

Friends of Essex Churches Trust

1st Annual Lecture

Why Churches Matter

Dr Simon Heffer - Writtle Church, Thursday 16 May 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to begin by saying how honoured I feel to have been asked to give this talk to you this evening, in this handsome church in the heart of our county. As I am about to illustrate, Essex churches are a subject that has long been close to my heart. I admire what you



all do to keep them going, and I come here tonight in a spirit of constructive support for what you do to preserve what I, and I do not doubt you, consider one of the most important parts of our national life – the parish church.

We are all victims of our upbringings. Before any of you panics, that is not a hint that I am about to deliver a talk on sociology. It is a means of explaining why I am here tonight. I am not an architectural historian. Nor, despite having been baptised into the Church of England when I was too young to raise any voice to the contrary, am I religious.

My only qualification to come here and talk about Essex churches is that I have been visiting them, staring at them, absorbing them, smelling them and rejoicing at them almost all my life. Few atheists can have spent quite so much time in church as I have. Perhaps I prove the point that some people try to make about a latent spirituality in even the most Godless of beings. For me the physical presence of a church is a symbol of the permanency of the culture in which I live, and choose to live. And, since my family have lived in the East of England ever since we fled here as persecuted Protestants from the Spanish Netherlands in 1548, there is an atavism in these buildings that I feel deeply too. They may have been designed and built as places of worship, but to me they are far more than that. They are a symbol of part of what defines me as an Englishman.

But nor I do propose to inflict upon you a quasi-romantic statement of why our churches should mean so much to us. I hope to confine myself to the practical: and, in doing so, to suggest ways in which the most important buildings in our county may be preserved a few more centuries yet, and not go the way of the steam train and the horse and cart.

But perhaps I need first to define why churches are so important: and that takes me back to my upbringing. The church as a religious entity was not an important part of my childhood. My father was an atheist too, the product of three-and-a half years on the Western Front as a teenager almost a century ago. My mother was, and I think still is, religious, but the rector in our village when I was a boy was an eccentric alcoholic to whom she found it difficult to relate. So I was not led by the hand from a tender age into the village church to experience the liturgy, and to associate its columns and windows with the beauties of the prayer book or the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. However my father, who once correctly predicted that the next time he would attend a church service would be in a coffin, had what John Betjeman called “a passion for churches”. And my childhood was unusual in that, since my father was nearly 30 years older than my mother, he had retired while my mother continued to pursue a career, and so he brought me up.

This could have been a boring experience for a man in his late 60s, so he sought ways to make it less so. When I was about three he taught me to read, a head start to which I owe whatever facility I have in the English language. That amused him, and kept me quiet, for a time. But what to do when the longer, warmer, brighter days came, and the outdoors beckoned? My father had first owned a car in the 1920s, when there was still such a thing as the joy of motoring, and when there were few more indulgent things than going out for what he would call “a run round”. These were not short treks. One day we would take in much of the Dengie peninsula: the next the stretch between Maldon and Colchester; the next the villages around Chelmsford – Sandon, Great Baddow, the Walthams and of course Writtle.

My father had a good aesthetic sense but also a powerful sense of history. He also understood that – in those days at least – many Essex churches were proximate to a pub. For some reason Tolleshunt d’Arcy sticks in my memory on this point. So I would be taken round the church and have interesting features and monuments explained to me, garnering some rudimentary architectural and social history. We always studied the war memorial, recording an event that, for my father, was more than a historical fact: he would often point out how certain surnames appeared more than once in even the tiniest village, and we would reflect on the awfulness for families that had suffered so disproportionately. And then we would go to the pub, where he in the days before the breathalyser would enjoy a convivial pint or three, and I in the days supposedly before England was swarming with paedophiles would sit on a bench in the garden with a bottle of Tizer and a packet of crisps. At some point I was given, to help pass the time, the Observer’s book of English Churches, with Feering church on its dust wrapper, to reinforce and formalise the titbits my father had tried to instil in me while going around the church.

By about the age of seven, with repulsive precocity, I could tell Early English from Decorated, knew what a chancel was, loved to spot hatchments, and had become – as I still am – a sucker for Norman. I was made aware of the geological point that Essex has no stone: so our churches were of flint, or brick, except when sailing barges had brought Kentish Rag up the Blackwater or the Crouch, as they must have done to build Rettendon and Canewdon. I know there are rare moments of Ketton and Barnack stone: but few things have struck me as more magnificent than an expanse of hand-made brick, and nowhere, I realised at an early age, was handmade brick done so spectacularly as at Ingatestone, in its majestic tower. And, of course, we have a partly wooden church: though I did not get to Greenstead-juxta-Ongar until much later in

life, to see where the body of St Edmund rested in 1013, and to remind myself again of the almost tangible nature of history seen in the context of a church.

I was caused to reflect on the Roman ruins that were standing all over the county until, in the 10th and 11th centuries and in some cases later, our forebears chose to dismantle them and use their bricks and tiles to frame windows and doors: you will all, I am sure, be familiar with Holy Trinity, Colchester, a tour-de-force of this particular brand of architectural salvage. I was also instilled with a sense of wistfulness about being born too late, something I have tried unsuccessfully all my life to shake off. This is because I was constantly told by my father how much better the churches would have looked, and how much more interesting they would have been, had I had the opportunity to look at them before the Victorians got their hands on them. I have a great affection for the Victorians, but I fear in this respect he was right, and they did posterity a grave disservice. But we are, as I have said, all victims of our upbringing.

But it was only when I was older, and could get behind the wheel of my own car and go in the pub myself, that I truly began to realise the wealth of churches we have in this county. I did not realise that some parts of the home counties – that great expanse of heathland in Surrey and Hampshire that was in the 20th century properly colonised by the commuter belt – had hardly any settlements, and hardly, therefore, any churches, before the 19th century. Unlike Kent, which rather extravagantly has two, Essex has no great ancient cathedral. Chelmsford will always be a glorified parish church, and even then has been much diminished since the day a quarter of a century ago when one of those go-ahead clergymen, straight from *The Daily Telegraph's* Peter Simple column of old, decided to rip out all its old furniture and fittings and replace it with objects that seemed to have been acquired from Habitat. But we make up, as a county, in quantity and quality of parish churches what we lack in a great cathedral. These are treasure houses, to be found even in the most humble village, and they tell the story of our people and our country, and are literally and metaphorically landmarks of our culture.

I shall deal with what one finds on the inside of churches later. But the first impression a church makes is from the outside: and in Essex that means the statement made, from afar, by the church tower. We are not a county of spires: those we do have make a profound impression – Thaxted and Saffron Walden come to mind, and of course the spire of the Cathedral at Chelmsford. But none of these, however glorious, affects me quite so much as the sight across the fields, coming in from Boreham, of the tower of Little Baddow proclaiming itself to me, as it has proclaimed itself to people for 700 years; or of the tower of Tilburyjuxta-Clare peeping from amid the trees at the end of its long lane as seen from the main road, or, most stately of all, the tower of the sailor's church in Maldon, proud on the last hill before the quay, dominating the landscape when one walks back from the end of the Promenade. For me, that is just about the finest site in Essex, other than home.

As Dr Bettley has mentioned in his introduction, I was Enoch Powell's official biographer. More than 20 years ago my wife and I drove him around Essex to look at churches. When the trip was suggested I naively imagined Enoch would want to see the picture postcard villages of our county: Finchingfield, Thaxted, or the colossal town church of Saffron Walden. Not a bit of it. Rainham, Fobbing and Corringham were his goals, and the apsidal church at Hadleigh, partly because of their antiquity – he, like me, was a sucker for Norman – but also because of their ancient importance in the landscape, before the coming of the oil refineries. The towers of those three churches – and of East Ham, which historically was one of ours – were, he contended, built not so much for the glory of God as for the benefit of a vantage point to see

invaders sailing up the Thames. Powell's other conviction was that most of what Pevsner calls Norman churches had in fact been Saxon ones, vandalised by the Normans as a highly symbolic means of impressing their culture on that of their conquered people. I am aware that his is not the only school of thought on this: but all over England there are tower walls at the west ends of naves that bear the lingering impression, 950 years later, of the work of an earlier civilisation that the conquerors failed entirely to obliterate, and which remains as a token of the Saxon's considerable existence.

I did a year or two later get Enoch away from the Thames estuary to take him deeper into our county. He marvelled at the monumental brasses in Tolleshunt d'Arcy: he could recite Macklin almost from cover to cover, brasses being an obsession of his. When his thank you letter arrived he enclosed with it a copy of a letter he had sent the same morning to the then incumbent in that parish. It began with an observation that a visit to his church had been greatly illuminated by a copy of the church guide he had bought there. It continued "I hope you will not mind if I point out what I consider to be one or two errors of fact." It finished eight pages of A4 typescript later – single-spaced. He told me a few months later "I never got a reply". We then went to Danbury. On seeing, from a distance, a recumbent knight in a recess he told me at once that it must date from the 1320s or 1330s. Marvelling, I asked him how he could know – had he boned it up from Pevsner? No, he said, he had spotted they were made from wood, and therefore must have been made during the famous Europe-wide alabaster shortage of those decades. I have yet to verify such a shortage, but am yet to disprove it either.

I cannot touch on such a subject as this without reference to the most atavistic church in our county, St Peter's on the Wall at Bradwell, the oldest church in Essex and the second oldest in the country, after St Martin's,

Canterbury. I was first taken to see it as a small boy, just as it was celebrating its 1300th anniversary. I have taken the walk out on to sea wall numerous times since then and the sense of awe I felt as a child has never quite left me. To look at St Peter's is to understand, if we need any help to do so, what living in an old country really means. My first memory of the chapel was its stark appearance in the landscape. That, and its lack of embellishment, helped me understand the emptiness and bleakness of England at the time it was built, in a way that most later churches cannot. It is a building that reflects a time when art was crude, when civilisation had ebbed, when life was short. Although we may use other church buildings to stimulate our understanding of the past, none can quite be so effective as St Peter's on the Wall is in its isolation. Until the seascape was benighted with wind turbines one could stare at the chapel and past it out to sea, and see exactly what our forebears saw 1350 years ago. Anyone who is not moved by such atavism is not worthy of being considered civilised or thoughtful.

When we set foot inside any of our churches it is an invitation to us to consider the past in which they were built. How well we can reconstruct it depends on the power of our imagination. Were we to encounter an early medieval congregation the first thing we would be likely to be struck by would be the smell: then the sight, of a people generally shorter of stature than we are, and anyone who appeared to be in great old age likely to be in his or her early fifties – much the age I am now. In an age of cruelly painful and often lethal childbirth, and before antibiotics, life expectancy was not much more than 30. The omnipresence of death, and the laws against recusancy, were not the least reasons why the church would have been full. The quality would have their seats:

all others would be likely to be standing. To most the liturgy, being in Latin, would be incomprehensible; but any English written liturgy would have been unintelligible too unless spoken, because of the high levels of illiteracy. Animals may well have been in the church, for shelter, and may well have left their traces:

perhaps that smell is not just the congregation.

Many towers would be yet to be built: fine earlier specimens like the squat, stout one at Stambourne, dating from around 1100, were rare indeed. In a few villages the absence of stone and difficulty of making corners led to the towers being built round, such as in my own village of Great Leighs. Similarly, some chancels would not yet be finished. In the 14th century, when the wealth from wool provided the means to extend and enlarge so many churches, there is evidence of a caesura in building styles, as the craftsmen are felled by the black death between 1348 and 1350, and 20 or 30 years pass before they have been replaced, and the wealth is once more sufficient to carry on with the building work. Our medieval congregation is, of course, worshipping before the Reformation: which does not just mean Latin, but also wall paintings that illustrate the joy of heaven and the terrors of hell to the unlettered parishioners. Nowhere in the country that I have seen has a better example of this teaching aid than Copford in our own county. Screens have images painted on them, some of which survive to this day; but above them they have rood lofts, which do not. And in niches around the church there are graven images. In so many of our churches the niches remain, their pedestals empty and the ornate canopies above them sheltering, this past 350 years or more, nothing more than thin air, since Cromwell's men went through the churches and smashed any evidence of idolatry. All these things remind us that whatever the theological significance of aspects of our churches, so too has politics always played its part – whether in the vandalism of the Conqueror, the break with the past of the Reformation, the determination of the Puritans to enforce Protestantism and, in some rare cases, the evidence of the legacy of the Oxford movement after 1833, as some churches became “high” again.

As they disperse from their Catholic rite, our medieval congregation speak to each other in a tongue nearly incomprehensible to us, and which if we could hear it today would sound to us rather like German. In recesses in the walls of some of the aisles lie the alabaster or wooden effigies of knights who had gone off to the crusades: the wooden ones in Danbury that Enoch spotted I feel I have known all my life. I first went to see them when I was about seven or eight, having read in a magazine an account of how, in the late 1920s, workmen had dug up part of the church floor to lay heating pipes, and had confronted the coffin of a knight. What made this unusual was that the body was immersed in some sort of embalming fluid, and the knight looked at them, from 600 years earlier, as if from a sleep in which all his earthly features were still discernible. In some ways the sight when the coffin was opened must have been shocking: but how I envied those workmen as they looked, as none of us has ever been able to do, directly at the face of the middle ages: and saw, they recalled, that it looked remarkably like ours. There is a line of human continuity from the foundation of each church through to the present day, but almost never is it given such a clear manifestation.

Tombs and monuments are the way in which that human chain most obviously presents itself. Only last winter my wife and I excitedly turned back the rug in the chancel of the church at Pebmarsh, there to see the magnificent brass, also from the 1320s, of Sir William Fitzralph – the oldest brass in Essex and, at five and a half feet long, not far off life-size. When we see these very early brasses we always assume they are of crusaders. In fact, Sir William

did perhaps even more important work than fighting the infidel: he helped Edward I hammer the Scots. From Sir William it is an unbroken chain to the stone, wooden and brass memorials that remember the dead of the two world wars, via tablets that mark lives lost in various imperial adventures of the 18th and 19th centuries. In a time when it represented an epic journey to go to the next village – and even well into the last century, long after the coming of the railway, there would have been many people in Essex villages who had never been to London – we can imagine the effect on the community of those who had sailed the seas, and especially of those who never came back.

I fear it is inevitable that as a historian and an atheist I should see churches as being about history. But of course I never forget that, first and foremost, the church is a centre for worship for Anglicans in any community. It is usually they – the devout and the communicating – who ensure the place keeps going. They do not merely provide the flowers, and polish the brassware, or hold the key for any interested party to gain access to buildings that now, because of the depravity of parts of our society, must remain locked. They give the place its *raison d'être*. If they do not attend and perform their acts of worship, then the church might as well be converted into flats, or become an antique centre, or a café – as so many churches have. And that is the paradox inevitable in our secular age. The population of England is perhaps ten times what it was when our medieval churches were built: and yet pews are empty. I have not come here to discuss the inability of the Church of England to connect any longer with even people who consider themselves to be of a distinctly Christian cast of mind – I am dramatically unqualified to do that. However, I cannot but reflect that the decline in congregations is not the least reason why so many churches are in peril. I hear all sorts of reasons why people who claim to believe in God don't go to church. Most common is that they don't have time – weekends, like life, are short, as the old joke goes. Some say they don't like the modern liturgy, and I must say I entirely sympathise with them. No doubt at the Reformation there were all sorts of grumbles about the Prayer Book, and later about the charmlessness of the King James Bible compared with the good old Vulgate. However, any textual critic will tell you – should you need to be told, which I doubt – about the inherent majesty and literacy of the language of what was produced in the 17th century. You will struggle to find anyone to say the same about the version of the Good Book that one of my teachers at university memorably branded “The Princess Margaret Bible”. But I know that many churches are helpful in this regard, signifying in advance via parish magazines, notice boards and now the internet which liturgy will be used when, so that the sensitive may plan their worship accordingly.

Some of you may fear that I am taking the view of the Church of England that in every respect it should be a museum, and should preserve both in terms of its liturgy and its fabric what it had before the horrors of the 20th century. That is not quite the point I am making. I do not doubt that there are less traditionally minded people who are attracted to parish churches by the modern liturgy, and who contribute enormously to the work and life of the community through their

participation in the church – and that, also, they help keep the church functioning. It is quite clear that they and all other shades of feeling can be accommodated, as I have mentioned. But alterations to the fabric are quite another matter, and other uses of the space that a church provides must also be considered sensitively.

I have been in churches where a corner of the building is being used as a crèche. That seems to me to be entirely consonant with the purposes of the church, and certainly far less

disruptive and more Christian than some of the things churches were used for in the middle ages. Bigger churches, copying the example of cathedrals, have their own gift stalls and even a table or two where you can sit down and have a cup of tea. I am conscious that exploitation of the tourist trade is a useful and essential way of raising much-needed funds. However, Cathedrals tend to have chapter houses or annexes, or even ancient refectories, where the interests of Mammon can be pursued without too much obvious disruption. The larger parish churches that do this sort of thing do not, and they can be intrusive. The solution then seems to be, if the money can be found, to build on some sort of annexe. We have all seen these, for these and for other purposes, and they are rarely happy experiences for anyone concerned. And, of course, once you start using a church for the purposes of child-minding or refreshment, health and safety regulations start to insist on all sorts of electrical and plumbing work, including lavatories, which are not quite in keeping with the idea of a church. Perhaps, therefore, we have to change our idea of a church. But I'd rather not. Or perhaps we need to put pressure on the government to relax certain regulations that, in the interests of creating some impossible utopia, they insist upon even hard-pressed and architecturally sensitive institutions complying with.

I am not just referring to lavatories and state of the art kitchens. I met a few years ago a woman who was responsible for helping to dole out substantial amounts of lottery money. She liked giving it to ancient churches, but she did not like some of the reasons why she had to do so. Not too long ago, she said, if a gutter became blocked a verger or a churchwarden went up a ladder and unblocked it. Now, she said, clergy had been informed that such enterprises were contrary to health and safety regulations, and any freelance operator who persisted in such activities was liable, if he had an accident, to bring all sorts of horrors down upon the head of the church. So gutters often remained blocked, because the church didn't always have the money to pay a professional unblocker to come to do the business. And as a result walls became damp and started to crumble. And so for the want of a man going up a ladder at no cost at all, thousands of pounds that might otherwise have been used for long-standing necessities and large-scale restoration projects was diverted to curing the recent consequences of damp.

Of course, what we might call natural causes isn't the only means by which churches encounter hardship and difficulty. In this economic crisis, as in no other that I can recall, churches have increasingly been the victims of criminals. The spate of thefts of metal for scrap – not least the clichéd lead off church roofs – was at its height about two years ago, but is still prevalent today. This is despite an Act of Parliament having just had Royal Assent that regulates scrap metal dealers, and what they may or may not do in cash transactions. One often sounds like a stereotypical resident of Tunbridge Wells in condemning crime, but it really is hard to understand the mentality of those who would happily desecrate an ancient monument – let alone one dedicated to religion – or, as so often happens, steal metal plaques from war memorials. Public opinion is, rightly, outraged by such things. I feel, though, that for too long the law did not do enough to stop these depredations, and that any resurgence of the crime – which I fear will happen if our economy continues to refuse to pick up – will not be that easy to police. When such criminals were brought before the courts they were usually given custodial sentences in keeping with the tariff for these offences, and judges generally did a good job of articulating society's disgust at what they had done. However, and despite the suggestion being made in national newspapers by a number of writers apart from me, too little has been done to improve regulation of the scrap metal business.

I am sure the majority of those who deal in this commodity are honest and decent – at least, I should like to think they are. However, it is palpably clear that many are not. Criminals

can only sell large consignments of roofing lead or, even worse, metal memorial plaques, because scrap metal dealers turn a blind eye to the obvious or near-obvious provenance of such things, and ignore the criminal activity that must have secured them. Time will tell whether the system of licensing for these tradesmen will put an end to this. A man faced with losing his licence, and therefore his livelihood, if he buys material that is clearly stolen is, in all probability, not going to buy it – I hope. One can easily conceal an illegal gambling or racketeering business. It is less easy to conceal an illegal scrap metal yard. It astonishes me that a government so willing to regulate to rule out positively harmless things – such as men going up ladders to unblock drains – was so reluctant to regulate to stop a serious, pernicious and deeply anti-social crime: the Act is the result of a Private Member's Bill. But then perhaps I have missed something, and scrap metal dealers are actually all militant supporters of the Conservative Party. But the Act will be pointless unless the police are vigilant, and make it their business to enforce it.

Yet even without the attention of criminals, churches in this day and age have a hard time. Many people who visit them put coins in the wall-safes that they see as they open the door to leave. They buy postcards or leaflets. Copford has the clever and sensible idea of requiring visitors to put money in an electricity meter so that the wall paintings they have come to see can be illuminated. But all these things will, I imagine, make only the smallest dent in the large pile of money required to keep a church going. We know that, after some disastrous property deals in the late 1980s, the Church Commissioners are hardly in a position to help. Church buildings have become, ironically, one of the great deserving causes of Christian charity in our country. But even that has its limits and, as the buildings become older and roofs and towers and windows require refurbishment, more and more parishes struggle to keep their building standing. Fetes, open days, big appeals lasting for years, and the occasional big donation by local landowners all have their uses and can have the added bonus of bringing people into a church, and into a church community, who might otherwise never connect with it. One of the most charming afternoons I have spent in recent years was a warm, sunny day in September three or four years ago, when we decided to visit the church at Tollesbury and found it was having an open day. We were able to climb the tower – which involved, I vividly remember, a certain amount of precariousness in the belfry – and take in magnificent views of the Blackwater estuary, up which, we were glad to note, no

Viking ships were sailing. When we came down refreshments of quite an elaborate nature were being served in the churchyard. It was the most perfect English afternoon, and the most perfect English occasion: I just hope the money it raised made an impact on the church's needs.

Some communities do the most remarkable job with their churches. About 20 years ago, driving to Clare in Suffolk, we spotted in the distance, standing on its own, almost the last church in Essex, at Tilbury-juxta-Clare, which I have mentioned earlier in the context of its remarkable contribution to our landscape. I may well have been wrong, but it seemed then to be redundant. There were no signs of life, no advertisements of services, and it was locked without any sign of where to get the key. Peering through the windows as best we could the inside looked neat but desolate. If it was not redundant, then what went on there at that time was a very well-kept secret. Now the church is far from moribund. I went there in the winter and although I still couldn't get in, I noticed all the usual signs of life. Ironically, one of these was freshly-dug graves in the churchyard. But there was also a tree planted to commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, at the corner of a very well-kept churchyard. The church now has a website. It is seeking to re-order a part of the church to create an area for social functions, parish and parochial church council meetings and children's activities. This seems to me sensible and laudable. In isolated

communities – and, indeed, less isolated ones too – finding other uses for a church that do not compromise either its architecture or its purpose must help ensure its survival.

Yet I come back to a point I have touched on before and must now make definitively: which is that it is likely to become beyond the means of the average parish to raise the money required to maintain a large, ancient building in the condition it requires to remain standing. Indeed, in some cases this has already happened. Charities such as this, or the occasional burst of lottery funding, can and do make the most enormous difference. But I fear in the decades to come the task is likely to become overwhelming. It is not just that we are a more secular nation, for there are plenty of people who do not count themselves as Godly who will put their shoulders to the wheel when required to help save a building of explicit historical, as opposed to religious, importance. I know something of this mindset. I apologise for offending the Godly among you, and for doing so in this place, but when I see a church I see an incarnation of the past, and a version of a part of our national story, and not simply a place of worship.

We live in an age when we are, for the first time in decades, not inevitably becoming wealthier. And even if we are, we are alert that there might be calls on our resources that prevent us from being quite so generous with our money when it comes to supporting charities as we might like to be. For a start, we all seem to live forever. That not only means that we might live for decades after retirement and exhaust our savings. It also means we might have to find the money to pay for long-term, and very expensive, care at the end of our lives. And even then some of us, expecting to go first, are conscious that we must leave our widows provided for. So casually rounding up £50,000 for £100,000 from the local community to keep a church standing, which has always been a tall order, is set to become taller.

I mentioned earlier a conversation I had some years ago with a lottery fund administrator. She told me something then that profoundly shocked me, but which in the ten or so years since I had the conversation has, as I have reflected on it, come to seem to me to be the only way out of the problem we face in keeping our historic and magnificent churches standing. It is to nationalise them. I was shocked when I heard this for two reasons. First, I am against nationalising anything, on principle. Anything commercial always works better when it is in the private sector. If old Marxists among you doubt this, think of the days when the state telephone company took six months to install a line. However, church buildings are not commercial. You can perhaps get a rent for them for the odd non-religious function, and you can gather fees for weddings and funerals, but we all know how few pawns that will butter. Church buildings are, however, one of the major cultural resources of our nation. Is any government, in even the most cash-strapped times, simply going to stand by and watch them crumble? I think not, even though so many of our politicians are utter philistines. There is no way the Church of England can afford to meet the repair obligations for the fabric of its churches: but in any case such repairs are not the church commissioners' responsibility. As you will all know, responsibility for maintaining these precious buildings rests with the incumbent and the parochial church council. The most recent figures I could find suggest that only around £112m of the £185m annually needed is actually raised and spent: so £73m worth of much-needed repairs and maintenance are not being done each year, causing buildings to deteriorate and making their eventual repair – or perhaps it is fairer to say rescue – even more expensive.

Of the £112m that is spent, £40m comes from various public grants or from trusts. The other £72m is raised by parishes themselves: a pretty heroic effort, but one that is simply not equal to the scale of the task. I am sure you know the figures but, in case you don't, let me set

them out. There are 16,200 Church of England churches of which 12,000 are listed buildings. English Heritage undertook research with the Church last year that estimated £925m would need to be spent on essential repairs to these buildings over the next five years – or £185m a year. As well as some of the ad hoc fundraising or income-generating activities I have outlined already, suggestions have been made that post offices could be accommodated in many churches. We should not be outraged by the suggestion: before the onset of village halls churches housed all sorts of activities far worse than post offices: even, according to the Bishop of London, cockfighting.

But whatever commercial wheezes are developed, none is going to maintain the church in the way it needs to be maintained, unless the church closes and the building is redeveloped altogether, which is the last thing we want. We can preach to the local people all we like about raising money for their church but, regrettably, only a hard core in each parish will see it as “their church”, and all the burden of keeping it going will fall on them. Meanwhile, the walls get damper, the death-watch beetle ticks away, the tracery in the windows starts to crumble, and the tower becomes a hazard to health and safety. The overwhelming nature of the problem is why, despite my own anti-statist instincts, I strongly believe the state must intervene.

Intellectually, I can justify this twice over. First, the Church of England – and it is the only church I am concerned with here – is the established church. The Head of State is the Supreme Governor of the Church. Whether the State likes it or not, it has an umbilical link with these 12,000 listed buildings that are such a headache to a country that likes to think it cares about its history. This brings us on to the second reason why an intervention would be justified. These buildings are one of the great features not just of our landscape and of our life, but of our culture as a people and as a nation. Is any responsible government, in this day and age, really going to stand by and watch these great buildings fall into ruin? Of course it can't. I know we have a record deficit, and that we as a nation are living beyond our means to a grave extent. But our culture is important. If those directly responsible for a part of it are trying their best – and I think we can all agree they are – and it is still not enough, then to avert catastrophe the government must step in. That is what governments are for. If it cannot find, each year, £73m to bring spending on churches up to the required £185m, then we are in a pitiful state. Total public spending is over £700 billion. All we need is just over one ten-thousandth of that sum to be put aside each year to save a priceless and unique national resource. It may mean adjusting some priorities. I would be happy to suggest to the Chancellor of the Exchequer where he might save that £73m that might otherwise be put to such good, and important, national use. I am afraid I see no other way forward. It might be healthy for the government, if it can be persuaded to use taxpayers' money in this way, to link it to money raised by parishes themselves – to match funding from local people or even from lottery grants. At some time in our national conversation we have to start asking, quite pointedly, why we pay income tax, and what we expect in return for it. The churches are an integral part of our nation. Even if we are atheist, Jew, Muslim or Hindu – or even Catholic or Methodist – they belong to us, just as St Pancras Station belongs to us, or the Royal Crescent in Bath, or Stonehenge. They are part of our particular world, part of what we all of us understand to be a symbol of our country. They are an embodiment of our history, a repository of our art, and a memorial to generations of our people. It may be that Lambeth Palace itself is going to have to speak to the government about this, and to do so in terms that reflect an ultimatum rather than a polite inquiry.

We cannot go on as we are. I salute and admire the voluntarism that has heroically – and I make no apology for using that word again – kept things going this long. But as buildings get

older, as years and decades pass since their last restoration, and as expensive requirements arise to make the buildings more widely useful to the community, more money must be found. The government has a responsibility for the historic culture of our nation and its people. Where church buildings are concerned it must exercise that responsibility, and do so urgently. I should like to think that in 20 years' time I shall be driving my own grandchildren around this magnificent county and showing them the wonders of how the late Norman moves into Early English – even if, by then, a government has succeeded in abolishing drinking, so there will be no pubs left to visit. I just hope the churches, as we know them, will not have started to go too. They have always been there, as we see it. But it would be a grave mistake to assume they always will be.