, parish office, a 60-seater café and a Tardis-like glass vestry, was not without its opponents; several members of the congregation left in disgust that the city's oldest church should be 'modernised' in this way.

#### Award winners

Communion Architects, based at Shelwick, has carried out a number of church reordering exercises in the county. The practice was founded by Alex Coppock in 2006. Probably its best-known

scheme is the award-winning conversion of the Norman parish church of St Peter's at Peterchurch, completed in February 2012. New community-based uses which have been seamlessly woven into the fabric of the building's interior include: a small lending library, spaces for health and fitness classes, a children's play area and facilities to mount exhibitions and music recitals.

Conventional services of worship are maintained, but the transformation has meant that weekly attendances at St Peter's have risen from 30 to 300. The awards jury's citation puts it well: "This is a very good example of a church expanding its role in village life through the provision of new services – to the young and to the old."

One of Communion's most recent projects has been the New Bridge Community Centre at St Andrew's, Bridge Sollars. Within this Grade 1 listed Norman church, a rural events space has been built, shared by five local parishes (who had no meetings spaces of their own) to mount events such as concerts, exhibitions and evening classes. Funding support came from the Big Lottery Fund.

Another local reordering scheme is the free-standing shop unit added to the interior of the 14th century church of St Leonard's, Yarpole, designed by Robert Chitham. Staffed by a team of 45 local volunteers, the shop sells a range of locally-produced produce, it is also the village's sub-post office and the structure's mezzanine level acts as an occasional café.

In 2008, on the initiative of tireless campaigner Sir Roy Strong, the City of London's Mercers Company launched its 'Village Church for Village Life' award, aimed at highlighting church reordering success stories. There

was a first prize of £10,000 on offer. Though this was something of a leap in the dark for this ancient livery company, its faith was amply rewarded with no fewer than 80 entries. Winner was the village church of St Philip & St James at Norton St Philip in Somerset. Architect George Chedburn's £175,000 conversion centres on The Hub, a new free-standing structural component containing vestry, lavatory, kitchen and upstairs meeting room. A similar architectural approach of 'discreet addition' was achieved at Whatcote in Warwickshire, where architect Charles Brown's reordering of St Peter's Church picked up the Mercers' runners-up prize.

At the inauguration service of the reordering of St Peter's, Peterchurch last year, a message from Sir Roy Strong was read out, which pulled no punches: "There are roughly 10,000 churches in England, of which 5000 are not really needed. The crisis in the countryside is everywhere to be seen: the crumbling buildings, the dwindling congregations, the endless demands for money and the inability of villagers to come to terms with reality."

USEFUL REFERENCES 'A Little History of the English Country Church' by Sir Roy Strong (2007) is published by Vintage Books. 'Re-pitching the Tent' by Richard Giles (2004) is described by its publishers (Canterbury Press) as "the definitive guide to reordering your church." Further information and advice on local church reordering can be obtained from the Hereford Diocese Office, Units 8/9, The Business Quarter, Ludlow Eco Park, Eco Park Road, Ludlow SY8 1FD (01584 871089). The work of The Churches Conservation Trust can be viewed at [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) English Heritage's publication 'New Uses for Former Places of Worship' can be downloaded free from [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk) Heritage Lottery Funding details are at [www.hlf.org.uk](http://www.hlf.org.uk) An abbreviated version of this article can be found on the on-line encyclopaedia Wikipedia at [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org)