

Ruined Churches: Problem or Opportunity?

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The Church Buildings Council (CBC, formerly known as the CCC) of the Church of England has recently produced a guidance note on best practice and management models for dealing with ruined churches, accessible from the Archaeology section of the Churchcare web site (<http://www.churchcare.co.uk>). The background to the production of this guidance, and suggestions for the way forward, are the subject of this article.

‘Ruin’ is a wonderfully evocative term which has inspired many writers, including Lord Byron in his famous passage about the Colosseum (Manfred, Act III, Scene IV).

*A grove which springs through levell'd
battlements
And twines its roots with the imperial hearths,
Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth;—
But the gladiators' bloody Circus stands,
A noble wreck in ruinous perfection!*

In 1870 this was the subject of one of the earliest recorded debates regarding the correct approach to a ruined monument; we recognise the issues today. Should we leave it as it is, clean it up, rebuild it, convert it, or even knock it down? In the end it was cleaned up and consolidated and became one of the world's leading tourist attractions, quite free of groves and ivy.

The debate, however, did not end there. In 2004, a suggestion that missing wall sections should be rebuilt prompted the following response from the Director of the British School at Rome:

Any modern architect who thinks that an ancient building is a disappointment because of the way it has come down to us has missed the entire point of the magic of the survival of the past
(The Times, February 20, 2004).

Ruins in general and ruined churches in particular are a common and treasured feature of the English countryside and are often taken for granted; there is no doubt that they are generally considered to be a public resource, eliciting perhaps less eloquently expressed but equally valid reactions. The rural ruined church is often seen almost as a folly (some, such as the famous and controversial cases of Sockburn church and the Shobdon Arches, were deliberately created as such; Fig 1), a whimsical reminder of a romanticised past.

*Fig 1
Shobdon Arches, Herefordshire; an 18th-century folly re-using important Romanesque architectural fragments, now much eroded (by permission of the Shobdon Church Preservation Trust)*

Most rural ruined churches were simply abandoned, a practice which continued until the Pastoral Measure (1968) created a legal mechanism and consultative process for dealing with buildings surplus to requirements. Others, particularly in towns, may be the result of disastrous events, particularly bombing in World War II. The reactions to these are often different, but no less emotive; such monuments and sites are often loaded with multi-layered significance.

So how big an issue is this? The CBC has now compiled an updated list of all the ruins definitely or probably under the Faculty Jurisdiction of the Church of England (around 200), to clarify the legal status of the uncertain cases and get an accurate overview of the Church of England's 'portfolio', which is (as with parish churches in use) the single biggest estate of such heritage assets in the country.

It is increasingly understood that the value of a ruin lies not only in its aesthetic, socio-cultural, archaeological or historical significance, but also very often in the ecology of these sites, which may have been managed to a greater or lesser degree, or not at all. An example is the ruin of Little Ryburgh All Saints, in Norfolk, which has recently been taken over by the parish council for use as a public monument (Fig 2).

This ruined church, a Grade II listed building, stands in a copse within a churchyard still used for burial, and is quite overgrown. Close inspection reveals herringbone masonry and flint quoins, and this combined with research has indicated that a church



Fig 1
The ruined and overgrown church of All Saints, Little Ryburgh, Diocese of Norwich (photo: Joseph Elders)

existed here from at least the late 11th century. Changes visible in the fabric give valuable insights into the liturgical, social, economic and historical developments which affected this tiny rural church through the centuries until its abandonment in 1750.

In terms of archaeology, this example demonstrates that these structures are time capsules, a valuable snapshot of the development of churches over the centuries which has not been masked by later change and restoration, particularly of course by the Victorians, but also for example in the aftermath of the Reformation. All ruined churches where substantial fabric survives are listed for these reasons. There is also often important underground archaeology, most obviously burials where these exist, but also the remains of earlier phases of the church and related features and structures such as monastic remains, or earlier use of the site. These sites are sometimes (somewhat arbitrarily) designated as Scheduled Monuments (but not in this case).

Should we therefore, in the tradition of the Colosseum and the Ministry of Works, strip the often destructive greenery away to consolidate this monument, better to appreciate its archaeological and historical significance, and facilitate public access? But wait. A recent survey established that the copse consists of several varieties of trees and bushes, and the ruin is colonised by climbing and creeping plants. Both are occasional or permanent host to two varieties of bees and several species of birds and insects, which are to a greater or lesser degree protected, and the local authority has a Biodiversity Action Plan for the area. A holistic approach to the management of such a monument is needed. How can this be achieved, and by whom?

Clearly, given the multitude of stakeholders and layers of significance sketched out above, partnership is the way forward if we are to fully exploit this extraordinary resource in the public interest. In some cases, such as at Little Ryburgh, it may be appropriate for other national or local organisations or private landowners to take over responsibility for ruined churches. In others, Heritage Management Agreements (or perhaps in the near or distant future statutory Heritage Partnership Agreements, should the Heritage Act pass Parliament) provide a model for collaboration towards managing this resource, involving volunteers and the local community; the CBC is looking to engage

with its secular partners, in particular the Council for British Archaeology, to facilitate these.

With increasing recognition of the importance of this type of site and the various and sometimes even conflicting values attached to them, the time is ripe to forge such partnerships. Ruined churches should be seen as community resources and public assets, not as burdens; as an opportunity, not a problem. Hopefully the guidance and related initiatives will help to shift perceptions.

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Useful Publications

CCC/CBC and English Heritage publications

Wildlife in Church & Churchyard. Church House Publishing, 1995

Churchyards Handbook (4th edition) Church House publishing, 2001

Stonework - Maintenance and Surface Repair; Church House Publishing, 2001

Discovering the past, informing the future: a guide to archaeology for parishes;

Church House Publishing, 2004

Church of England/English Heritage: *Guidance for best practice for the treatment of human remains excavated from Christian burial grounds*: 2005. Available at http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/16602_HumanRemains1.pdf

English Heritage: *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment* 2008

Church Buildings Council: *Ruined churches: Problem or Opportunity? Guidance for parishes and dioceses*: 2009. Available at <http://www.churchcare.co.uk>

CBA publications

Gilchrist, R (1989) A survey of ruined churches *CBA Research Report 60*, Council for British Archaeology, London

Rodwell, W & K (1977) Historic Churches – a wasting asset; *CBA Research report 19* Council for British Archaeology, London. Pages 13-17 contains a list of ruined churches in Essex and a summary of such in neighbouring areas

Other publications

Ashurst, J, Conservation of Ruins. *Butterworth-Heinemann Series in Conservation and Museology* 2006

Batcock, N (1991), The Ruined and Disused Churches of Norfolk, *East Anglian Archaeology 51*, Norfolk Archaeological Unit, Norwich

Batcock, N (1993), Medieval churches in use and in ruins, in Wade-Martins, P, (Eds), *An Historical Atlas of Norfolk*, Norfolk Museums Service, Norwich, pp60-1

Chitty, G (1987), A prospect of ruins, *Transactions of the Association for Studies in the Conservation of Historic Buildings*, Vol. 12 pp.43-60

Darvill, T (1987), *Ancient Monuments in the Countryside: An Archaeological Management Review*, English Heritage, London

Davison, CL (1991), *Historic buildings in Norfolk: ruined churches*, Department of Planning and Property, Norfolk County Council, Norwich, unpublished draft consultation document

Greenoak, F, (1993) *Wildlife in the Churchyard, the Plants and Animals of God's Acre*; Little Brown Books

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Shaw, JM (1987), *Historic Buildings in Norfolk: Problems and Opportunities*, Department of Planning and Property, Norfolk County Council, Norwich.

Thompson, MW (1981), *Ruins: Their Preservation and Display*, British Museums Publications Ltd, London