

Country churches held in trust for the future

CLIVE FEWINS



They may be tucked away at the end of deep lanes, hidden in Cotswold farmyards, perched precariously on hillside terraces, or sited incongruously on the outer edge of modern housing estates. They may be large, cavernous and Victorian, small, medieval and mysterious, or just delightfully jumbled and of many periods.

But whatever their pedigree, they must be buildings of historical or archaeological importance. An irreplaceable landmark. Then, with more than a few prayers and much ecclesiastical bureaucracy, they may join the long line of church buildings to be taken over by the Churches Conservation Trust.

Since the trust (formerly the Redundant Churches Fund) came into being in 1969, a handful of churches have been acquired every year. The number currently stands at 342, of which the vast majority are country churches no longer used for regular worship.

'Trust' churches remain consecrated and act as venues for occasional special services, but the current emphasis is on finding alternative community uses for them by involving local volunteers and partner organisations.

One of the churches 'taken over' by the trust is the parish church in the small village of Wensley, gloriously situated in the dale of that name in North Yorkshire.

Holy Trinity Church in Wensley, in the Yorkshire Dales, has recently come into the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.

Like the majority of country churches that come into the care of the trust, Holy Trinity Wensley was of doubtful viability because the village population had dwindled to 140, mainly elderly, people who were finding it increasingly difficult to find the £7,000 annual 'parish share' fee payable to the diocese. In addition to this the worshipping community was well cared-for by alternative church buildings, notably in the nearby village of Preston-under-Scar.

Its Saxon origins and fine interior fittings meant that Holy Trinity was far too special a building to be considered for alternative uses, and so, after all the due processes had taken place, it became the 340th church to be cared for by the trust.

Like all trust churches it now bears a plaque saying that it is no longer used for regular worship but because it is part of 'England's history' it is now maintained by the trust 'for the benefit of this and future generations'.

Like many trust churches it is fortunate in having a team of volunteers who clean and maintain the building, make sure it is opened daily, and arrange a flower rota. The leader, Penny Seckerson, explains:

"Really there was little alternative to redundancy: the transfer to the trust has been painful to some, but a success in many ways. We are very fortunate in having helpers like this," says trust director Crispin Truman. "There are about 1,000 regular volunteers and a further 3,000 or so who help by means

of friends' groups and community groups. Without them we would just not be able to cope."

The trust gains its funds largely from the government and from the Church Commissioners. However, for eight out of the past nine years its grant aid has been frozen. Currently it receives £3.16m from the government and £1.36m from the Church Commissioners. The result is that the trust is increasingly reliant on donations to meet the repair needs of its churches.

Some of the volunteer helpers, like Val and Colin Sparks, who live near the coast of Kent, are also enthusiastic members of the supporters' club. They are both retired, and their favourite spare-time activity is visiting trust churches. Since 2002 they have travelled all over England doing this, and have visited all the 342 churches except one — Thornton-le-Moors in Cheshire, a new addition, which they plan to visit shortly.

"To be taken on by the trust, a church building has to be exceptional, but we find that, in one way or another, they are all interesting," says Val. "My husband and I don't really have a favourite but sometimes we divide the churches into three categories: atmosphere, position and interior. On that basis, one of my great favourites for atmosphere is Covehithe in Suffolk; for position, Brougham in Cumbria is top of my list; and for its interior Badley, in Suffolk, scores very highly.

"The trust does an exceptional job



Badley Church in Suffolk has one of the most atmospheric interiors of any trust church.



Booton Church in Norfolk is described by the trust as "an exuberant oddity".



One of the stupendously grand memorials to the St Paul family in the Church of St Lawrence, Snarford, Lincolnshire.



Fourteenth-century wall paintings at Little Witchingham, Norfolk.

in repairing and maintaining these wonderful old buildings. When they carry out repairs, the standard of workmanship is always of the highest, and the trust is constantly doing its best to widen interest, which is admirable.”

Someone who would heartily agree is author and playwright Alan Bennett, a keen supporter.

“It is in churches more than in great houses or over-visited ruins that I find English history at its most human and palpable,” he says. “I am uneasy about being patriotic, or even being English, but here among the tombs of knights and their ladies, monuments to merchants and their wives, the listing of the fallen and the remembrances of forgotten lives, I come as close to endorsing it as I ever will.”

For those who obviously find that when they visit ancient churches it is monuments that provide the greatest sense of history and atmosphere, one of the most appealing trust churches is St Lawrence, Snarford, in Lincolnshire. It has a series of stupendously grand sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century monuments, mainly to the members of the St Paul family, who built the adjacent Snarford Hall, of which nothing now remains.

Other trust churches are wacky and unexpected, like St Michael the Archangel at Booton in Norfolk. It was built at the end of the nineteenth century by an eccentric Victorian ‘squire-son’, a descendant of the native American princess Pocahontas. The

Rev Whitwell Elwin designed the building himself and incorporated aspects of many architectural styles. The church is described in the trust guidebook as “an exuberant oddity”.

Other trust churches such as Duxford, Cambridgeshire, East Shefford in Berkshire, Inglesham in Wiltshire and Little Witchingham in Norfolk contain the most exquisite wall paintings. All four are on my list of trust ‘favourites’.

Others may be architecturally very simple, but possess amazing atmosphere. For me the best example of this in a trust church is at Lower Sapey, in a hilly corner of Worcestershire.

Simple and remote, St Bartholomew’s Old Church is reached by a long winding lane. When the lane comes to an end you will find yourself beside the church, which rests on a steep bank above a stream. It is one of those churches saved by determined rescuers from the brink of collapse, having been unused for many years.

When neighbours and unofficial guardians Pat and Mike Prosser moved to the adjacent farmhouse in 1989, the long-disused church was surrounded by shoulder-high vegetation.

“You needed a machete to get through to the door and it took a year to clear the churchyard,” Pat says.

The Prossers and friends lobbied hard for the preservation of the building and were finally rewarded when the trust stepped in during 1994.

You only have to look at the entries in the visitors’ book to see that the



The church at Lower Sapey is in a peaceful rural setting.

church, with its plain-walled unfurnished interior with a hint of ancient paintings on the north wall, is a place still hallowed by the many that come to visit. Pinned to the ancient door is a curled printed card. It contains a copy of an old Celtic blessing:

Of the running wave to you

Deep Peace

Of the flowing river to you

Deep Peace

Of the quiet earth to you

Deep Peace

Of the shining stars to you

Deep Peace

Whatever your belief, or lack of it, it is almost impossible not to be moved by the sight of this amazing place, and by

the story of how it was saved.

Crispin Truman urges those who visit and enjoy trust churches to be generous.

“Last year we welcomed a record 1.5m visitors to our churches,” he concludes. “If every one of them just left a donation of just £1, we should have a major new income stream.”

He also urges all visitors to trust churches to sign the visitors’ books and consider joining the trust’s Supporters’ Scheme for as little as £30. ■

For more information about the work of the Churches Conservation Trust, visit www.visitchurches.org.uk or telephone on 020 7213 0660.