

Buildings at Risk in Greater London

by

DELICIA KEATE

In January 1991, English Heritage published its first Register of Buildings at Risk in Greater London. The Register, now in its fifth edition, was compiled on the basis of a London-wide survey in consultation with local authority planning departments, national and local amenity societies and recommendations from the public, and is updated annually with the help of the same. The London survey formed part of a broader buildings at risk survey initiated and funded by English Heritage in 1990 to provide an assessment of the scale of the problem nationally, and to act as a basis for more effective targeting of grant aid towards those areas and buildings most in need.

Buildings potentially at risk are assessed according to two criteria: their state of repair and the degree to which they are occupied. The assessment scale is shown in Fig. 1. Buildings are deemed to be 'at risk' when they are vacant or only partly

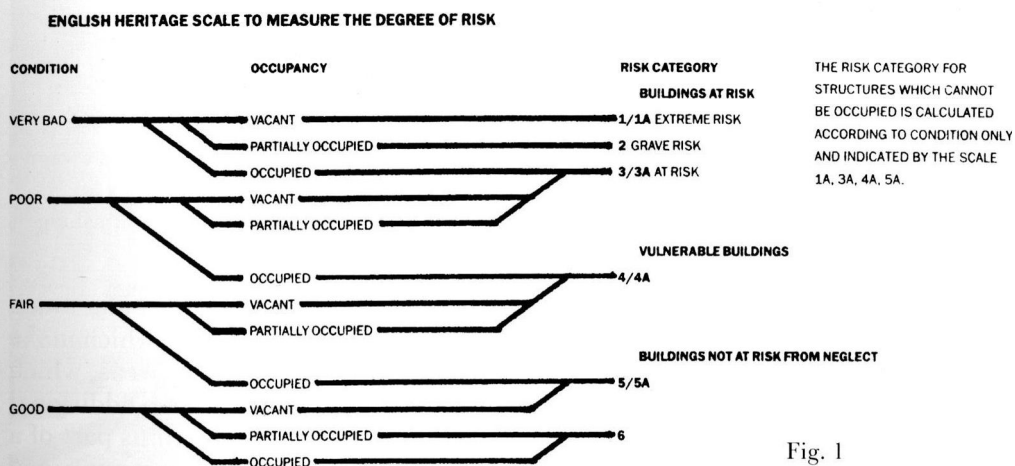


Fig. 1
Scale for assessing the degree of risk
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Delicia Keate is Buildings at Risk adviser, London and South-East Region, English Heritage. She is the co-author, with Philip Davies, of *In the Public Interest* (London, 1995).

occupied, and in poor or very bad condition. The London Register also extends to buildings which are assessed as 'vulnerable'; these may be in a reasonable state of repair but have no use, and may well require action to prevent them falling into the 'at risk' category.

The current Register contains 899 buildings, of which twenty-four are listed Grade I, fifty-five Grade II* and the remainder Grade II. All types of buildings and structures are included, from large industrial complexes such as Battersea Power Station, to neglected items of street furniture, such as the Grade II cast-iron public urinal in Star Yard, Camden (Fig. 2). Whilst the Register includes statutorily listed



Fig. 2

Nineteenth-century public urinal, Star Yard, Camden, Grade II. A rare survival of vanishing street furniture, in need of repair

buildings only, it is fully recognised that the entries represent only part of a much wider problem of urban dereliction; there are many unlisted buildings which make important contributions to the character and townscape of historic areas, which are neglected or under-used. Local authorities are encouraged to keep additional records of such buildings and, where necessary, encourage their repair as part of a comprehensive strategy, particularly where they have entered into grant-aided Conservation Area Partnership Schemes with English Heritage .

The following is an attempt to examine the principal reasons why historic buildings become 'at risk' in the capital, and some of the steps being taken by English Heritage and local authorities to address the problem.

There are a number of factors and combinations of circumstances which culminate in the disuse and disrepair of historic buildings. Profound social and cultural changes in post-war British society have led to the redundancy of many building types. In London, some forty-nine listed churches and chapels are deemed to be at risk, either because they have already fallen into disuse, or face repair costs far in excess of parish resources. The problem of securing viable alternative uses for redundant inner-city churches compatible with their special architectural interest and integrity, will doubtless remain a major conservation challenge in years to come. Since 1991, English Heritage has devoted substantial sums in grant aid to enable the repair and reuse of churches at risk in London and there have been several encouraging successes in finding new uses for redundant churches.

Notable among these is St Matthias, Poplar, listed Grade II*, which was built in 1652-4 as the private chapel to the East India Company, and remodelled and encased in ragstone in the prevailing Gothic Revival style in *c.* 1867 by W.M. Teulon (Figs. 3-5). It is a rare example of an Interregnum church. After fifteen years of

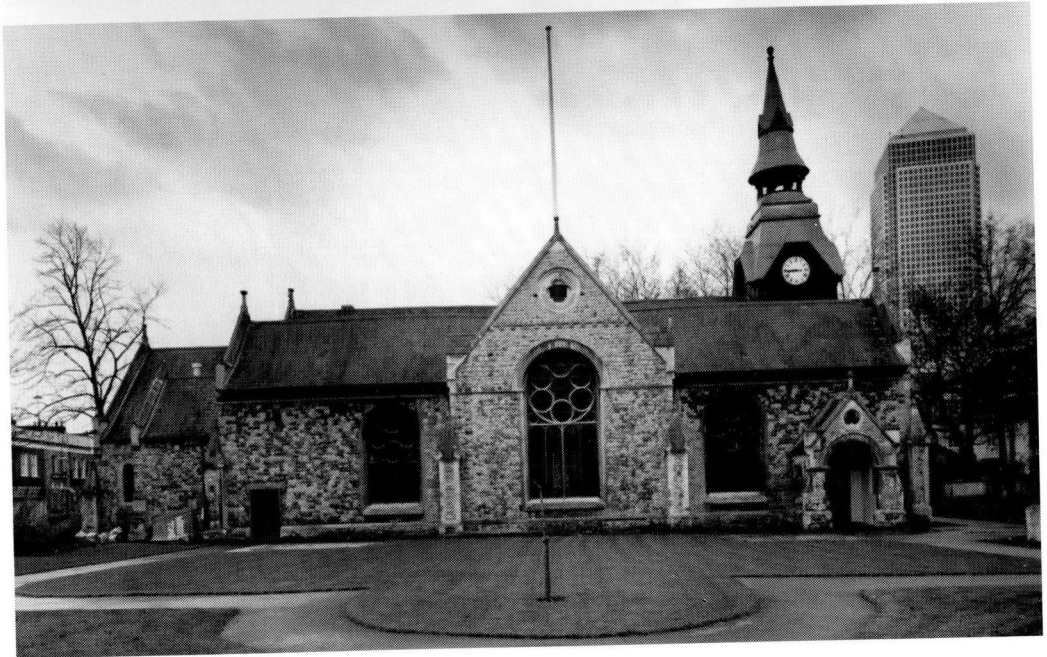


Figs. 3-5 (above and over)

Church of St Matthias, Poplar, Tower Hamlets, Grade II*.

The interior before restoration in 1990, and the interior and exterior following repairs

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dereliction, it has recently undergone a major repair programme by the St Matthias Trust, and will shortly be leased to a local arts trust. St George's Church, Wells Way, Camberwell, a Greek Revival church designed by Francis Bedford in 1822-4, which was completely gutted by fire, has been converted to flats designed as a two-storey courtyard development within the shell of the nave, thus retaining the external form and structure of the church (Fig. 6). The ruined shell of St Luke's

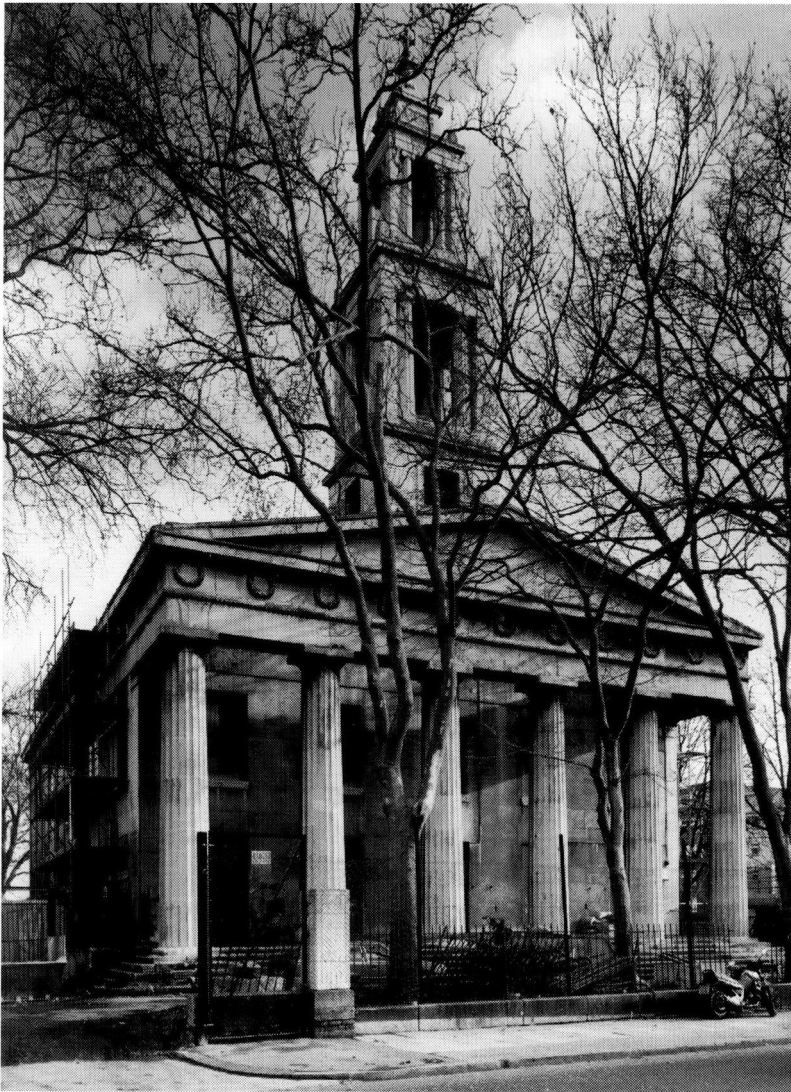


Fig. 6

St George's Church, Wells Way, Camberwell, Southwark, Grade B.

A housing development within the ruined shell is now complete

English Heritage

Church, Old Street, has been consolidated and vested in the Redundant Churches Fund. Suitable schemes of conversion will be carefully considered. The Grade II* Round Chapel, Hackney, is currently being converted for use as an arts centre by the Hackney Historic Buildings Trust (Fig. 7). All of these schemes have been carried out with substantial grant aid from English Heritage.

In recent years, social, political and economic pressures for change, together with restructuring in many areas of national life, such as defence, healthcare, education and local government, have resulted in an unprecedented scale of redundancy of the buildings which were designed to house those functions. Many are listed or form prominent landmarks in historic town centres, or, in the case of the large defence, hospital or transport complexes, are often designated as conservation areas in their own right.

To focus greater attention on this emerging problem, and to encourage more imaginative strategies for reuse by owners, English Heritage recently published

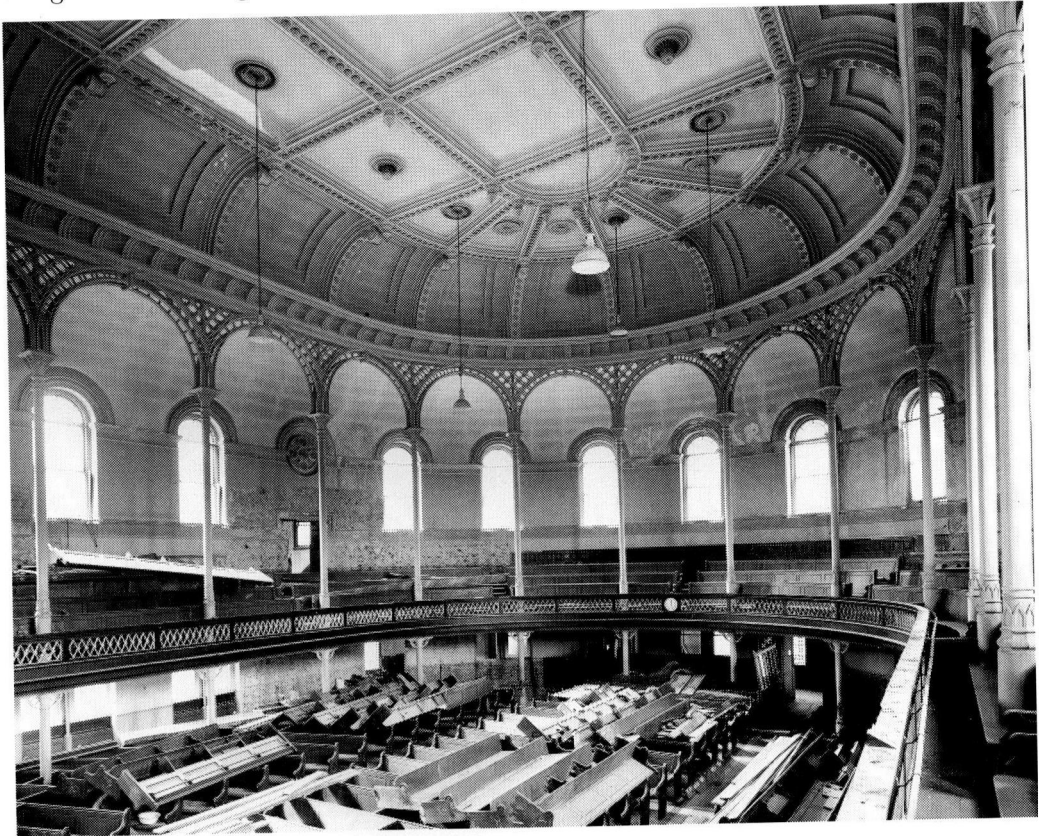


Fig. 7

The Round Chapel, Lower Clapton Road, Hackney, Grade II*. Built 1869-71, to the design of H. Fuller. Undergoing conversion for use as an arts centre with English Heritage grant aid
English Heritage

In the Public Interest: London's Civic Architecture at Risk, which features over a hundred illustrated examples of redundant buildings which are, or have recently been, in public ownership: town halls, fire stations, schools, hospitals, public baths and libraries, park and cemetery buildings, military sites, docks and transport buildings and former public utilities. Guidance is given on the interim maintenance and disposal of redundant buildings, stressing that, by forward planning at an early stage, dereliction, disrepair and high repair costs can be avoided.

Most of the redundant civic and municipal buildings which feature in the publication were built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were often constructed to extremely high standards, with an innovative use of building materials, an eclectic choice of architectural styles and a range of large and small internal spaces. For these reasons, they offer distinctive premises capable of conversion to a wide range of uses.

Successful examples of the reuse of former public buildings include the Waterloo Fire Station, Lambeth, now an award-winning restaurant (Fig. 8), and the former Royal Free Hospital, Islington, converted to low-cost housing (Fig. 9). Other building types may require more imaginative



Fig. 8

The Old Fire Station, Waterloo, Grade II. Built 1908-9 by the London County Council
English Heritage

approaches; the monumental castellated Gothic engine house at Green Lanes Pumping Station, Hackney, listed Grade II*, is currently undergoing conversion for use as a climbing school (Fig. 10).

With many redundant public buildings, problems have arisen from unrealistic expectations of their development value, lack of consultation with planning and conservation staff, failure to appreciate the potential of listed buildings as assets, or, sheer inertia. There are all too many examples of publicly-owned buildings which have been vacated with no prior planning for disposal or reuse, without



Fig. 9
Former Royal Free
Hospital, Liverpool
Road, Islington, Grade
II. Built 1848-52 as the
London Fever Hospital
to the designs of
Charles Fowler and
David Mocatta. A
scheme was completed
in 1992 to convert the
complex to low-cost
housing with additional
new buildings
English Heritage



Fig. 10
Green Lanes Pumping Station, Hackney, Grade II*.
Built 1854-6 to the design of Chadwell Mylne to resemble a medieval fortress

maintenance plans to ensure that the basic modicum of works are carried out to keep the property weathertight and secure from vandals. Escalating costs reduce the scope for sensitive reuse, creating a vicious downward spiral of neglect and decay. Haggerston Library, Kingsland Road, Hackney, listed Grade II, which has stood empty for 20 years is probably the most extreme object lesson (Fig. 11). The fine interior has been largely destroyed by water penetration and dry rot. Repair costs are estimated to be in excess of £1million.



Fig. 11
Haggerston
Library, Hackney,
Grade II.
Built 1893-6 to the
designs of R.J.
Lowell and M.B.
Adams
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Tackling the issue of council-owned buildings at risk remains one of English Heritage's key priorities in London. Some 25% of the 899 buildings on the current Register are in council ownership, and a further 10% are, or have been, in other forms of public ownership.

Typically, council-owned listed buildings fall under the responsibility of several different departments, with no co-ordinated strategy for their basic maintenance or disposal if surplus to requirements. Often, historic buildings fall victim to a fundamental lack of communication between departments, and conflicting priorities. A particular problem is encountered with housing, where it has been a common practice with properties which are earmarked for rehabilitation to move their existing occupants long before any development package has been secured. In certain cases, resistance to sale on the private market, even after funding bids have failed, has left listed buildings standing empty for several years.

While a significant problem clearly remains, in the light of the publicity surrounding the Register, the advice set out in *Planning Policy Guidance 15* (PPG15), which clearly states that councils should set examples of good practice to other owners with regard to their own historic buildings, and, in certain cases, encourages statutory action by English Heritage to secure repairs, greater commitment is gradually being made by councils to the care and, where appropriate, the disposal of their listed buildings.

Redundant hospitals will present a major challenge for the property market in coming years. Nationally, it is estimated that some 120 major historic complexes, each in excess of 500,000 square feet will become surplus to requirements over the next five to ten years. In anticipation of this, in 1992 English Heritage and the National Health Service Estates convened a working party to examine the problem and a joint publication, *Historic Buildings and the Health Service*, provides detailed advice on planning for redundancy and on the conservation and adaptation of former hospital buildings.

For many historic buildings, it is simply the case that progressive changes in economic and social circumstances, and consequently to the surrounding physical environment, have blighted or compromised their scope for reuse. In London, some 60% of buildings at risk are Georgian terraced houses, most of which lie in inner-city areas. Many are located on major highways, such as Mile End Road, Tottenham High Road and Old Kent Road, reflecting patterns of suburban ribbon development from the capital, originally occupied by middle class commuters and retired city dwellers. Many became shops in the nineteenth century as the city expanded, typically with the addition of a one-storey projecting extension built on the former front garden or area. 810 Tottenham High Road, built in c.1715, one of a symmetrical pair of houses with an imposing Baroque façade, listed Grade II*, exemplifies the changing fortunes of the kind of grand house built along the high roads, now empty or occupied on the ground floor only (Fig. 12).

Few buildings could be further removed from their original historic context than Bromley Hall, which dates from the seventeenth century, listed Grade II*, and Poplar Public Library nearby, listed Grade II, which stands adjacent to the



Fig. 12

808-810 Tottenham High Road, Haringey, c.1715, Grade II*. 810, on the left, with its projecting shop added in the nineteenth century, typifies the declining fortunes of grand houses built along the main thoroughfares into London
English Heritage



Fig. 13
Poplar Public Library,
Tower Hamlets, Grade
II. Built 1904-5 to the
design of Squire,
Meyers & Petch in a
Beaux Arts inspired
style. Blighted by its
location next to the
Blackwall Tunnel
Approach Road

Blackwall Tunnel Approach (Fig. 13). The Clapham Orangery, however, probably stands unrivalled for the incongruity of its present setting (Fig. 14). It was built in 1793 and stood in the gardens of Thornton House, which became an entertainment venue for the cream of London Society. The entablature's bucolic inscription: *Hic ver assiduum atque alienis mensibus aestas* - 'Here is eternal spring and summer in months not her own', is somewhat at odds with the building's inner-city location in the centre of a high rise council estate. However, there is local support for its rescue, and Lambeth Council is now seeking a community use with a possible Lottery bid.



Fig. 14

The Clapham Orangery, Lambeth, Grade II*. Built 1793, the house to which it belonged was demolished in 1946 to make way for new housing. A community use is being explored

Often, it is all too easy to dismiss buildings in difficult locations as lost causes, thus providing an excuse for inaction and an inevitable downward spiral. There are unfortunate cases, however, where the viability of historic buildings has been severely compromised by short-sighted planning decisions which fail to protect their setting, or to secure their repair as part of wider redevelopment schemes. A recent example of this is High Cross School, Tottenham, built in 1848 in a Gothic Revival style (Fig. 15). Planning permission was granted for an adjacent housing development which failed to take into account the future of the Grade II listed school, leaving the building virtually landlocked and thus severely reducing options for its reuse.

Economic recession and the slump in the property market have meant that



Fig. 15

High Cross School, Tottenham, Haringey, Grade II. Built in 1848.

The surrounding site was redeveloped for housing without securing an agreement for the repair and reuse of the disused school

refurbishment proposals for many historic buildings, often tied to wider development schemes, have failed to progress. Owners are unwilling to sell at a loss in the current climate, and many historic buildings stand empty. It is especially important that owners are made aware of their responsibilities by ensuring that a regular maintenance programme is implemented to keep the historic buildings weathertight and, importantly, secure from vandalism and theft. The theft of architectural fittings and fixtures has reached epidemic proportions in inner-city areas. Empty buildings are especially vulnerable.

Chandos House is a prime example of the adverse effect of the recession on buildings even in a prime West End location. Built in 1769-71 to the design of Robert Adam, listed Grade I, it is one of London's most important buildings at risk. A refurbishment scheme for offices was approved in 1990, but was never implemented. Following an outbreak of dry rot and the recent theft of several important Adam chimneypieces, English Heritage recently has initiated statutory action to ensure that urgent remedial works are carried out.

There are those owners who protractedly neglect historic buildings, sometimes deliberately in order to justify their demolition, simply because redevelopment of the cleared site is economically a more attractive option. In such cases, the decisive

use of statutory powers is almost always necessary in order to prompt action. Two key provisions exist within the planning legislation to secure the repair of historic buildings. Section 54 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, enables local authorities to serve on owners an 'Urgent Works Notice' for the immediate preservation of listed buildings and, in default, carry out the works and reclaim the costs from the owner. Under Section 48 of the same Act, a Repairs Notice may be served on the owner specifying works for the long-term preservation of a listed building, in default of which compulsory purchase proceedings may begin. In Greater London, English Heritage shares these powers with the London Boroughs. In exceptional cases, where the resources demanded may be beyond the scope of the local authority, or indeed where the building in question is owned by the local authority, English Heritage has used these powers.

Two recent cases where English Heritage has served Repairs Notices, both in respect of privately owned buildings, are 143 Lower Clapton Road, Hackney, a Grade II house of *c.*1760, which is now subject to Compulsory Purchase proceedings, and 184-188 North Gower Street, a terrace of three Grade II listed houses of *c.*1820 (Fig. 16). In the latter case, considerable damage had occurred to the interior



Fig. 16

184-188 North Gower Street, Camden, Grade II. Refurbishment is anticipated shortly
English Heritage

following the removal of the entire roof structure. Following an application to demolish the buildings, English Heritage served Urgent Works and Repairs Notices in 1994. The properties subsequently were sold, and a refurbishment scheme has now been approved.

Such extreme examples are, fortunately, comparatively rare. In the majority of cases, the threat of statutory action alone will prompt a positive response from owners. A study published in 1992 by the Association of Conservation Officers, *Listed Building Repairs Notices*, showed that only 13% of cases where Repairs Notices were served eventually reached a Compulsory Purchase public inquiry. Generally, the increased use of statutory powers is to be encouraged.

In addition to individual buildings at risk, there is a significant, London-wide problem of neglected and vandalised historic parks, gardens, cemeteries and churchyards. At Gunnersbury Park, Hounslow, no less than thirteen listed garden buildings and structures are considered to be at risk.



Fig. 17

West Norwood Cemetery, Lambeth. Alexander Berens Tomb, Grade II*, designed by E.M. Barry in 1858. Laid out in 1836, the cemetery contains monuments to many notable figures, including Sir Henry Bessemer, Sir William Cubitt, Sir Henry Tate and Mrs Beeton. A management plan for the cemetery is under preparation

English Heritage is promoting greater awareness of these issues and encouraging those responsible for the repair and upkeep of historic parks and gardens to adopt schemes of management, embracing the repair of historic structures, nature conservation and, where beneficial, reuse of associated buildings. Such a scheme has been prepared at West Norwood Cemetery, Lambeth, which contains sixty-four listed tombs and monuments (Fig. 17). Here, the Council's widely criticised policy of 'lawn conversion', involving the

mass clearance of whole areas of Victorian tombs, was overturned following intervention by English Heritage and the Diocese of Southwark and the confirmation that, as consecrated ground, faculty jurisdiction applied to the greater part of the cemetery. Cemeteries and churchyards 'at risk' are now included separately in the Register.

There are twelve mansions and villas on the Register situated in public parks and gardens, which are currently vacant or under-used because of lack of funds or as a result of the relocation of council functions. These are especially vulnerable to



Fig. 18

Morden Park House, Merton, Grade II*. Built c.1770. Buildings in public parks are especially vulnerable to vandalism and theft because of their isolated position. The house was used by the Council as offices until 1985. It has suffered extensive damage from dry rot and the loss of several original chimneypieces

English Heritage

vandalism because of their isolated locations (Fig. 18). Often such properties, together with their associated grounds, were bequeathed to the public by enlightened benefactors, and their use in perpetuity as buildings for public benefit may be controlled by restrictive covenants. In the case of Clissold House, Stoke Newington, a specific Act of Parliament reserves the use of the building for the community.

The restoration of historic public parks, gardens and cemeteries and the repair of their associated buildings and structures are eligible projects for Heritage Lottery funding, which provides an unprecedented opportunity for local authorities, preservation trusts and Friends' groups to carry out comprehensive schemes of repair and enhancement hitherto beyond their resources. A successful bid has been made by Islington Council for funds to repair the churchyard at St Luke's, Old Street and a number of similar projects are in the pipeline throughout the capital. English Heritage is currently co-ordinating a strategy for Lottery bids for enhancement works to London Squares and other historic open spaces, including the reinstatement of railings lost in the last war.

The main purpose of publishing the Buildings at Risk Register, in addition to attracting possible new uses, is to provide a focus for action by local authorities and to secure a commitment from them to tackling the problem. In February 1995, a

report was published jointly by English Heritage and the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC), *Conservation in London: a study of strategic planning policy in London*, which recommends that securing a viable future for buildings at risk should be a high priority as a catalyst for urban regeneration. The report forms part of the LPAC's 1994 Revised Strategic Planning Advice for London, and in due course it will be recommended by both authorities for inclusion in *Strategic Guidance for London*.

As part of its strategy to strengthen expertise at local level, English Heritage is part-funding conservation posts in London. There are now specialist Buildings at Risk staff in Hackney and Southwark, a third is proposed for Islington, and further posts are being considered in other inner-city boroughs. English Heritage's priorities will continue to focus upon strategic London-wide issues such as parks and gardens at risk and publicly owned buildings, as outlined above, and, not least, Grade I and II* buildings at risk. In the case of Danson House, Bexleyheath, a Grade I Palladian mansion built in the 1760s to the design of Sir Robert Taylor (Fig. 19), which has

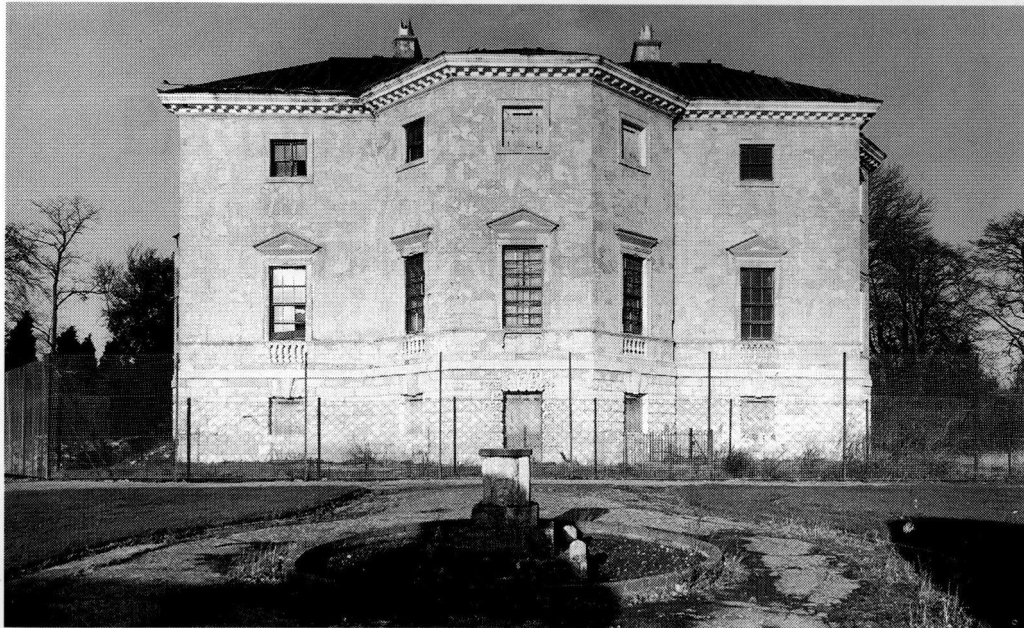


Fig. 19

Danson House, Bexleyheath, Grade I.

Built in the 1760s to the design of Sir Robert Taylor in a late Palladian style. The house and Grade II* stable block have recently been acquired by English Heritage

English Heritage

suffered years of dereliction, English Heritage has intervened directly by purchasing the property from Bexley Council. A major repair programme is due to start shortly, following which the property will be marketed.

Some 50% of the buildings on the original 1991 Register have now been repaired.

The number of entries has fluctuated each year as new buildings at risk are identified in the wake of the recession, but the overall number is gradually reducing and there is light on the horizon for some of the longest-standing and most intransigent cases. However, there is no room for complacency. Whilst English Heritage will continue to play a central role, local authorities have a crucial part to play in promoting a greater understanding of the cultural, environmental and economic value of the historic built environment.

The *Register of Buildings at Risk in Greater London* is available for £5 (incl. p. & p.) from English Heritage, London & South East Region, 23 Savile Row, London W1X 1AB. Tel: 0171-973 3757.

In the Public Interest is available for £6.50 (incl. p. & p.) from English Heritage Postal Sales, PO Box 229, Northampton, NN6 9RY. Tel: 01604-781163.

Historic Buildings and the Health Service is available for £35 from branches of HMSO.