

Repair the Church and put heart into the people The Times 16th February 2013

The school, shop and pub might have gone but in nearly every village there is a church. It may not always be well attended but it is nearly always much loved. At Folke, a tiny Dorset village a few miles south of Sherborne, the church of St Lawrence was rebuilt in 1628. There is the trace of a Saxon door in the tower. The last time major work was done was in 1875. The roof has leaked for years but in 2010 the parish realised major work was essential. It has just been re-roofed, large areas of the interior have been re-plastered and external stone work renewed, all at a cost of £200,000. The money came from English Heritage and nine charitable trusts with a substantial effort from local people who made a financial contribution that surprised them all.

A pair of barn owls were encouraged to move home for the duration of the project, a weekly service continued throughout, and there were two baptisms and a funeral during the major work. A student on the stonemasonry course at Weymouth College carved a new pinnacle and put it in place in December. In January children from the local school sang in thanksgiving for what has been achieved. For the couple planning to get married in August it seemed the work has been done just for them, but it will last for generations, for their children and grandchildren.

This year many parish churches, chapels and meeting houses have reason to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the Historic Churches Preservation Trust (HCPT), whose work is now carried out by the National Churches Trust. The HCPT was set up to fund the repair of English parish churches, which were then suffering from decades of neglect exacerbated to crisis point by the almost total cessation of maintenance and repair during the Second World War.

Since 1953, the Trust has allocated over 12,000 grants and loans, valued at £85 million in 2012 prices, to churches, chapels and meeting houses across the UK. From the start, grants were available to churches of all Christian denominations and gradually the remit was extended to include Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In recent years, funding has extended to help Christian places of worship install modern facilities such as kitchens, heating and toilets to enable greater community use. With no direct funding from church or state, this work has been possible only through the generous support of private donors, legators and charitable trusts.

Last year Plaistow Memorial Community Church in East London was one of 115 places of worship to receive a grant from the National Churches Trust. Designed by William Hayne and opened in 1922 the church is dedicated to the memory of local men who were killed serving in the war. 169 of their names are cast into the bells which hang in the east tower.

The church is in the middle of a major project to repair and restore its buildings and this funding has helped to install new toilets and improved access to the Welcome Centre at the back of the building.

The church is already used by a large number of community projects. These include a 'We Are Family' Club for vulnerable parents and the Friendship Group for older people. The upgrades will mean that more people will be able to use the church for activities and events who have until now been deterred by substandard facilities.

Back in my Diocese of Salisbury, at West Knighton near Dorchester, St Peter's church is the only public space other than the pub in the village. A few years ago the temporary removal of a few pews revealed a rotten floor. This prompted the church to think about how it could create a better space for worship and also encourage use by more local people. The PCC found it hard to contemplate raising sufficient money to do major work on the building. But then David Brown a local parishioner left a legacy of almost £200,000.

Using the legacy, the church has now been totally re-ordered so that it now works both for church services and wider community use. The building is more beautiful than ever and now is also warm and even more welcoming. Sunday remains the day of worship but under-floor heating means that in winter the congregation is warm and people stay and chat. The following morning the Pilates group can meet.

The new facilities include a kitchen servery, hidden sink and cupboards for storage that enable regular coffee mornings when the mobile library is parked opposite the church. There is a winter lecture series that would have been impossible in the cold church. When a Harvest Supper followed on in church after the service an additional 14 people came. Recently there was a tea in the church after a wedding blessing, much easier and cheaper than holding a reception elsewhere.

Investment in a church building means that more people use it and build networks of support and friendship. That is an experience reported by many other churches which have carried out repair and modernisation projects. In an age when some of the ills of society stem from people's isolation, ensuring that parish churches continue to be where Christians come together for worship but also where it is possible for us to get to know our neighbours regardless of faith, seems to me to be money well spent.

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