

## THE CHURCH AND CONSERVATION

*by Ken Powell*

'It will be as well to wait for a few years before proclaiming that there is no longer a problem of redundant churches of architectural interest.'<sup>1</sup> Ivor Bulmer-Thomas's words on the likely impact of the 1968 Pastoral Measure were, in the event, suitably cautious. Of the success of the Redundant Churches Fund—of which he was the first Chairman—there can be no doubt. The failure of the Fund to preserve every church of interest for which no suitable use could be found cannot be blamed on Ivor Bulmer-Thomas or his successors, for the Fund cannot choose which churches it preserves. Those which have been vested in its care have, despite occasional lapses of judgement in relatively minor matters, received the 'skill and devotion' envisaged at the time of the Fund's formation. The sensitivity with which the Fund maintains the nearly 200 churches now in its care is an example to other, better-endowed bodies, as is the remarkable economy of its operations.

However, the 'measure of success' which the Church Commissioners have claimed in their dealings with redundant churches must be brought into question. For of nearly 1,000 churches declared redundant since the passage of the Pastoral Measure, over a quarter have been demolished. Mr. Bulmer-Thomas has been quite steadfast in his opposition to the so-called 'ecclesiastical exemption' and in his calls for the Church of England to 'conform itself to the law of the land'.<sup>2</sup> With 12,000 listed buildings, a figure which increases almost daily as the listing resurvey of the country continues, the Church has a unique responsibility to the nation. The recent (1984) report of the Faculty Jurisdiction Commission, a deeply complacent document, devoted some space to a defence of the 'exemption'. Its argument that other owners, including the Crown, enjoyed exemption and that the Church should share their privileges is hardly worthy of discussion. The Crown exemption, which extends, for example, to the buildings owned by hospital authorities is itself long overdue for radical reappraisal. However, further arguments hinged on the consideration that 'a church is first and foremost a building consecrated or dedicated for the worship of God'.<sup>3</sup> A simple extension of the secular system of controls was, for this reason, it was argued, inappropriate. (The report did, it must be said, go on to argue for the extension of listed building controls to the demolition of churches under the Pastoral Measure, if only to relieve the Church of the 'odium' attached to a decision to demolish). The mention of consecration and the special, sacred status of a church building is significant. We are all familiar with the bureaucratic concept of churches as "ecclesiastical plant". So comical is the phrase

that we may underestimate the prevalence of the idea in that bureaucratic democracy which is the Church of England today. Yet the idea of a church as in itself sacred is one which seems to figure rather peripherally in the workings of the redundancy procedures and in the management and care of churches which remain in use.

The Church's changing attitudes to its historic buildings need to be seen, of course, in the light of a broader transformation in its outlook and particularly in its view of its own past. The Church of England had emerged from the Reformation as a compromise and the government of Queen Elizabeth was intent on curbing the attacks of Puritan vandals on church buildings and their contents. Fore-shadowed in the primacy of Archbishop Laud, the sacred character of consecrated buildings, akin to that afforded to ordained men, was a matter of faith to the 19th century Ecclesiologists and their Anglo-Catholic successors. It was to the Ecclesiological Society, ironically, that Dr. Gilbert Cope was to declare (in 1963) that modern church design should be 'essentially *sociological*'. A church should be 'a complex of functionally related buildings—worship-room, other rooms and domestic accommodation'. . .<sup>4</sup> This definition suggested that most existing church buildings were sadly deficient, and in *Towards a Church Architecture* (1962) Peter Hammond called for nothing less than a 'new Reformation', with new buildings reflecting the 'renewed Church'. The new iconoclasm was in tune with the secular spirit of the age. In the major cities of England, clearance and redevelopment on a totally unprecedented scale swept away many 19th century churches with the housing they were built to serve, and the hierarchy of the Church rejoiced to see the destruction. In Manchester and Salford, for example, nearly 50 churches have gone since 1945. In Liverpool, of the churches mentioned in Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buildings of England, South Lancashire*, published in 1969 at the end of one era of destruction, some 22 had disappeared by 1984. Given the marked decline of population in the inner-cities, some degree of closure was inevitable. Yet many of the buildings demolished were in fact replaced by new complexes of buildings—the modish term was 'church centre'. Many of these have proved to be a distinctly bad investment. Like the vast housing schemes of the period, they were constructed in form and materials in a manner which demonstrated a powerful and deliberate contempt for traditional ways. These new churches were designed to look unecclesiastical, in compliance with the precepts of Drs. Cope and Hammond. They did not dominate or surprise the eye, but were at one with the renewed environment. Many have failed structurally and few have flourished pastorally. They are victims of the collapse of confidence in modern architecture. Countless old churches in town and country were—

and still are being—subjected to radical alteration to provide them with the supposedly essential amenities (for example, lavatories) found in new churches and to accord with new liturgical fashions. Though ultimately inspired by the reforming spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the reformers in the Anglican Church were almost as cavalier in their interpretation of the Council's edicts as their Roman Catholic brethren. The recent cases of proposed major additions to the ancient churches of Chiddingfold and Compton in Surrey, one scheme stopped only by the planning powers of the local authority and the other still likely to be implemented, show how far the Church is prepared to go in its quest for convenience at the expense of beauty. One can only be grateful, given the present legal anomalies, that some diocesan chancellors are prepared to defend historic church interiors—the recent decision in respect of proposed alterations to Banbury parish church is an example.



Plate 1: "The Saviour", Deane Road, Bolton, Lancashire. By Paley and Austin 1882—5. Recommended to the Redundant Churches Fund, by the Advisory Board for Redundant Churches but demolished 1974.  
(Photo. courtesy Christopher Dalton)

If the treatment of historic churches in use is frequently both insensitive and doctrinaire, that of redundant churches is often scandalous. The loss of fine Victorian churches is particularly evident, buildings of the quality of Scott's Holy Trinity, Rugby, Paley and Austin's The Saviour, Bolton (Plate 1), and Bodley's St. Edward, Holbeck, Leeds. In London, after the aftermath of the war—when the opportunity was taken to do away with many churches which could have been repaired after damage—there has been a steady campaign of demolition. St. Alban, Teddington (Plate 2), the so-called 'cathedral of the Thames Valley', is just the worst example of what seems a policy of planned neglect. James Brooks's great church of St. Columba, Kingsland Road, one of the historic centres of Anglo-Catholicism in London and a masterpiece of High Victorian design, is let to a sect which is finding it very difficult to maintain. No less sad is the fate of that great Evangelical fortress, St. Stephen, Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead.

There is little doubt that the passage of the Pastoral Measure, enshrined in statute by the Redundant Churches Act of 1969, actually *encouraged* dioceses to declare churches redundant. A large number of redundancies signified, it seems, to some a suitably progressive and efficient approach to the management of resources. So, in 1973 alone, fifteen churches in the diocese of Lincoln were declared redundant. The toll of demolition in this diocese has been severe, with many harmless and appealing old churches, typical of this rich but undemonstrative county, needlessly sacrificed. Salmonby, Woodhall (with its idiosyncratic west front), the late Georgian Tothill, and the two little churches by James Fowler at Moorby and South Reston were amongst the losses. The 1970s saw a general spring-clean of churches in central Leeds. The diocese of Ripon had been forced to retreat in the mid 1950s when it sought to demolish the Georgian city centre church of Holy Trinity, Boar Lane, for commercial development. There was a national outcry, and Ivor Bulmer-Thomas and others were able to spring to the successful defence too of St. Edward, Holbeck (finally demolished some thirty years later). After the passage of the Pastoral Measure, ten churches were closed and eight of them subsequently demolished. There have been many instances over the years of parishes resisting the closure schemes of the diocesan administrations, usually without success. (The spirited and successful defence of Christ Church, North Brixton, where the Privy Council quashed a scheme for redundancy of Beresford Pite's amazing Byzantine basilica, is one exception). There are encouraging signs that pastoral schemes based on diocesan disapproval of particular parishes and their churchmanship are no longer so certain to succeed. It seems that the diocese of Manchester may be obliged to retreat from its proposal to close St. Alban,



Plate 2: St. Alban's Teddington, Middlesex. The proposal by the Church Commissioners to demolish was the subject of a public inquiry in January 1986.

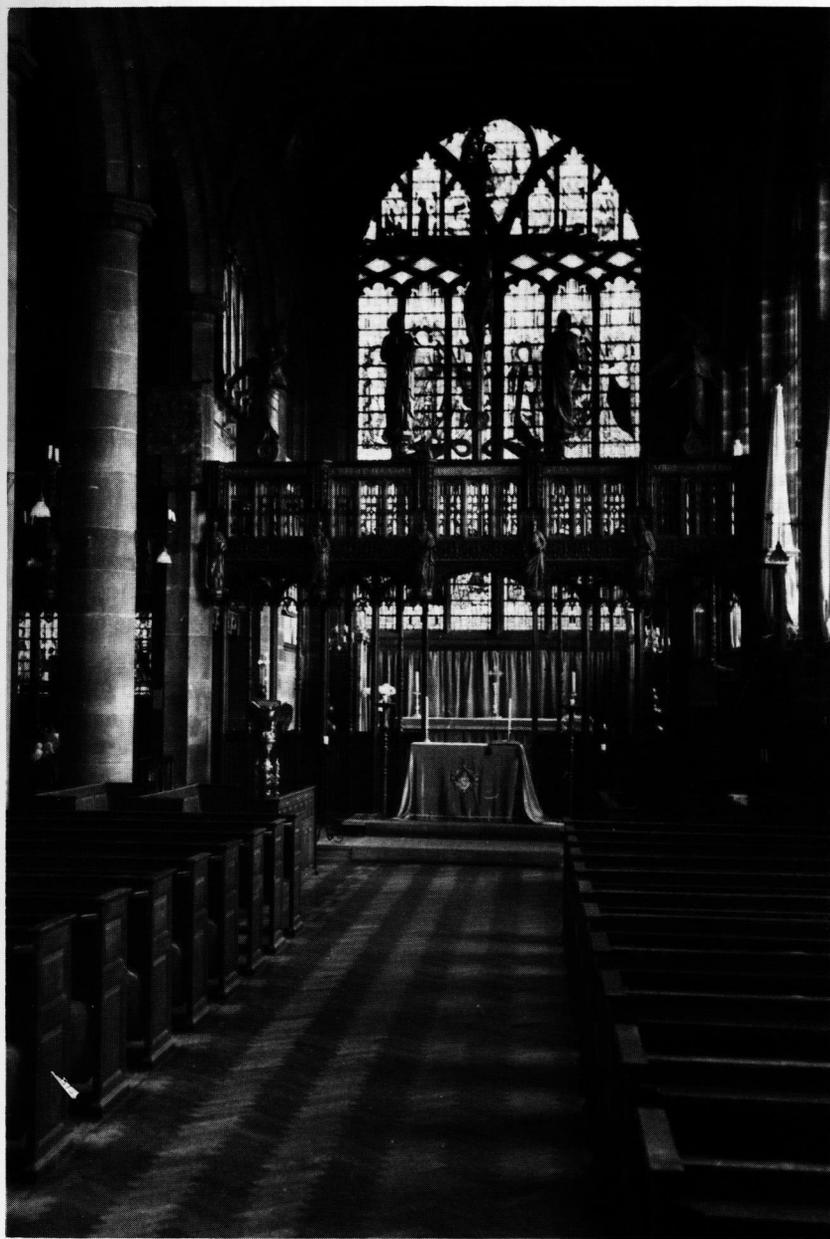


Plate 3: St. Mary, Wardleworth, Rochdale, Lancashire, by Sir Ninian Comper.  
Threatened with closure.

Chetwood, Manchester, a fine church by Joseph Crowther known for its Anglo-Catholic tradition and a rather more vague threat to Comper's St. Mary, Wardleworth, Rochdale (Plate 3), may not materialise. In the latter case, the offer of substantial grant aid from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission can only help the efforts of the congregation. The intervention of the State in the affairs of the Church has, so far, been principally as a generous benefactor. Over £5 million has been paid in grants to churches in use during the last year, the great part of it to Anglican churches. The Redundant Churches Fund, of course, now receives 60% of its funding from the State. Even so, it is left to the Commissioners to decide which churches shall be vested in the Fund. The present system of non-statutory inquiries where there is serious objection to a proposal to demolish a listed church is an unsatisfactory compromise but it would be surprising if the Commissioners refused to heed the Secretary of State's recent finding that St. Wilfrid's Brighton, Goodhart-Rendel's ecclesiastical masterpiece, should not be demolished. The logical outcome, when the diocese of Chichester has made sincere efforts to secure a new use, is that the church should become the first 20th century building to be placed in the Fund's care. St. Alban's, Teddington, already mentioned, is to be the subject of a non-statutory inquiry early in 1986.

The Pastoral Measure provides three possible options for a redundant church—vesting in the Fund, which may now follow on directly from redundancy, demolition or new use. Finding a new use is naturally seen as a success for the system, though many uses provide little capital return for the Church. Sometimes, the fact has to be faced that a building must be released for a token sum, particularly if the use is deemed to be worthy. There is a strong and widespread conviction that churches are 'community' buildings, though the medieval understanding of community—which is often invoked—hardly survives today. As a consequence, uses which prohibit public access may seem objectionable. The most obvious example is conversion to a private house, which has been the fate of many small churches in rural areas. St. Michael, Driby, Lincs., a pleasing mid-Victorian church (with some older remains), converted to a house to designs by Francis F. Johnson, is an example of a reasonably sensitive approach to domestic conversion. (There are many examples of less sensitive alterations). At St. Oswald, Fulford, York, the new owner sees himself as the 'guardian' of the building, opening it regularly to the public and forming a body of 'Friends' to promote the activities there. Most new owners are less conscientious. The conversion of churches to multiple residential use provides major problems. St. James, Farnham, Surrey, is a large, relatively plain church by Henry Woodyer, completed in 1876 and declared redundant in 1974. Its conversion to 16 flats

has, it must be said with some regret, robbed the building of most of the interest it once possessed. Externally, it is disfigured by rooflights and glazed extensions. Inevitably, most of the interior has gone completely. The chancel is retained as a 'multi-purpose space', basically a rather anonymous communal lounge. The scheme is, however worthy in its intentions, in the end a failure. In trying to save the building, it has almost destroyed it. At St. Paul, Cross Stone, Todmorden (West Yorks.), in contrast, residential conversion seems to be the only hope for a church which is a major landmark of the Calder valley. This plain Gothic Commissioners' church, spectacularly sited on a hillside, has been totally gutted and offers scope for radical internal division.

The use of churches as museums, heritage centres, concert halls and community centres is relatively uncontroversial and such well-known buildings as St. Nicholas and St. George, Brandon Hill, both in Bristol, St. Michael and Holy Trinity in Chester, and St. John's, Smith Square, London, come to mind. A 'suitable' use is, however, no surety of a pleasing result. At St. Mary, Castlegate, York, fittings, including much work by Butterfield, were ejected and monuments and architectural features concealed when the church was converted to a heritage centre in the 1970s. The gimmicky and flimsy displays which fill the building contrast with its inherent nobility. R.D. Chantrell's simple but handsome church of St. Matthew, Holbeck Leeds, was saved from demolition and converted to a local community centre but the conversion work is so badly conceived and executed as to be an insult to the building. The gutting of C.F. Porden's Greek Revival church of St. Matthew, Brixton, London to provide space for a social centre has destroyed totally the internal character of the building. At Holy Trinity, Bristol, the sale of the church to a Caribbean community group resulted in its eventual abandonment when the group went bankrupt.

Commercial uses for churches are anything but uncontroversial. Yet office use can be compatible with the retention of architectural character. An example which deserves to be widely known is St. Michael, Derby, now used as offices by a local architectural practice. The aisled interior, typical of a Victorian Gothic church, can still be appreciated, though several gallery levels have been added to augment the accommodation. Details, and even some fittings, have been carefully conserved throughout. Externally, the church is virtually unchanged. Donald Buttress's conversion of St. Thomas, Ardwick Green, Manchester, to offices for local voluntary bodies was more economical but shows a similar respect for the building (in this case a plain brick Georgian box). The use of churches for retailing immediately summons up images of the money-changers in the Temple.

Strangely, the term 'craft centre' seems to make retailing respectable, though use by a chain store would rightly stir up strong opposition. By the same measure, a number of simple country churches have come to be used as barns or stores for agricultural equipment, yet the conversion of a church to a factory or car repair depot would be unacceptable to most people. The extraordinary proposal that the redundant St. Stephen, Rosslyn Hill, in London, be made into a riding school, with horses stabled in the nave is very imaginative yet it stirs uncomfortable memories of Cromwell's cavalry camping in despoiled cathedrals. Anglican sensitivity about the appropriateness of new uses surprises Nonconformists. Bound by the conditions of their charitable status, the various denominations are obliged to dispose of redundant buildings for the best price which can be obtained regardless of the use. In every large city are to be found former chapels used as factories, furniture stores, garages, shops, and even restaurants and public houses (though the Methodists still seek to prevent the sale of alcohol in former church buildings by the use of restricted covenants). Many—perhaps the majority—of these conversions are purely utilitarian and little regard has been paid to the qualities of the building. In many cases, the buildings have been altered almost beyond recognition. For every good scheme of re-use (for example, the conversion of Cuthbert Brodrick's Haddingley Hill Chapel, Leeds, to offices) there are many which are unspeakably bad. Nonconformists do not, of course, hold with the idea of consecration and when a building ceases to be used by a congregation its special status ceases.

The significance of consecration seems to have been largely ignored in the Church of England in recent years. 'Redundant to whom?' is one appropriate response to the deliberations of diocesan pastoral committees. Can such a committee put an end to the sacred status which a building and site may have enjoyed for a century—or even a millennium? The answer must surely be that they cannot, whatever latter-day legislation may say to the contrary. The issue is vividly illustrated in Wales today, where there are a very large number of churches, on ancient sites, which are potentially redundant and ill-located for present day needs. No pastoral Measure exists for Wales, and no Redundant Churches Fund, so that redundancy must mean sale or demolition. Discussions have been proceeding for some time about the possibility of a Fund for Wales, with the Welsh Historic Buildings Council prominently involved. Elizabeth Beazley has suggested ways in which some of the remote Welsh rural churches can be maintained, despite their effective redundancy. Working parties, for example, to look after churchyards—'evening classes on the use of the bill-hook should go down as well in Cardiff, Aberystwyth or Bangor as in other towns

where self-sufficiency inclined intellectuals live'.<sup>5</sup> The old church of St. Brothen at Llanfrothen (Gwynedd) is a candidate for such a programme of periodic maintenance. It was superseded by a new church, at the centre of the modern village, over a century ago but has remained formally 'in use' ever since. Recently, however, services there have ceased completely and the building, though in a good state of repair, has the look of creeping neglect. The Norfolk Churches Trust, one of the best known of the county trusts in England, has been successfully organising working parties for some years. Perhaps what is needed, in England and Wales, is a national trust for churches, aiming at a large membership of people who wish not only to look at churches but to play an active role in their conservation.

Consecration has become an unfashionable idea in recent years, so that the Church of England has seemingly come to share the functional view of church buildings typical of the Free Churches. 'Functional' all too often means drab and unimaginative. With the depressing modern churches of the Manchester diocese and memories of the fine buildings they replaced doubtless in mind, Canon David Wyatt of St. Paul, Salford, has written: 'the Church in the post-war period has not been particularly distinguished in aesthetic or any other creativity. Not the least cause has been a doctrinaire repudiation of what is traditional and a frenetic espousal of what is novel and startling'. Canon Wyatt's simple Victorian church, surrounded by tall modern blocks of flats, has been rescued from utter dereliction and made into one of the most memorable churches in the diocese, with many fittings retrieved from redundant buildings. It is a beautiful and an inspiring setting for worship.

'The growth of the preservation movement', it has been claimed, 'is one of the major social phenomena of our time. It has brought together all manner of people in a common purpose—the recording and saving of their heritage. And it has already profoundly affected the shape and contents of the world around us'.<sup>6</sup> The past is certainly widely seen as a benign influence. Visiting old buildings is a national pastime (the National Trust has over a million members) and museums and art galleries are popular places in a way they have never been before. There is a vast audience for Shakespeare—and audiences are not insulted, as the Church of England insults its congregations, by the assumption that 16th century English is beyond their comprehension. . . . The Church lacks a proper judgement of the value of its own past for its life today, and the neglect and abuse of its buildings is one symptom of this. Creativity in the church today seems to be reduced to the level of hessian hangings and appliqué vestments.<sup>7</sup>

Consecration means the act of setting something apart as sacred. Every redundant church is a symbol of defeat for the Church, every unworthy addition or alteration an offering of the second-best to God. Sir Ninian Comper believed that the purpose of a church was 'not to express the age in which it was built or the individuality of its designer. Its purpose is to move to worship, to bring a man to his knees, to refresh his soul in a weary land'.<sup>8</sup> In its search for efficiency, in its very humanism, the modern Church has lost sight of the holiness which should be at its heart. It will be ironic indeed if the world outside its walls has to bring it to recognise the value of its own past.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. I. Bulmer-Thomas, *The Problem of Redundant Churches*, (The Ecclesiological Society, 1970), p.3.
2. *Idem.*, *Transactions AMS*, Ns.25 (1981), p.77.
3. *The Continuing Care of Churches and Cathedrals* (Report of the Faculty Jurisdiction Commission, 1984), p.22.
4. G. Cope, *Ecclesiology, Then and Now* (The Ecclesiological Society, 1963).
5. E. Beazley, 'Wales' in *Change and Decay: The Future of Our Churches* ed. M. Binney and P. Burman (London, 1977), p.73
6. M. Binney and D. Lowenthal (eds.), *Our Past Before Us: Why Do We Save It?* (London, 1981), p.9.
7. See M. Merchant, 'The Church and the Arts' in *The Continuing Care of Churches and Cathedrals*, pp.203-212.
8. N. Comper, *Of the Atmosphere of a Church* (1947), p.9.