

THE CHURCH'S BUILT HERITAGE

Background note from the Lincoln Diocesan Synod

The responsibilities for maintaining historic churches in a Rural Deanery

The Rural Dean of the West Wold Deanery Synod made a presentation to Lincoln Diocesan Synod on 7.11.04 to highlight the concern felt by the Deaneries in this rural Diocese who were facing large repair bills for their historic medieval churches.

West Wold, a rural Deanery, covers an area of 250 square miles, with its eastern boundary reaching almost to Grimsby and its western edge some 14 miles north of Lincoln and having a LER of about 12,500, the size of an urban parish. With a u.s.a. of about 500, the scattered communities have the responsibility of 41 church buildings in regular use. Many of the parishes are tiny hamlets, some with only 50 inhabitants. West Wold Deanery has many ancient and architecturally significant buildings, 40 them are listed as Grade 1 or 2 and 2*. (One unlisted Church has been consecrated in the well-prepared rooms of a former Mess Building of a wartime RAF station. It forms part of the Community centre for the estate and is easily maintained.) Four of West Wold's churches are mentioned in Simon Jenkins' book "England's Thousand Best Churches". He states that Lincolnshire has 'the finest collection of medieval churches in England.' and visited 54 of them.) The Diocese of Lincoln has a total of 637 Church buildings, 91% listed as Grade 1 or 2* with only 59 unlisted buildings.

Improving the facilities for the local community

Every church PCC faces a tremendous financial struggle to maintain these ancient buildings. The cost of repairs increases

annually. Government legislation with respect to buildings has multiplied and churches are learning to bear the cost of compliance. Essential Health and Safety regulations which may involve the need to hire scaffolding even for gutter cleaning, has increased costs for minor work. The Government's Disability Discrimination legislation offers a necessary way to make the churches accessible to everybody, although ramps, accessibility and loop systems can become an additional financial burden for many small communities, even though they appreciate the beneficial effects. The installation of toilets and re-modelling schemes which make church building more 'user friendly' are welcomed but are expensive. The important process for Inspections for Asbestos and any subsequent removal by trained and qualified people can be an additional drain on limited funds.

Regular Quinquennial inspections and the subsequent repair work for the parishes in Lincoln Diocese can result in amounts which are crippling to small communities. The effects of these inordinate costs can, as rumour may suggest, make parishes take difficult decisions, perhaps even to ignore a quinquennial inspection for fear of what it may reveal or to find a willing person who will patch things up temporarily temporarily and more cheaply.

Church congregations can appreciate the benefit of ensuring that their local churches are fit for use. Many improvements have been made over the years, so that churches are better heated and lit and are made more welcoming and comfortable for worship and other community events. Over the years, congregations have worked unceasingly to raise the necessary finance to fund the repairs and maintenance but in recent years the costs have risen and VAT has proved to be an additional burden on top of the actual costs.

The effect of well maintained Community Church buildings

A Church building is a well respected and necessary focal point, serving the local community. Congregations and the surrounding communities take a pride in their local church. It is a sign and symbol of the presence of something 'spiritual' in the community. The small congregations of faithful regular worshippers, value and love their local church building and recognise it's tradition in having been a place of prayer and spirituality over hundreds of years. They may well feel responsible for the continuation of the place which offers a welcome to the whole local community to worship God and celebrate the rites of passage from baptism to death.

It has become a regular practice in many places, to open churches daily to visitors. Many people from all denominations and none, often seek to visit a church when they are on holiday, or at times of stress and emotional need. A visit to a church building can offer an oasis of peace and calmness in the midst of constant noise and busyness. Some may not go to regularly for worship, but they want it to be there for them when they need it! Our churches are a valued resource for the whole of our multi-faith, multi-cultural nation.

In some places, church buildings are used by the community where there is no suitable meeting place, thus enabling groups to meet locally. Ecumenical services and meetings take place in chapels and churches, thus encouraging denominational collaboration. Schools with small Halls hold their Christian festival services in their local churches, so that parents and friends from the community can join in. Schools also find that visits to churches can help children in their spiritual development are a valuable for their RE. The local church members will want to make the mission and ministry tasks of promoting of Gospel their main focus but the maintenance of their buildings and finding the funding for the repairs can divert the attention of parishes from this important task

The need for full VAT exemption

It is well to be reminded that while Churches were paying the entire costs of their building work, the VAT costs were substantially financing the country's Exchequer, with less being granted back through Government Agencies such as English Heritage. While it has been good to learn of the opportunity to claim back a proportion of VAT on eligible repairs to listed buildings (at 100% since April 2004) through a grant scheme after the VAT has been paid, this has not been enough to lift the financial burden of maintaining these listed buildings. Small communities have been left in constant fund-raising mode, which can seem an endless process as time elapses and the costs increase. Approaches to English Heritage and the Historic Churches Preservation Trust and other grant awarding bodies for funds to finance repairs to their beloved churches, result in small grants. It is clear that entire and automatic relief from VAT would decrease the financial burden significantly and encourage the local communities to continue with their stewardship of the national heritage.

We are led to believe that in Continental Europe, where there is no established church, Governments give much more support to those who maintain their national heritage buildings. For those of us who travel to Europe and visit their places of worship, we can be amazed by the care and attention that has been given to make the churches attractive and well decorated, warm and waterproof. It can be amazing to see public buildings, churches and cathedrals, often younger than some of our historic churches, so well looked after.

The time is ripe for a re-appraisal of the ways in which the financial burden for the care, maintenance and repair of the country's churches may be supported by HMG so that this part of the historic heritage of the country can be maintained. There is a need for a full, permanent exemption from VAT in order to help towards the upkeep and preservation of the nation's church heritage. It would be good to have some recognition by HMG, that because of its own legislation, an additional financial

burden has been placed upon the custodians of the nation's church heritage, and this now needs to be lifted.