

# Inspired by ... Support Officer Posts

*Jackie Hall*

*Diana Evans is the Head of Places of Worship Policy at English Heritage. Part of her remit has been to head the ongoing 'Inspired!' campaign, which has just started to roll out new Support Officer posts to help congregations make the most of their historic buildings to ensure a bright future for them. Jackie Hall interviewed her for Church Archaeology.*

*Before we talk about the new posts, perhaps you could remind our readers about the aims for the Inspired! campaign which started in 2006.*

The main purpose behind *Inspired!* was to respond to different levels of need regarding repairs to historic places of worship. We came up with five responses, which we hoped would help. The first of these was to rewrite the list descriptions in a user-friendly way that would highlight what is significant about each building. This was overtaken by the Heritage Protection Review, part of whose remit was to align the different designation systems. Since this is now not going forward to parliament, we have returned to this and have commissioned four consultants to rewrite the list descriptions of the 660 buildings, mostly Church of England churches, listed in the 1970s. Not only will this change their listings from the old A, B, C method that was employed at that time to the I, II, II\* that is still in use, but they will be written the way we'd like designations to look in the future – and in a way that will make it easier for congregations to understand their buildings.

Our second response was to help congregations help themselves, and the new Support Officer posts are the product of that. The third response was to focus on maintenance and this has been done through

*Secretary of State Andy Burnham and Tim Hatton, Manchester's Support Officer, at the EH Launch in St Clement Salford, December 2008 (Howard Barlow; copyright English Heritage)*

the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) Faith in Maintenance programme. This has been enormously successful – nearly 1,500 volunteers have received a day's training in building maintenance already. We have also started pilot projects of gutter clearance in the dioceses of London, St Edmundsbury and Gloucester (the last an ecumenical pilot), to

understand the practical issues and explore different models of maintenance. We are currently in the process of reviewing these pilots and viewing them in a national and European context.

The fourth response was to start a light-touch small repair grant scheme but, unfortunately, this never got going due to lack of money. Our fifth response to the problems facing historic places of worship was to explore, with bodies like the Churches Conservation Trust, other uses that they could take on, especially mixed uses to avoid redundancy. This will also be an important part of what the Support Officers do.

#### *How many Support Officers will there be?*

Altogether, 30 posts will be rolled out over the next three years, and English Heritage will pay 50% of all costs for the first three years of each post.

#### *Who pays for the other half?*

For each post there is a partner organisation, who is the employer. The five pilot partners are all Church of England dioceses, and they have all found the posts to be very worthwhile – one of them has already been made permanent.

#### *But not all the posts will be in the C of E?*

No, there can be great variability depending on individual circumstances. Each post is or will be tailor-made. Some may be ecumenical, some interfaith, some could be based in local authorities and some in county churches trusts. Although most will be regional, in some cases, perhaps the non-conformist exempt denominations (see Christopher Stell's article in the last *Church Archaeology*), it might be appropriate to have a nationwide position.

#### *What will be the priorities of the Support Officers?*

Again, this will vary depending on the post. Some will need to take a strategic look at all the historic buildings in their area; for some the emphasis might be on helping churches access grants better; for others there might be a need to understand and interpret buildings better, while other Support Officers might concentrate on maintenance. In some areas, looking at new uses for historic churches and other places of worship might be the most important priority,

perhaps to open them up more to the public and to avoid redundancy.

#### *How many posts have been appointed so far?*

As well as the pilots, three other posts have been agreed.

#### *How do our readers go about getting one of these posts?*

If they are a member of a congregation, they will need to go through the hierarchy of that church or faith group. Larger organisations should look at the website and get in touch with us, at English Heritage. Lots of work goes into creating each post, and making sure it's right for the particular circumstances – filling in all the necessary forms comes right at the end of the process.

#### *Have the repair grants for churches changed at all?*

No, they are exactly the same, with the same criteria. Getting help with a grant application from a Support Officer doesn't necessarily guarantee success. But the money for the Support Officer posts is **new money** – it hasn't been taken from the repair grants fund.

#### *How do you see the future for historic places of worship?*

I feel hugely positive about it, mainly because of the massive commitment by volunteers who use these buildings and who keep them going, which should never be undervalued. There is also strong interest from people who have no religious beliefs – there are nearly 1000 independent friends groups, many interested in the heritage and history held in these buildings. Local authorities are showing interest as well – we've held six training days on places of worship for local authority staff last year, all of them oversubscribed. These are about the legal frameworks for the exempt denominations, how buildings could be used for community uses, how they could be changed to achieve that, and how historic buildings no longer in use can be given a sustainable future.

*What advice or training do Support Officers receive for dealing with potential conflicts between making alterations and promoting new uses, and conserving historic significance (archaeological, architectural etc)?*

One of the reasons why Support Officers can be so useful to congregations is that they can ensure all possible views are sought when the project is at the “twinkle in the eye” stage, before a specific proposal has been set in the congregation's mind and long before any money is spent on commissioning drawings. The principle of early consultation underpins Support Officer work, together with the need for the congregation to identify its needs and understand the significance of the building. The Support Officer will be backed up by a network of individuals within the partner organisation, English Heritage and other bodies so that different perspectives can be expressed; we're looking for constructive conservation and sustainability, not conflict.

*How do you see church archaeology now and in the future?*

There has been a sea-change in attitudes to archaeology in the last ten years. Not only is there much more individual interest, but all the dioceses have a Diocesan Archaeological Advisor (DAA), many of whom give a good deal of their time to parishes to help them get it right. There is increasing understanding that the archaeology, both above and below ground, should be explored first, so that it is written into the specification. Knowing more enables you to share it better (and this is likely to be a priority for many of the Support Officers) and archaeology is part of that.

For more information about Inspired! and the Support Officer posts, go to the English Heritage website at <http://www.englishheritage.org.uk/inspired/server/show/nav.19414>

*Jackie Hall is Vice Chair of The Society for Church Archaeology, Assistant Editor of Church Archaeology and Cathedral Archaeologist at Peterborough*