

HISTORIC CHURCHES PRESERVATION TRUST

Background

The Historic Churches Preservation Trust is the only national charity offering funds to communities for essential repairs to the fabric of churches and chapels in England and Wales, regardless of denomination and grade. It was founded in 1953, and since then has awarded *£23.1 million in approximately 11,000 grants*. It receives no financial assistance from either government or the church authorities, and survives entirely on voluntary contributions.

The work of the Trust

In our throw-away, short-term society, the concept of giving money for the repair of ancient churches is often misunderstood. It can be perceived that this is to do with the fusty preservation (as in aspic) of bricks and mortar that have outlived their usefulness to society. Nothing could be further from the truth.

These buildings are critically important on several different levels; this is *not* just about “bricks and mortar”, but perhaps more about “bricks and mortals”:

The Holy. Some 12 million people make tourist visits to our nation’s churches each year. Very often they will sign the visitors’ book with comments about the peace and tranquillity of the church. Churches fulfil an important spiritual role, not just through the provision of formal religious services. They are havens for quiet meditation, prayer and thought in a world that can often seem completely mad. It is not for nothing that many churches witness a large increase in visitors at times of national or international tension and crisis.

The Community. In many rural areas, recent years have witnessed the progressive demise of shops, pubs, banks and post offices. These same areas are, in some cases, reeling from the joint shocks of a relentless deterioration in the rural economy and a reduction in the number of tourist visitors because of international tensions. Sometimes the church is the only public building still left open in such communities. Equally, in inner city areas, the church can often be found filling a crucial social role, providing support to the homeless, drug and alcohol dependents, one parent families, and so on. In both these cases, the church’s importance to its community is not just to those who attend services; the church is the *epicentre* of its community; geographically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. And in most cases, once a week the bells ring out to the world as if to proclaim: “Look! Here is a living, thriving community!”

The People. Our churches, whether large or small, whether grand or humble, whether ancient or more recently built, are all about people. It is impossible to visit a church without thinking about the people who designed and built it, maintained it, repaired, embellished and modified it, worshipped in it, were baptised, married and buried in it, in some cases over a period of more than ten centuries. In many churches the very stones seem to speak to us of times past, of events and people. And if we are ever tempted to look upon the architecture and forget the people, the gravestones, tombs, monuments and mausoleums of individuals and families constantly bring us back to this fundamental fact. A visitor from outer space, if he visited the 16,000 churches in England and Wales and studied them, would be able to make a fair attempt at recreating the sweeping history of these countries and the people that created them. *These churches are our history, our culture and our art, all in one building.*

The Treasures. On the final level are the bricks and mortar themselves, and the sometimes irreplaceable contents which they contain and protect. Whilst these buildings are nothing without the people, it is the coming together of the architecture and the people that makes the work of the HCPT so absorbing and so vitally important. The treasure that is the building itself can take the breath away, and can be enjoyed on so many different levels. Among our churches are grand soaring buildings in some cases larger than cathedrals; tiny thatched buildings with no tower nor spire; foundations from Saxon times and churches built in the flowering of the British Empire. Each church is a unique joy; there are the pretty; the awe-inspiring; the eccentric; the utilitarian; those that stand as monuments to the flowering of a

particular age of architecture, and those that look not so much as though they have been built upon the ground, but grown up out of it. And they all share two things in common – they were all built to the glory of God, and they are all in daily use.

The challenge

No charity can expect to survive or attract donations unless it can be specific about the need that it is trying to fulfil. In 2001, English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund estimated the sum spent annually on church fabric at £100m, and of this HCPT estimates that £55m is for work that is eligible under their rules. The Trust receives approximately 1,800 enquiries per year which turn into 350 grant awards in a typical year. The average cost of work is a staggering £104,000 per church, which is the more startling when it is realised that *38% of the applications are from communities with a total population of 500 or less*. 25% of the total cost of the project is funded within the community – an amazing proclamation of the love of the community for its building and a glowing testimony to the success of thousands of church fetes, bring and buys, cake stalls, jumble sales and coffee mornings. By the time most churches make their application to HCPT, they have already a great deal of successful fundraising under their belt, but are looking to raise a further £9.5m to be able to start their project. Against this, HCPT has less than £2m to offer. This stark figure shows the scale of the challenge HCPT faces; for many communities, having to raise a further £20,000 is so daunting that it might as well be £200,000.

As if this was not enough, the costs per year are rising far faster than the rate of inflation, as a result of high labour rates, shortages of craft skills and traditional materials; Health and Safety legislation; theft, vandalism and insurance premiums; conservation, architectural, archaeological and wildlife requirements. And finally with Diocesan Quotas and parish shares rising, congregations static or falling, and populations more transient and less committed to their communities, the ability to pay for these higher bills is under more threat than for very many years.

The limitations

Faced with a situation where the demand for funds is increasing inexorably, the availability of funds on a national basis is decreasing and the cause is perhaps becoming less fashionable, HCPT has had to focus its help only on the most deserving cases. The repairs must be to the essential fabric of the building; the community is expected to use most of its own free reserves before seeking the Trust's help; the work has to be of an urgent nature and professionally specified; the church is expected to apply to English Heritage/Heritage Lottery Fund if it qualifies for a grant under the terms of their joint repair scheme; the cost must be beyond the means of the community, and the work must not have started when the Trust receives the application form. There are many projects which the Trust would like to support, but cannot currently because of lack of funds.

The threat

Most communities manage eventually to maintain their buildings to a minimal standard, but the challenge is becoming greater with the passing of each year. Although the rate at which churches were being made redundant slowed after 1997, in the autumn of 2002 the Churches Conservation Trust (formerly the Redundant Churches Fund) publicly warned that the numbers were about to increase again in a major way. This warning came at a time when the government was showing signs of being less committed to the sector. HCPT generally believes that a church is far better kept open and being looked after by its community, but in some cases the community is now so small for the size of its church that it is difficult to see how long some churches can remain open. If churches are made redundant, it is only the very best Grade 1 churches that are likely to be rescued by the Churches Conservation Trust and therefore preserved as church buildings. *The fate for the remainder is bleak indeed.*

How can you help?

Become a Friend of HCPT

A minimum subscription of £15 per year (£25 in the first year) will keep you up to date with the Trust's activities and progress, through the Review magazine, Annual Report and Newsletters. In the Review magazine each year is a list of organised church visits. These are

themed or arranged to cover the churches in a particular area, and benefit the work of the Trust. In the future it is intended to run more events for Friends at a local level.

Send a donation

Even the smallest donations coming to the Trust are more than welcome, as they bear witness to one more person who cares enough to open their cheque book. If you can afford to send a donation more regularly, please do so – you will have the satisfaction of knowing that *every penny* you send to us will make its way to a church, as *all* of our administrative costs are covered by the income from investments made many years ago. Donations can be made via the Trust's website listed below, and please don't forget to ask the Trust for a Gift Aid form if you are a UK taxpayer, as this means that the Trust can reclaim 28p from the Chancellor for every £1 donated

Remember us in your will

A high proportion of the Trust's income comes in the form of bequests from donors. This generosity is a very tangible and living memorial. Leaving a legacy is very simple, and the Trust has prepared a fact sheet, explaining how to do this, including planning a bequest for the best tax efficiency.

In conclusion

HCPT's declared aim is "Keeping Churches Alive". Churches are not just "bricks and mortar", but a cause to be passionate about. Please help HCPT to help more communities like your own.

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