



## **The Beauty of Holiness and its Perils (or what is to happen to 10,000 parish churches)**

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Thirty years ago, in 1977, the Victoria & Albert Museum, of which I happened at the time to be Director, staged an exhibition entitled Change and Decay. The Future of our Churches. It was the second in a series of heritage crisis exhibitions which marked my directorate. The first was in 1974, The Destruction of the Country House, the work of a team headed by distinguished architectural historians, in particular John Harris and Marcus Binney, founder of the heritage ginger group Save which was one of the direct consequences of the 1974 exhibition. That was mounted when the incoming Socialist government threatened to introduce a wealth tax which would have brought the remaining great houses tumbling down like a pack of cards. Everyone recognises that that exhibition was a landmark changing public perception of the country house and led to a shocked awareness of the enormity of the losses already to our architectural inheritance. As a consequence their cause does not need to be pleaded any longer. Mentmore in 1977 was the last great house to go under with the dissolution of its contents and the last country house crisis was Tyntesfield which was saved thanks to the National Trust and substantial grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The country house has become a classless cult and, with incentives from government, it has been seen wise to leave them as much as possible in the hands of their original owners as the surest safeguard to ensuring their future. Now let me skip forward to 1979 and the third of those exhibitions, The Garden. A Celebration of a Thousand Years of British Gardening. This was the first exhibition ever to be mounted on the history of the island's gardens but it also explored their present plight. This again caused a great stir and scored its point. For the first time major gardens were listed under government aegis. It also became mandatory to consult the Garden History Society about threats to historic gardens and landscapes. Suddenly the restoration of historic gardens became a growth industry. In the aftermath county garden trusts began to be formed, by now covering most of the country, and the study of garden history took off producing a mass of books with new research and becoming a subject for the syllabus in many of our universities. Unlike the country house there has never been anything remotely ideologically contentious about gardens. Battles continue of course to be fought and much remains to be done, like the formation of a national garden archive, but, on the whole, the historic garden scene is no longer in crisis. You may at this point think that I am digressing. Now what is so interesting is that out of the three heritage exhibitions two fully fulfilled their objectives both in terms of government and in those of winning public sympathy and support. What is striking is that in terms of attendance the ones on houses and gardens attracted a very large one. In sharp contrast Change & Decay. The Future of Our Churches only drew about 20,000, a shortfall heightened by the Faberge exhibition running simultaneously in honour of the Queen's Silver Jubilee which attracted queues around the building. Many a time I strolled through Change and Decay alone, for it was empty. But a formidable team of contributors, headed by Marcus Binney and Peter Burman, did a remarkable job and the publication produced with the exhibition remains an incredibly valuable tool telling us where we all were in 1977. I am not saying that the exhibition was a flop altogether because in a sense it wasn't, for within three weeks of opening government for the first time came through with grants to restore historic churches, administered firstly via the Historic Buildings Council and latterly, since 1996, through English Heritage. In all some £200 million has been given to maintain and restore historic churches. Perhaps it is the moment to remind you of the present position in which English Heritage money makes up 6% and the Heritage Lottery Fund only 8% of the total repair bill. The remaining about 80% heroically comes from the congregations and the supporters within the local community. Also 1977 prompted more counties to form trusts dedicated to church preservation resulting in splendid on-

going activities like the annual sponsored bike ride and walk events which began in 1982 with Suffolk and now take place in thirty one counties. To that I can add that during the run of the exhibition NADFAS came to me with the idea of recording church artefacts, an excellent, and I believe, continuing project. I have returned after thirty years to the subject of churches for a number of reasons. In the first instance out of a sense of personal failure, that the exhibition failed to trigger a response comparable to that engendered by houses and gardens. It is also prompted by a perception of urgency, of things moving to a crisis point which calls for both clear thinking and immediate action and no longer drift and indecision. In short to me, in heritage terms, just as the twentieth century was about saving the country house, the twenty first century will be about saving our great historic churches. But I speak to you no longer from the privileged position of being the Director of one of this country's great cultural institutions but as a man who makes his living as a professional writer and who, since 1987, has sat on no committees of any kind. I am that rare bird, in this quango and focus group besotted era, a free spirit. Such a qualification at least gives me the perspective of the average punter and the ability of coming back to a subject after thirty years with a fresh eye. The subject which presently engages my pen is one which I adumbrated in the preface to the Change & Decay exhibition. And here I quote: 'Seldom are we ever given a glimpse of the [church] building as the historic microcosm over the centuries of a community. Their very fabric tells us of prosperity and depression, of war and peace; extensions in size reflect rise in population; the names of the headstones reveal the families who for generations moulded the life pattern of the land around. We need to develop for a wider public our approach to churches as expressions of past human beings, everyone's ancestors over the centuries, and shift from the crudity of categorizing a building on its aesthetic merits alone, ignoring all else.? That remains as largely true today as it was thirty years ago. I will return to that topic later, but let me start by saying that it was a great tragedy that the torch lit by the 1977 exhibition wasn't seized as avidly and borne forwards as it was in the case of houses and gardens. The sad thing is the climate is more inimical now than it would have been in the last quarter of the previous century, the heyday of heritage. Indeed heritage has almost become a dirty word and we are faced with an attitude widely prevalent in the present government's thinking that the trouble with Britain is that it is dragged down by the weight of its own past. Witness the dreadful Dome. That also can be evidenced in the fact that, although anything historical is hugely popular on television, history as I knew it is no longer taught in the schools. The time structure which my generation took for granted in the case of any educated person has already largely gone. And to add to our woes the majority of the population has no idea what goes on in a church or even more what used to go on in a church in other centuries. Those of you who have been present at a service of thanksgiving where the service sheet has failed to print the words of the Lord's Prayer will know exactly what I mean. Through inertia through the eighties and nineties a generation which still had some tenuous links with what went on in churches and upon whom much could have been built has died off. So as the first decade of the twenty first century draws to its close any links with the wider public are far fewer. According to Christian Research 11.7 per cent of the population attended services on an average Sunday. By 1998 that had dropped to just 7.5 and the figures for 2006 record a fall to 6.8 per cent. Statistics are always open to challenge and the Church of England's own figures, not the result of polling, show that attendances are in fact holding up. More interestingly the pattern of attendance has changed, not being entirely Sunday-based any longer but spreading into the week which, for the future of church buildings, is good news. And perhaps I should temper my hostility to government by saying that although at times it comes across as being almost anti-Christian there are more practising Christians in it than at any other period I can recall. I can offset that doom and gloom by the fact that 16,000 historic parish churches in town and country are still in use, although what form that use takes is at times exiguous to say the least. That is something of a miracle but little can conceal the fact that we now have a population of over sixty million and they, in the main, are urban based and that the crisis over historic churches is less urban than rural. The urban churches represent a far different problem. My preoccupation in this lecture is with the fate of rural churches, some 10,000 of them scattered through the countryside and, as I shall demonstrate, they present a multi-faceted dilemma.

We need to look them first in the context of the history of the village. In 1801 about twenty per cent of the population lived in cities or towns. A century later 75% of the population was urban. The figure is probably even higher now. Few people seem to grasp that the country church which we cherish was already in many ways redundant by 1900. The irony of the Victorian age is that the mass restoration and rebuilding of country churches, in the main by estate owners, was for congregations which were no longer there. That was particularly so in the aftermath of the great agricultural depression from the 1870s onwards. Add to that the sad fact that the Victorian episcopate was obsessed with coping with faith in the city by building

new churches but it never turned its mind to the consequences in church building terms of the mass depopulation of the countryside. New churches should have been balanced by withdrawal from or adaptation of old ones but that never happened. That urban preoccupation by the episcopate has continued to run through the twentieth century and into this one which accounts for a situation which, in employment terms alone, can only be described as mass mismanagement of personnel on a gigantic scale. What rural clergy are asked to do no other profession would put up with. In my part of Herefordshire I reside in an area which amalgamates seven parishes with their churches. Three, if not four of them should be shut or put to alternate use immediately. I don't know where this notion that each church has a God-given right to have some kind of service on a Sunday came from. Experience has taught me that these services are attended by only a handful and are, at best, often dispiriting. It is no wonder that I now go to the cathedral which is full and offers a fine ministry of welcome and splendid music and liturgy. What this may indicate is that we are returning to the pre-parish age, the era of the minsters of Anglo-Saxon England which sent its priests out to the rural population. In the twenty first century we do this in reverse, the rural population going by car in the main to the minster. During the last ten years we have also witnessed an ever widening gulf between town and country. The dominance of the urban interest was vividly reflected in the Countryside Alliance demonstration in London, one on a scale only matched by the Chartists in the 1840s. It received scant coverage and its petitions were ignored by government. You can't divorce the fate of the country church from the fate of the village and no one seems able to face up to that fact. The village as a social unit within an agricultural society had died before 1900. Today's village is made up of second home owners, commuters and the retired. The modern village is a construct which has no roots in economic reality and that is reflected in the fact the village shop, garage, bakery, post office, doctor, school and, in some cases, even the pub have already gone and public transport virtually evaporated. Look at in this light the rural parish church stands as some weird aberration. Village halls oddly attracted grants on a substantial scale as part of the millennium celebrations. I am one of those who bitterly regret that that was ever done. In times past the church was the village hall and the hall only emerged due to misplaced notions of the use of sacred space in the Victorian era. So these rural churches remain in most cases as buildings which, if they had to respond to normal commercial pressures, would have been abandoned years ago as unviable. That they are still there we know is due largely to voluntary local effort drawing on what is nostalgic folk memory. I am rash enough to say how long will that last? Inevitably one moves in circles which love old churches which they enjoy visiting and in which they might even from time to time worship. But we delude ourselves when we think that we are more than a tiny minority and that the attitudes that surround the country church with sentimental tinsel won't fade. It is one thing for the wider public to see these churches through a haze of crinoline ladies making their way to them on a Christmas card and quite another to ask people to put their hands in their pockets to repair and maintain them. So we start with a massive failure in terms of public relations. For the majority of the population the crisis of the thousands of country churches hasn't impinged on their consciousness. Houses and gardens are always in the public eye, but not churches. Perhaps it has something to do with a sense of guilt of the kind Philip Larkin writes in his poem about slipping into a church trying hard not to be noticed. Churches shouldn't present that problem for they are truly democratic buildings, the meeting place of ordinary people in times past. Parish churches are buildings for the community and should be used for every kind of activity. That is a fact which should be built upon for their survival along with the fact that a great number are major architectural masterpieces. What militates against them in the present politically correct and multicultural era is that within their walls the Christian faith was and still often is taught and practised. The country house and the garden never had that ideological problem, nor would that have been one twenty or thirty years ago since when the ground has dramatically shifted. That is why it so tragic that the initiative of 1977 wasn't acted upon while the climate over matters of belief was more benign. The perception of the village church for most of the population is rooted in the picture postcard picturesque. For the educated the dominant forces which have taught us how to view these churches are two late twentieth century icons, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Sir John Betjeman. I think that the time has come to query their contribution instead of adding to the incense on those particular altars. Was how they taught the educated to view churches a help to our present plight or not? As we know they loathed each other. Pevsner was a German Jew who early on had converted to Lutheranism. The Buildings of England was an inspired creation begun in the immediate aftermath of World War II in 1945 and completed in forty six volumes in 1974. This achievement cannot be denigrated for it taught the English to look at their own buildings and it has to be remembered that he would cover up to ten or more churches a day. These volumes are of course irreplaceable but they remain still essentially children of their time, Germanic and art historical. Each entry works to a formula focussed on the building, the dates of its various parts, applauding here a Norman arch or there a Perpendicular window. He goes on to list what he regards as interesting contents: pulpits, stained glass, fonts, tombs and

such like including, more surprisingly, the church plate. What is completely missing is virtually anything about the church's social or cultural history in terms of who built it, the nature and extent of the parish, its incumbents, its place in the religious history of the area. What he delineates for us is not a living but a dead entity. Pevsner describes a church like a scientist dissecting a specimen. Pevsner I suppose can be said to speak to the intellect, whereas Betjeman appeals to the imagination and the heart. Poet, writer and broadcaster, Betjeman became a national icon. Never far away from him was the notion that what right had this German academic to pontificate on things essentially English. And Betjeman could write in a manner which was both easy and attractive to a vast audience familiar to him through radio and television. We all know the cadences - here, for instance, is his opening to a series of talks on West Country churches in 1948. 'Down what lanes, across how many farmyards, nesting in how many valleys, topping what hills and suddenly appearing round the corners of what ancient city streets are the churches of England? The many pinnacles of Somerset, of rough granite from the moors in Devon and Cornwall, of slate by the sea coats, brushed with lichen, spotted with saffron, their rings of five and six bells pouring music among the windy elm trees as they have poured their sound for centuries, still they stand, the towers and spires of the West? Betjeman was to condition two generations, including my own, to look with heady nostalgia and romance at the country church. Collins Guide to Parish Churches, which he edited, appeared in 1958. It opens with his criteria of being concerned with 'judging the buildings by their atmosphere and aesthetic merit.' The book boldly also set out to embrace those of the Victorian age and the early twentieth century which was a welcome innovation. To it he added a wonderful introduction, a tour de force of what one might describe as the Betjeman-esque with his predilections and prejudices writ large. Betjeman was a committed Anglican of Catholic leaning and that fact shines through the text. Its atmosphere breathes the aesthetic patriotism of his great friend, the painter John Piper, one born of the two great wars against Germany which dominated the last century. Although Pevsner never describes what a church was for Betjeman is unequivocal in the last sentence of his introduction '... the purpose of the church remains the same as it was at the beginning of this book, to be a place where the Faith is taught and the Sacraments administered.? What is important to grasp is that the work of these two icons is now virtually half a century old. There has been no lack of books since about churches but the only one to challenge these two founts has been Sir Simon Jenkins' England's Thousand Best Churches published in 1999. A prolific journalist and columnist by profession Jenkins takes a very different line from either Pevsner or Betjeman casting churches in a manner acceptable to the prevailing secularism of the last years of the previous century and the opening ones of the present. He is categorical in stating that to him 'a church is not a place of revealed truth' but, in the words of the poet, Thomas Gray, 'the short and simple annals of the poor' and also 'a dispersed gallery of vernacular art' and, finally 'a museum'. Unfortunately he does not actually flesh out any of these statements but it does remain the book most likely to be popped in the back of the car by the casual tourist. Much as I respect his work it does not move the perception on of the average church visitor. Indeed it seemingly denies to the church building its role as a testament to faith. We have a real communications problem here for no guides exist which present our churches through the centuries as the hub of a community, peopled and bustling with life. This can be to some extent laid at the door of the failure of academe to respond to the 1977 exhibition which, in the case of both country houses and historic gardens, precipitated a major research renaissance changing our knowledge and perception of their purpose and use in the past. That response did not really come much before the final decade of the last century when church history began to be examined less from the top down than from the bottom up. That can only be done where records survive, so it cannot be achieved much before the fourteenth century but can most certainly be done from the Reformation on when churchwardens' accounts and registers became mandatory. It is an approach which has already revolutionised our understanding of the Reformation, the Civil War and the Interregnum as these cataclysmic events actually affected ordinary villagers caught up in the fate of their church. Although there have been many distinguished contributors to this field of research this approach has been epitomised above all by the work of Eamon Duffy in two splendid books *The Stripping of the Altars* in 1992 and *Voices of Morebath* in 2001. In both he spells out parish life as it was lived in the local church through a revolutionary era when the place was torn apart. But it would be true to say that this way of looking at church buildings has yet to filter through to the average guidebook. Who were the incumbents, what happened at the Reformation and during the civil war, who were the great families who had the right of appropriation and whose tombs fill the place, what were the charities so often recorded on some wooden plaque on the wall, who made up the congregation, what was the music like, indeed what type of Christianity took place within its walls - puritan, evangelical, Anglo-Catholic - it all ebbed and flowed through the centuries and affected the visual appearance of the building. This bottom up approach also rams home another truth that these buildings always changed, every so often as a result of government intervention or religious revival. Not to allow it to change is in fact to kill it

off, to drive out the community for which it was intended. There's a marvellous book which I'm sure you all know by J. G. Davies entitled *The Secular Use of Church Buildings*. It's quite an old book, 1968, but it's an eye-opener as to what used to go on in churches other than the liturgy, because for centuries it was the one really strong building arising amidst the hovels of the peasantry and the only one large enough for any kind of community gathering whether for business or play. In it took place meetings, debates, elections, legal proceedings, teaching as well as festivities, happenings which were only gradually eroded by the ecclesiastical authorities. Equally the church generally housed any fire-fighting equipment, acted as the local armoury and afforded storage space for the scold's ducking stool and the stocks. If multiple use had not been eroded church halls would not need to have been built. The church was the village hall and, as I've already said, the restoration of the village halls for community purposes has weakened the case where there is one for the historic church now fulfilling that role. So much concerning the problem of churches could be solved by giving the building back to the community as its meeting place with adequate safeguards for worship. I have already told the sad tale of heritage almost becoming a dirty word. Wading through the morass of stuff available on the state of parish churches made me also begin to think that the two words 'preservation' and 'conservation' might also be shortly joining it. That does not mean that I have no respect for them, rather that we need a shift in emphasis away from them as they can be classed in one sense as negative and not dynamic words. Change has always been the life-blood of our churches. If you walked into almost any of them over the centuries you would have found them altered, either totally or partially rebuilt, the interiors rearranged, some things kept, others discarded. Much of what we now freeze in aspic for eternity as art would never have happened at all if preservation societies had existed in the Middle Ages. When the history of preservation and conservation during the last century comes to be written there will be much of course to thank all those societies and pressure groups for but also, I think, there might be some things for which they must take the blame. If you freeze a building it cannot move on to respond to changing needs and, in effect, you've killed it off. The key word for the twenty-first century is surely adaptability. What needs to happen, as I've said, is for churches to be given back to their local communities in the fullest sense. Such an approach would certainly be viewed by government with favour. But you won't be able to successfully give that space back to a community if it is jammed full of untouchable Victorian choir stalls and pews. In some ways we are more in need of societies for sensibly changing and altering churches - adapting them as I've said - than ones for conserving and preserving them. To change and alter things is to move forward, to conserve and preserve is at best static, at worst turning the clock back. It is also too often forgotten that parish churches might be old but they're not that old, the present parish system being largely twelfth century. The Christian community got along for centuries without them. Perhaps, as I've already suggested, that's what's going to happen to them in the twenty first century. They began as buildings which embraced the whole community within a given urban or rural area. For about four centuries that remained true. We should not delude ourselves either that the parish church was always a uniting force within rural communities. It was to become a divisive one. If you asked me when the parish church as community died I would answer with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642. It had already lost rich Catholics as recusants from the 1580s and, after the Restoration, dissenters, who were officially recognised, were able to have their own places of worship after the 1689 Act of Toleration. Those losses continued through the eighteenth century with Methodism and then, in the Victorian period, came more evangelical losses. In the last century followed the general decline in belief and the demise of the necessity of attending church as an index of social respectability and standing. After 1945 came a massive fall-off. Indeed the history of church attendance is one long litany of congregational loss down to the era when the motor car can take you to the church of your choice in the consumerist age. And in any case you can in a sense attend church listening to the radio or looking at television. But we can't get away from the fact that these rural churches have an hypnotic hold over even the surrounding unbelieving laity in an era now labelled as post-Christian. So what are we going to do with all these thousands of old buildings? Let me begin by saying that as you know a great deal has been done and even more is being done. Even a government which seems hostile has been reasonably generous introducing tax rebates on gift aid and exception from VAT for church repairs. Add to that the excellent initiatives of the present Bishop of London and of English Heritage with its document *Inspired!* In addition the implementation of the Toyne Report opens the door to some radical reorganisation of the diocesan and parochial systems which are still, even in 2006, in the main medieval. All of these initiatives are signs that something is at last beginning to stir. But let me provide a viewpoint from someone who has, as I've said, wandered back into this subject after three decades. In 1977 the means whereby churches were preserved, changed, declared redundant or whatever was a hydra-headed tangle. It still is. There is an appalling lack of clarity and until that has been attained you will not reconnect with a sympathetic public. The future of our churches is a pie into which so many fingers are now plunged that it's a wonder the

contents aren't all over the floor. I couldn't get over the utter morass of institutions, public bodies and trusts involved in anything to do with the maintenance, alteration and preservation of church buildings. In the case of country houses and gardens for the most part it is literally the Historic House Owners Association, the National Trust and English Heritage, government coming in through various agencies and then the various societies like the SPAB, Georgians and Victorians on the sideline. And that's it. The general public can grasp this not altogether complex structure. The image is coherent and the administrative and management structure easy to follow. But you turn to anything to do with churches. It is a nightmare even to list a few of those who are involved in historic churches, The Churches Conservation Trust, The Council for the Care of Churches, the Ecclesiological Society, The Friends of Friendless Churches, English Heritage, Heritage Link, the Archbishop's Council, the Church Heritage Forum, the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, the Ancient Monuments Society, the Historic Churches Liaison Group, the Historic Chapels Trust and the Churches Open Trust to mention but a few. Add to them all the Diocesan Advisory Councils. What sort of coherent image do you think this ghastly hydra projects to the average punter on holiday who likes visiting old churches and wouldn't mind trying to help propping a few up. One can at least be thankful that Lord Lloyd Webbers Open Churches Trust wound itself up last December so at least there'll be one less finger in the proverbial pie. The public are presented with the Tower of Babel, a babble of conflicting interests and voices. I spent thirty years in the museum world and I know too much about the internecine warfare that goes on between even the most seemingly well-intentioned bodies which occupy the same territory. You are never going to harness the general public to the cause without some kind of coming together. Virtually every major body connected with saving and preserving churches is post-war. The Ancient Monuments Society admittedly goes back to 1924 but the Historic Churches Preservation Trust is 1953, the Friends of Friendless Churches 1957 and the Churches Conservation Trust 1969. Their very names are antiquated and, if I had my way, I would junk them. They belong to an era that's gone. Their success or rather failure can be measured by the fact that the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, for instance, has a membership only of some 1400 people. The National Trust I need hardly remind you has some three million. In my dealings with these various bodies in the preparation of this paper I was struck less by the camaraderie which existed between these various societies than a kind of edginess among people who are trying to occupy the same territory. The existence of all these different societies in fact muddles the issue. As far as the public is concerned ideally what is called for is one organisation which they can equate with for both visiting and maintaining beautiful old churches. I know the answer to this will be Oh, we'll have another liaison committee but it won't do. We need one organisation only with a new name, a revised series of community based objectives in tune with where we are now and a radical recruiting drive for members with keen thoughts as to what can be offered because there must be things to offer. But the likelihood of this happening is remote as there are too many entrenched interests for keeping the status quo. Also it would help the cause if the Church of England came clean and told us which churches were in a serious condition. It is no use going on about a crisis when there seems an inability to spell out precisely where it is biting. The impact in 1974 of hundreds of photographs of demolished or wrecked country houses had an electrifying impact on the public. Gardens equally affected people. Lastly let me end with a cameo. I live on the Welsh Borders in Herefordshire, a radically over-churched county, one in which you can stand in one churchyard and look over to the next. I have been visiting every church, a simultaneously elevating and dispiriting experience. I have not yet finished the tour. Only in one country church did I find that not only had the pews gone and been replaced by chairs but also, at the back of this medieval building, a loo had been installed with disabled access and a kitchen. It was all utterly seemly. In most I wanted to do what the commissioners under Edward VI and latterly under Elizabeth had done with the roods, take an axe and hatchet the utterly awful kipper coloured choir stalls and pews, drag them out of the church and burn them. There was another even better beacon, the church of St Michael at Mansel Lacy, a Herefordshire church with a Norman nave and fourteenth century windows. The St Michael's Mansel Lacy Community Association was set up in 1996 as a charity. Its objects are the provision and maintenance of community facilities within the church for the inhabitants of the parish without any political, religious or other distinction. The use of the building includes meetings, lectures and classes and other forms of recreation, anything in short which improves the lot of the local inhabitants. So beneath this legal umbrella now nestles the Garden Club, the Lacy Ladies, The Get Together Club, an annual Soap Box Derby not to mention a Community Access Point. I am sure that this is not the only role model for the future for our rural churches but I find it an inspiring one. What we need is precisely these role models of adaptability bringing life and a new role to the village church, one which in twenty first century terms is much like the part it played in the life of the community in the late medieval period. All over the country the future use of these buildings should be placed squarely for consideration to those in the surrounding community firmly in terms of change and adaptability and less in those of propping up in perpetuity a relic

from an age long gone. All of this requires leadership from the top which so far seems to be singularly lacking or, if it is there, the message hasn't reached the majority of the rural population. Those in whose hands the future of our beautiful historic rural churches resides should be thinking about this now. Little case can be made in the twenty-first century for an expensive building to exist for a service once a week or month lasting an hour. Adaptation often emerges as some kind of last ditch solution whereas it ought to be a positive action to be encouraged now by congregations facing up to the enormity of a problem which is not going to go away but, if anything, worsen as the century progresses. Not every building without a purpose has a right to live on. The challenge resides in giving them a reason to continue to exist, for there is no way all of these buildings can survive to the end of this century. Sadly the disappearance of a church is seen as yet a further nail in the Church of England's coffin. It shouldn't be. It's just that patterns of worship have changed. Populations have shifted. The reason for the building of a parish church nine or so centuries ago has gone. I think that we should also remember that, as in the case of the dissolved monasteries, a ruin has its charms and the Christian faith moves on. I suppose if I were staging the exhibition Change & Decay in 2007 I would alter the title to Radical Change or Decay. The choice is yours.

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