

Conservation and the church heritage

This second issue of *Church Archaeology*, marking another busy year for the Society, reports some of the significant recent developments in both the study and conservation of churches. I am pleased to introduce Richard Halsey as the author of the first in a series of guest editorials commenting on the past year in church archaeology. Richard Halsey is Director of East Region with English Heritage and has a long-standing professional and academic interest in ecclesiastical buildings.

Carol Pyrah

The continuing care of parish churches (and a growing number of listed Nonconformist chapels and Roman Catholic churches) forms a large part of the workload of many at English Heritage, especially those working in counties blessed with many more medieval churches than can readily be kept in regular use. It was partly to draw attention to this wider role that English Heritage Commissioners decided to designate 1997 as 'Christian Heritage Year', focusing on the opening in May of the new museum at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury (a project close to the heart of Sir David Wilson for so long).

Those of us who remember this monument as a curiously unfriendly and cluttered site, hemmed in by the Victorian Gothic King's School buildings and a hospital, with just a sad wooden shed for its museum, can now enjoy broad views over the site from a splendid new vantage point (the reclaimed south east campanile mound) and properly study the many artefacts in the airy, new museum. As many finds as possible are shown without intervening glass, though

sufficiently inaccessibly to prevent damage from sticky fingers. Reconstruction drawings help visitors to visualise the site at various times in its history, the colourful church interior shown in bright daylight, rather than Sorrellian gloom. With so little standing fabric, the site still remains a challenge to all but dedicated archaeologists, but the museum, with its many exhibits, is an attraction in its own right, demonstrating how small-scale evidence can be used to good effect to flesh out the bare historical and archaeological bones. But I am still not sure I remember seeing any evidence for a box framed basilica in the 7th century?

The marketing centrepiece of the Year was a large map of 'England's Christian Heritage'; over 250,000 copies of this map listing nearly 200 sites of interest were distributed. Naturally enough, it included all the English Heritage ecclesiastical sites, cathedrals (most of which have received grants for their repairs) and lots of other churches and chapels that English Heritage had been involved with in recent years. Needless to say, a few places not included on the map complained at their exclusion, but given the huge wealth of 'Christian Heritage' to choose from, it's really extraordinary that so many sites managed to fit onto just one map. Very many other events were generated through the year by the attention given to this subject; the Society should feel heartened to know just how interested the general public is in the subject of churches and their history.

That interest in church buildings was more than amply demonstrated by the huge success of the Joint Scheme. This is the joint grant

scheme for places of worship in use run by English Heritage and using equal sums of money from EH and the Heritage Lottery Fund (currently a total of £20 million per annum), not just to fund repairing churches and chapels of heritage interest, ie usually those that are listed, but also to ensure their continued use by funding selective 'new facilities'. Giving out money ought to be the enjoyable bit of our work, but the sheer success of the Joint Scheme in drumming up business has overwhelmed the staff and funds available. Over 1300 applications have been made for something like £200 million worth of work. From an average pre-Joint Scheme programme of about £60,000 worth of repair, applications for over £200,000 are normal, with many projects reaching seven figure sums. Lottery greed and clerical fantasy (for the perfect worship and community centre) are no doubt the basis of some applications. But most are simply endeavouring to catch up with repairs that have accumulated over the last few decades and particularly to launch the building into the 20th century (just in time for the 21st to begin!).

The 'new facilities' issue is at the heart of much statutory control work, in Diocesan Advisory Committees, Historic Church Committees and of course, local planning authorities. The practical issues – new accesses, new drains and foundations – are usually resolvable, with some give and take and providing there is money available to pay for adequate evaluation and feasibility studies (and there has been quite a lot of cash put into 'archaeology/recording').

However, it is the broader principles that cause the biggest rows,

the necessity to prove the need for the intervention so justifying any heritage loss. Surely, we are told, it is not unreasonable to provide some catering (and the inevitable toilets) if a building is to be continuously used by the general public? After all, no other public meeting space would be thought complete without such things, whether a WI hall or a new racecourse grandstand, and sound commercial reasons are formulated to justify new cafes in such secular situations. The ecclesiastical equivalent is justified sometimes in terms of traditional (Benedictine) hospitality, sometimes more baldly as being the vital ingredient in keeping the church in use. Today's society seems to run on communal tea and coffee and for the Church to remain relevant (and therefore active), such things have to be provided.

Equally vehement are those who do not like change and who also find it sacrilegious to include such mundane things within the building envelope. Their arguments stray into the realms of 'character' and 'significance', concepts that need to be considered alongside the more tangible and pragmatic fabric issues. Archaeologists have just as much to contribute to this part of the debate as those who consider themselves to be coming from an aesthetic angle. By summarising small items of evidence to create a clear chronology of use for a particular space, its significance and character can be better defined, and any new work designed to take this evidence into account. Too often sketch schemes for, say, infilling the base of a west tower simply ignore the character and significance of the space, through ignorance and the rush to fit the client's quart requirements into the building's pint pot. Perhaps worse is the frequent lack of quality in design, with standard fittings and modern finishes used in new construction expected to fit into centuries-old fabric. Panel radiators will never look anything but

late 20th-century technology, but the right colour paint and early consideration of the fabric against which the radiator will stand, can help to keep them inconspicuous.

The former CBA Churches Committee repeatedly drew architects' attention to the need for archaeological assessments to parallel or complement the recommendations of their quinquennial inspections. The 'Conservation Plan' concept is an extension of this idea, or rather, the more logical approach, as the process should identify areas of cultural significance, and establish policies to safeguard them, in advance of new project design. Once again, the archaeologists' techniques of analysis and compilation are vital ingredients to a successful plan. However, it is important that the archaeological considerations are incorporated within the broader view and not seen as a simple list of prohibitions. It may be vital to the knowledge of the building's chronology to record the scars of a long-lost wing or chapel, but counterproductive and destructive of the character of the overall space or architectural composition, to insist on leaving those scars visible.

John Newman's report for the DCMS on the operation of the 'ecclesiastical exemption' since 1994 is very supportive of the need for archaeological considerations to be addressed at the earliest possible stage, and equally supportive of the role of diocesan archaeological consultants. His recommendation is that 'all DACs in the Church of England follow the practice laid down for DACs in the Church in Wales and appoint, after consultation with the CBA, archaeologist members with voting rights'. Furthermore, he recommended that 'all DACs formulate archaeological policies, coordinated with the local archaeological policy for the relevant county or counties'. Let us hope that there will be some county archaeologists for the Church of

England to consult!

John Newman also drew attention to the need for much better information to be made available to DACs, commending those who had attempted to create records for each of their churches, rather than rely simply on DAC members' memories. The Council for the Care of Churches Working Party on Church Archaeology will report later this year (its work unfortunately delayed by the untimely death of Donald Findlay), and the CCC is also promoting the creation of a national Church Heritage Database. Such things have been attempted in the past, and many of us know just how much information is available to compile, let alone validate or draw conclusions from. The exercise must not be allowed to become so all-embracing that it will take a century to complete, which is why the Steering Group is embarking on an initial phase to ascertain just what the principal users of such information need to carry out their various functions. A similar exercise undertaken by English Heritage in Norwich Diocese alone drew out some fairly disparate responses, so it will be interesting to see if a larger pilot can find consensus.

At the moment, there is a great deal of activity involving the ecclesiastical built heritage and its proper management, and this Society needs to ensure that its collective expertise is plugged into these various initiatives. For the Society's strength is that it is pan-denominational, with a membership including academics and administrators, clerics and archaeologists, all with the common purpose of learning from and preserving the ecclesiastical heritage. Richard Halsey

