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Ruined churches are a treasured feature of our countryside.

For some parishes, they can be an expensive headache. But for others, they represent an opportunity.

We can help you understand how to deal with ruins in your care.

Download our guidance

- [Ruined churches \(508.17 KB\)](#)



What is a ruin?

There are two basic types of church ruins:

- “Flat” sites with no visible remains above ground

- And those where some structure survives

Some are [scheduled ancient monuments](#) and most are [listed buildings](#).

Our research shows that there are between 150 and 250 ruins within the faculty jurisdiction. Please contact [your Diocesan Advisory Committee](#) if your ruin is not included in [our database](#).

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Now we see shattered walls, broken columns, trees thrusting through crumbling floors... All this makes for that melancholic delight we seek so eagerly and treasure gratefully in our brief passage through time.

Rose Macaulay, Pleasure of Ruins (1953)

Who is legally responsible for ruins?

Finding out who is responsible for these structures and sites can be difficult.

It often involves time-consuming research at the land registry and elsewhere to establish title.

- If the site is not owned by any Church of England body, then the bishop has the power to remove the legal effects of consecration (if they still apply). [The presence and status of any burials should be considered](#)
- If the site was closed by Order in Council, then it may now be vested in your Diocesan Board of Finance
- If the site is in Church ownership, then it technically remains consecrated and [subject to the faculty jurisdiction](#). The only way to remove the legal effects of consecration is through closure under the Pastoral Measure (2011)

Find out if your ruined church was [formally closed](#). Or see how to close it under the Measure.

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Opportunities for new uses

Ruins are a resource which you and your community can use:

1. People often feel a sense of attachment to them and there is always a great story to tell
2. They occupy a plot of increasingly valuable land, and developers are beginning to appreciate this
3. You can re-use the surrounding churchyard as a burial ground

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Causes of decay

Once a church is ruined, it becomes vulnerable to decay at a faster rate. Decay is often a long-term process but it can lead to partial or total collapse.

Causes of decay include:

- Wind, rain and frost can wash out mortar and erode masonry
- Birds, animals and insects burrow into and undermine the walls
- Vegetation can undermine foundations and level walls apart
- Roots of trees can run inside the core of walls
- Climbing plants penetrate and cloak masonry

But these natural developments are not just a problem. They may be of great significance in themselves, and can contribute to the beauty and interest of the ruin.

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Conservation methods

Get the advice of an experienced conservation professional to assess the condition of your church ruin and decide on the best action to take.

First, they will do an audit of the site's ecology to see if you should remove all forms of vegetation from walls or if that would damage the ruin itself.

Then, they will advise you on the best way to deal with encroaching vegetation.

Kill and remove it

The stems are cut and poisoned with biocides.

After they have withered, you can remove them from the masonry.

It may not be possible to completely remove some roots without a measure of rebuilding.

Trim it

A lot of the vegetation on the walls might be benign or even protective (e.g. from the elements). Ivy can be a picturesque adornment for ruined walls.

But its roots can open up joints and crack apart walls. And wind forces on the foliage can lever sections of walls apart.

You should prune the vegetation carefully to reduce wind resistance and prevent it from rooting into the wall.

Use it

Historic England and others are experimenting with grasses “soft capping” the crowns of walls to prevent their deterioration.

The grasses absorb water and insulate the wall head, which can breathe and dry out. They also overlap the edges to provide a natural drip and protect the wall faces.

This method is still experimental so you should always ask for advice beforehand.

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Repair

The exposed masonry may need to be restored.

If so, then you should use visually and structurally appropriate and sympathetic materials. Poorly chosen materials or solutions can make the problem worse.

We recommend you take a proportionate response to repair. Ask yourself if you should:

- Record what is there before reducing the fabric to a sustainable state
- Invest considerable resources into a single ruin
- Or use your resources to maintain several ruins

This is a complicated and often controversial case-specific problem. There are no hard and fast rules. [Always contact your diocese for advice.](#)

Find practical advice on repairing ruined churches in our booklet, [Stonework: Maintenance and Surface Repair](#)

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Health and safety issues

Unconsolidated and uncared for ruins can quickly become dangerous. They also attract vandals.

Signs and robust fencing are unlikely to deter such people from entering the site.

As a Parochial Church Council, if you neglect the maintenance of your ruin, you could be held liable for injuries to visitors (and trespassers) under the [Occupiers' Liability Act \(1984\)](#).

If the ruin is listed (but not scheduled), the local authority may force you to carry out repairs or take it from you with a compulsory purchase order.

If the ruin is scheduled, you can [approach Historic England for help](#).

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Management models

The best way to make sure that a ruined church is properly maintained is to make use of it.

We can suggest the three following models:

[Closure and alternative use](#)

You can ask for the ruin to be formally closed as a place of worship under the [Mission and Pastoral Measure \(2011\)](#). This will:

- Remove the legal effects of consecration
- Bring the ruin within the secular jurisdiction
- Leave it in the ownership of your Diocesan Board of Finance

This may lead to an uncertain future for the ruin, because there are only four options under the Measure:

- Alternative use
- Vesting in the Churches Conservation Trust
- Demolition
- Vesting in the Diocesan Board of Finance as a controlled ruin

Note that the churchyard will remain vested in the incumbent.

[Read our guidance note for more detail](#)

Management agreements and grants

An attractive solution is the use of a heritage management agreement in partnership with the local authority or Historic England.

It allows you and the community to use the ruin for research, educational and leisure activities. And the local authority will collaborate with you in the ruin's care.

Here are some options:

- **Heritage management agreements**
- Biodiversity management and grants
- Environmental stewardship schemes
- Landfill Communities Fund
- Heritage Lottery Fund

Also try local authorities, charitable trusts, local and national heritage groups and amenity societies.

[Read our guidance note for more detail](#)

Keep and use them

This model is for ruins:

- Within the curtilage of churches and churchyards which are still in use for worship or burial
- Which are still used occasionally for services
- To which there is a strong local bond

Grants for conservation and to aid community and educational use may be available from the Heritage Lottery Fund, local authorities, heritage groups and amenity societies.

Local communities or interest groups can also help by setting up friends groups or other voluntary groups to look after the ruin.

[Read our guidance note for more detail](#)

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Want more help?

Church Heritage Record

Find out if you have a ruin in your churchyard

Chancel repair liability

Find out about registering a liability

Grants for building repair and conservation reports

See if you are eligible for one of our grants

Caring for God's Acre

Celebrate your burial ground

Also of interest



Archaeology

Learn about archaeological recording methods



Human remains

What should you do if you find articulated bones?

Two old graves in graveyard with tall grass

Image not found or type unknown

Churchyard structures

Care for the structures in your churchyard



Biodiversity

Care for our God-given creation

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/ruined-churches>