



A BRIEF GUIDE TO PROTECTING CHURCH TREASURES

Introduction

The Church Buildings Council is aware that parishes can feel they have to sell their church treasures because on the **one hand, they are worried that they might be stolen, and on the other hand, that they can't afford the insurance.** The advice set out below, which has been compiled with the advice of the police and insurers, will help you to keep your treasures with confidence.

The Court of the Arches judgement over the sale of an armet from the Church of Wootton St Lawrence (Diocese of Winchester) has established a number of principles that apply to proposals for the disposal of church treasures, the most important of which is that sales will rarely be permitted because of the strength of the presumption against sale. It also emphasised that parishes should not seek to dispose of valuable articles merely because they could not afford full insurance cover.

The Church Buildings Council policy on *Disposals and Loans* was written to ensure its advice to Chancellors was consistent and based on thought-through principles. Now that it has been endorsed by this judgement it is important the parishes are offered as much assistance as possible in securing their treasures.

How to secure your treasures from theft

Safes

A safe can provide a very effective measure to secure valuable items such as communion plate or brass altarware when not used for services.

If your safe is over 40 years old it is strongly recommended that it is replaced with a modern one which will provide **much improved protection.** **Any safe should be installed in accordance with the manufacturer's** instructions and it is strongly recommended to consult your insurers before purchasing a new safe.

It may be possible to obtain a suitable second hand safe of equivalent rating. Any such safe should be reconditioned in accordance with the relevant [British Standard \(BS7582\)](#). These safes can be purchased for surprisingly low cost.

As a minimum all freestanding safes should be bolted to the floor. This will substantially increase the time a thief requires to gain access to the safe. Small portable items can also be stored in smaller safes kept locked inside the **church's** bigger safe. This double safe system will delay and further discourage thefts.

Keys

All keys to the church should be kept in the personal custody of a responsible person or in a secure place away from the church. Any duplicates should be kept to a minimum.

It is important that safe keys are never kept at the church. It is good practice to maintain a register of all who hold a key to the church and this should be reviewed on an annual basis. Keyholders should be required to sign the register and ensure no duplicate keys are produced or any keys loaned to other persons.

Intruder alarms

To reflect positive stewardship some insurers allow a discount off the overall premium if an intruder alarm is installed to certain requirements.

Intruder alarms can protect part or all of the building. Signalling can be on an audible alarm-only basis or be remote to a central station. It is suggested you consult your insurers in the first instance for further guidance.

Linking fire alarms directly to keyholders can be useful because an early alert can minimise the damage caused by arson. If appropriate, provide a telephone number to the local community so that you can be reached directly with reports of any suspicious behaviour as some people may be reluctant to call the police.

There are now sophisticated alarm systems available which can issue audio warnings to people who approach church buildings out-of-hours. Your insurers will be able to advise you on recommended systems and you should also consult your DAC.

Display cases

Church buildings hold a wide range of treasures that may require special protection and secure display. Display cases are often found in museum exhibitions and are a well-proven solution for the safe display of portable objects. However, the devotional character of places of worship means that the use of a display case will need to balance the long-term protection of objects against the special function and character of historic church buildings.

Not all portable objects in churches should be displayed in cases. Case design can be difficult and costly, and cases will have significant maintenance requirements, so it is important to be sure that a case really is the best way of dealing with the challenge of preserving and protecting an object. The Church Buildings Council has available guidelines to help you through the process of designing, building and installing display cases. This will include technical, security and conservation considerations. You can download our guidance on display cases [here](#). If you are planning to install a new display case for your treasures please contact us for further advice and sources of funding.

Securing objects

You can protect paintings by ensuring that their frames are securely fixed to a wall (a gap between the painting and the wall is recommended to prevent deterioration in high humidity environments). Professional painting conservators can advise you on the secure display of paintings and also on discreet labelling of these objects.

Although monuments are usually well secured to walls, smaller features such as busts, figures, helmets and swords, can be vulnerable to theft. Some conservation measures can improve security of portable items (for example by using invisible dowels and conservation-grade adhesives) but such interventions need to be proportional to the risks involved and carried out by a professional monuments conservator. It will also require a faculty and you should discuss this with your DAC Secretary.

Photographs

A complete, up-to-date and good quality inventory is of the utmost importance, as it will help the police investigate a crime and recover stolen treasures. In addition, you should also identify the objects that are particularly vulnerable to theft and have good photographs (preferably in digital format) available for quick circulation. Most smartphones and digital cameras provide good quality photographs. Photos can also be added to the Church Heritage Record for your church.

Forensic marking

The identification of valuable materials and artefacts by unique markings may not only deter offenders, but also increase the likelihood of apprehension of the culprit, the recovery of stolen items and a successful prosecution. Signage at the site to show that marking has been used will also act as a deterrent.

Forensic marking technologies allow a unique mark to be placed on part of a heritage asset which is invisible to the naked eye, but detectable by UV lights. There are a number of products on the market. Physical stamps are a low-cost solution that make ownership instantly visible to potential purchasers. Be aware that care needs to be taken to ensure the marking product will not in itself cause damage to the object or artefact.

Works that affect the fabric of your church building or its setting may need consent before work commences. If you are in any doubt, you should seek advice from your diocese/DAC before carrying out the works.

Encourage local vigilance

Encourage parishioners to keep an eye on the church and to make regular checks, such as by walking past on the way to work or taking exercise. Keeping the church open and attracting visitors will help reduce thefts. Encourage volunteers in the church to greet visitors.

Inform neighbours if any works are planned to your building site and provide contact details for them to use if they wish to check whether workmen or visitors are meant to be on site. Training on crime prevention is available for church volunteers from your local crime prevention team.

Where the site is visible to neighbouring properties, consider the installation of sensor linked security lighting. Consider cutting back any overgrown trees and bushes which could block visibility to passers-by, but be careful not to harm any planting that is part of the interest of heritage of the site such as ancient trees. Refer to the [ChurchCare tree guidance](#).

Consider joining, or setting up, a Church Watch or [Heritage Watch](#) scheme for your church building.

Improve formal surveillance

It is helpful to build up a good working relationship with your Local Neighbourhood Policing Team. By sharing information about your church building, you can help to feed into their planned patrol activities. Consider asking the police and fire service to place the location of church buildings onto their call-handling systems. This will allow for a more timely and effective response in the event of a crime or fire at the premises.

You may wish to invest in CCTV cameras. These can be linked to loudspeakers to deter offenders.

[Secured by Design](#) is an initiative of the Association of Chief Police Officers that provides advice on how to reduce the risk of crime through the design of buildings and places. Their [website](#) provides some useful guidance.

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Arson

Arson is a major threat to our churches and is a security challenge. As part of a church's desire to remain open during the day efforts should be made to minimise the risk of arson.

Remove unwanted items that could be used to start a fire: old newspapers, candles and matches. Ensure that any petrol, or other fuel, for lawnmowers is kept away from the church building, and that motorised tools are not stored in the church with fuel in them. Wheelie bins should be kept well away from the church, preferably in a locked compartment.

We recommend the postcode of the church (or nearest building to the church) is clearly displayed on the noticeboard. This will enable visitors to use it when contacting the emergency services if a crime is detected at the church. For some buildings a fire alarm will be appropriate – consult your insurers for advice.

What to do when a crime takes place

1. Call the police

999 - Emergency Number

You should call 999 when it is an emergency, such as when:

- a crime is in progress
- someone suspected of a crime is nearby
- there is danger to life or property or
- violence is being used or threatened.

2. Do not approach suspects. Gather information and await the arrival of the police.

101 - National Non-Emergency Number

You should call 101 to report crime and other concerns that do not require an emergency response.

For example, you should call 101 if:

- your property has been stolen or damaged and the suspect is no longer at the scene
- you need to give the police information about crime or anti-social behaviour in your area
- you want to speak to the police about a general enquiry

101 is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Crimestoppers - 0800 555 111

To remain anonymous, you can contact the independent charity Crimestoppers in order to pass on information about crime or criminal activity.

You will never have to give a formal statement, talk to police or be a witness in court, and you could receive a reward of up to £1,000 if the information you give us leads to the arrest and charge of at least one person.

3. Contact your archdeacon and DAC secretary

4. Crime scene preservation

The objectives and priorities if your church building has been subjected to a crime will be to identify, preserve and recover evidence and intelligence that may lead to the apprehension of the offender and recovery of property.

If your church building has been the subject of burglary, theft or damage the police will send a Crime Scene Investigator (CSI) to examine the building to identify potential sources of evidence.

It is important that the first person to attend the scene of the crime does not interfere with potential evidence:

- Restrict access to the crime scene by introducing a cordon - you can use chairs or a rope etc.
- If you find shoe marks, blood and tools or abandoned property inside the building or in grounds nearby, the items should be left in situ for the CSI, however, it may be necessary to remove or cover portable items to protect them from the weather. Record where the item was found, handle it on the edge or an area not normally handled and take it to a safe place where it will not be disturbed until the arrival of CSI. If wet, it should be left in a position where water can run off and it can dry naturally.
- Avoid touching the point of entry/exit if at all possible. These areas will be examined by the CSI for fingerprint and DNA, damage, tool marks (do not attempt to fit abandoned tools to tool marks), and shoe marks, particularly on any smooth, hard, non-grained surfaces, such as gloss painted surfaces or glass.
- Do not assume fingerprints are not there because you can't see them. Any glass, especially if handled or moved by offender, should be preserved. If out of doors, cover the object or carefully place indoors and allow to dry naturally if wet.

5. Contact your insurer

This should be done at the earliest opportunity. You may need to advise them of your policy number, date and circumstances of loss and crime reference number.

You may need photographs of any stolen items to be sent in with estimates for replacement items.

6. Contact local media

The news desks of local media organisations can be critical in helping to recover stolen items. Local newspapers, radio and TV stations will raise awareness of your stolen treasure, increasing the likelihood of it being identified and making it harder to sell. It will also increase the awareness of the threat posed to churches by theft and help to improve public vigilance.

Insurance

We must remember that whilst insurance can provide monetary compensation, it can never compensate for the loss **of part of a church's** history.

It is important to check with your insurers that the portable items are insured. Most specialist church insurers provide protection on a pre-set package basis with a built-in significant single article limit for these items. Cover is normally on a modern worthy replacement basis.

If a church desires to insure a specific item on an artistic or antiquity basis they should consult their insurers. Generally they will be required to obtain a valuation at their own expense from a reputable professional valuer. It is likely the insurer may require enhanced costly protection to be provided for this item and charge additional premium to reflect the increased risk.

