

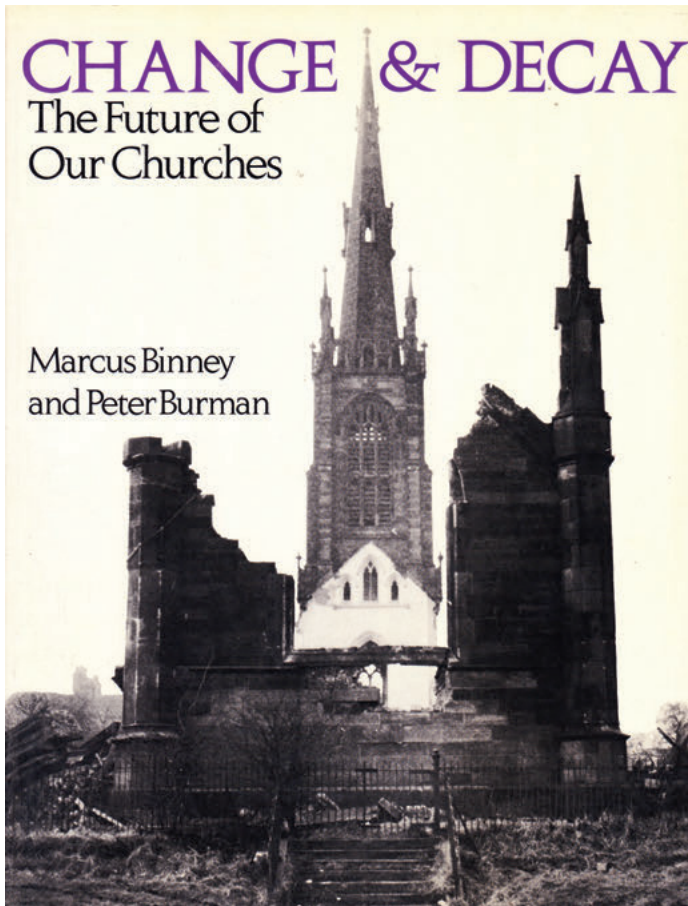
# SPOTLIGHT ON CHURCHES

*Marcus Binney*

2017 marks the 40th anniversary of the exhibition *Change and Decay: The Future of our Churches*, at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Though not as famous as its predecessor *The Destruction of the Country House*, it was extremely influential, and SAVE organised a large travelling version which toured the country for three years, shown at museums and galleries, and cathedrals too.

Roy Strong as Director of the museum commissioned two trustees of the newly formed SAVE, Peter Burman and I, to curate the exhibition in succession to the first exhibition curated by John Harris, Peter Thornton and I.

Within three weeks of the opening of *Change and Decay* in June came the surprise announcement from the government that



historic buildings grants for outstanding churches ie Grade I and II\* would begin immediately, increasing substantially in the following full financial year. Until then there had long been a stand-off between Church (ie Church of England) and State on the basis of no control, no grants.

The Church of England had its own system of faculty jurisdiction and had fiercely argued in the debate on the first Ancient Monuments Bill in Parliament in 1913 against any additional controls over their church buildings from central government. For years this had seemed an impossible deadlock and it had the unfortunate side effect that grants were denied to all places of worship, notably Roman Catholic churches and Nonconformist chapels, many of which were badly in need of major repair. They did not have the fundraising capacity of the Church of England, and received little from organisations such as the Historic Church Preservation Trust which gave mainly to Anglican parish churches.

The research for *Change and Decay*, carried out by my wife Anne, centred initially on compiling a list of notable churches lost over the preceding century on the model of the stupendous list of lost country houses compiled by John Harris. The church list became a huge affair and local authorities produced awesome lists of lost churches – 36 listed churches which had been demolished in Glasgow, 50 historic churches demolished in Liverpool and 23 in Bristol – not all listed then though many would have qualified if they had survived.

Barry Mazur the designer of the exhibition, changed the format. *The Destruction of the Country House* began with celebration and went

on to the famous Hall of Destruction. *Change and Decay* began with a harrowing large format slide show of demolition followed by the glories of church art and positive examples of rescue and reuse.

It became apparent at quite a late stage that the real crisis was the accelerating number of churches (especially Anglican) standing empty or facing imminent closure. In too many cases this led to precipitate demolition as the Church Commissioners' Advisory Board for Redundant Churches could fast track demolition if they considered a church of lesser historic interest, thereby excluding any chance to search for new owners or new uses.

On examination, we found many of these lesser churches were buildings of real quality and character, many Victorian, but some earlier. We went to war with the Church Commissioners, which had the memorable outcome at a reception of a Church Commissioners official saying to me “we’ll have your blood Mr Binney!”

The travelling version of *Change and Decay* consisted of 80 six foot high panels which opened like books to reveal magnificent photographs of churches, lost, decayed and revived.

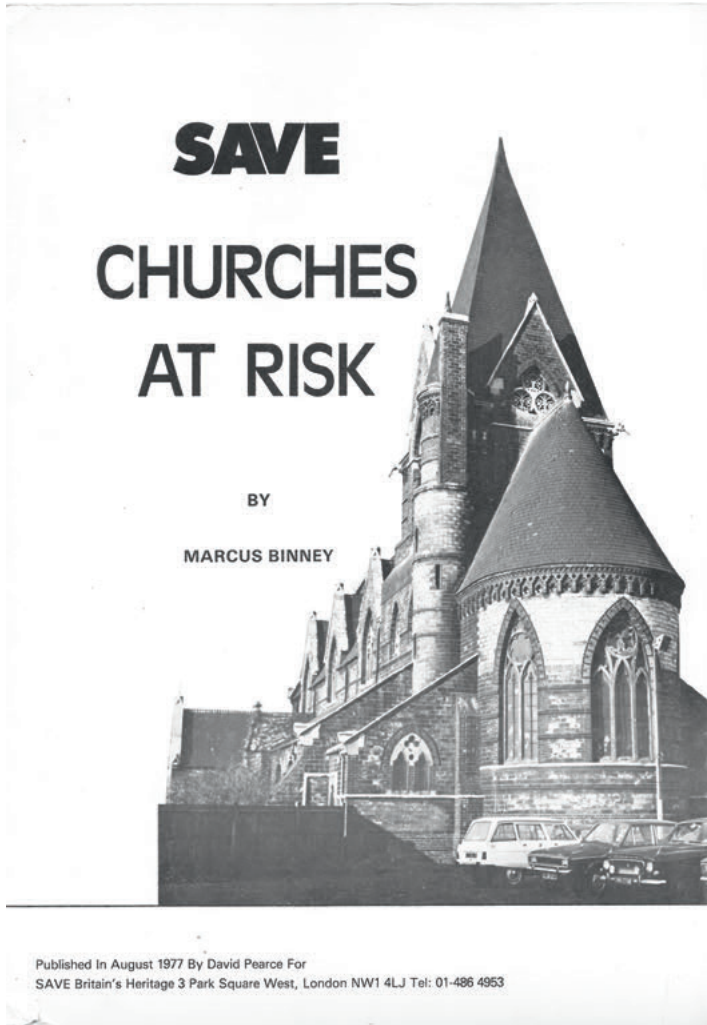
The second great focus of the exhibition was also covered in the book Peter Burman and I wrote for the British Tourist Authority *Chapels and Churches: Who Cares?* In this we explored the architecture and history of all the many other denominations from Calvinist Methodists to Wee Frees in Scotland.

SAVE participated directly in the exhibition with a lightning report on *Churches at Risk*, which was followed by a series of reports on endangered churches including *The Fate of a*

*Thousand Churches, The Fall of Sion and Churches: A question of Conversion.* As always SAVE's approach was not just broad brush. We took up the cause of individual churches at risk. Peter Burman organised a collection at the exhibition which raised £7,000 pounds to repair the roof of the little medieval church at

Rackheath in Norfolk. We fought successfully for the beautiful 18th century church in Worcester built for the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion (then run by the exotically named Wilfred De'ath).

A bigger loss loomed in the form of the threat of demolition to Gilbert Scott's All Souls





*Photo: All Souls, Haley Hill  
by Alastair Wallace via  
[www.mapio.net](http://www.mapio.net)*

Haley Hill in Halifax, which he had described as, “on the whole my best church”. The Church Commissioners and the diocese had been told that the spire of All Souls was dangerous and decided to make its demolition a test case. SAVE held a rally in the staircase of Scott’s Midland Hotel at St Pancras (then all dust and cobwebs) where we formed the Friends of Haley Hill followed by the All Souls Haley Hill Trust.

We saved All Souls thanks first to our splendid and appropriately named architect Donald Buttress (who as a result went on to be Surveyor to Westminster Abbey), and second Lord Charteris, chairman of the National Memorial Heritage Fund who used his casting vote to award us a grant of £300,000 towards the repair of the roof and spire. Some of the

trustees had felt it was wrong to give money to redundant churches when so many churches still used for worship were in need. Our other main supporter was the Marquess of Anglesey, whose many pithy postcards of support are treasures of our archive.

Once the work was complete All Souls was vested in the Churches Conservation Trust. SAVE went on to fight a series of church battles, saving the Roman Catholic Church of St Francis Xavier in Liverpool (now fully in use for worship, its outstanding architecture is now acknowledged and admired complete with SAVE’s own stained glass window). Another church saved on death row was the Clifton Congregational Church in Bristol, converted to apartments but leaving the exterior substantially unchanged.

Government grants for church repair have dramatically improved the outlook for historic churches. When *Change and Decay* opened in 1977 parish church Declarations of Redundancy were running at 80 to 90 a year. Soon after the rate slowed to 20 a year where it has remained. Through repair grants English Heritage (EH) gave a secure future to hundreds of churches and when disproportionate cuts in its annual grant-in-aid from Government began to threaten the programme the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) stepped in with a Joint Places of Worship Scheme. Yet EH funds continued to be cut year on year in real terms and some five years ago the HLF took over church grants in their entirety. The great bonus of the HLF Grants for Places of Worship (GPOW) programme was that grants of up to £250,000 could be given for urgent fabric repairs. The roof is the heart of any historic building. Neglect it and it is very soon in serious trouble. The test for GPOW was the need for repair with less emphasis on the usual lottery tests of outreach and public engagement. As a result congregations could get the essential repair work done and many parish churches are in better repair than they have been for centuries.

At the end of March 2017 the HLF announced that all this is to change, beginning this September, when the GPOW programme will close to new applications. In its place funding for repairs to places of worship will be available through HLF's existing Our Heritage programme (up to £100,000) and the main Heritage Grants programme (£100,000 up to £5m).

The Our Heritage scheme is intended to introduce a faster single-stage application for

grants of up to £100,000 in contrast to the previous two-stage application process currently required under GPOW. Grants will be available not just for repairs but for a wider range of activities and capital works. Churches needing higher levels of grant (for example to repair a large roof), will be required to apply for a Heritage Grant which will immediately put them in competition with applications from major heritage attractions and museums. The volunteers who look after churches will be matched against the professional advisors which these larger bodies retain and can afford. Churches will find it hard to compete in such an environment.

The champions (and owners) of historic churches and the many volunteers which support them are up in arms. First they were not consulted, only informed of these momentous changes shortly before they were announced. Second a great many large medieval and 19th century churches are faced with repairs bills of well over £100,000 (usually roofs) and will find themselves dealing with the much more complex application process for larger grants. They feel doubly trapped as the grants they are seeking will be at the bottom end of Heritage Grants (that is nearer the £100,000 minimum than the £5m top limit) but they will be engaged in a competitive process in which a grant application, though accepted as eligible, can be rejected because other applications are considered stronger. This may prove a mighty dampener. A further worry is that until now repair grants have had to be put forward by architects with experience of historic building repairs. This has been an important safeguard and an assurance that building works will be to a high standard. This

## SPOTLIGHT ON CHURCHES

is not a requirement of the Our Heritage programme or Heritage Grants.

The Lottery tests of outreach and public engagement fall particularly hard on Catholic churches which are sacred spaces and not available for secular purposes – though community and educational activities may and do take place in other nearby church buildings. In many cases a major public benefit is provided by being open to visitors who come to see fine church interiors and works of art. For centuries numerous British travellers have enjoyed Catholic churches in continental countries in this way. In Britain visitors are

welcome in Catholic churches and though some Catholic churches are locked so are many Anglican ones too – almost all because of concerns of vandalism and theft.

There is a bigger question of whether the HLF (and behind them Government) are actually interfering with freedom of worship by laying down conditions as to how churches are to be used (or refusing grants if they are considered not to conform with guidelines on extended use) and judging whether they consider a church to be sustainable by their own secular standards. SAVE gave strong support to members of the congregation of



Photo: St Peter and St Paul, New Brighton. The National Churches Trust via [www.Flickr.com](http://www.Flickr.com)

the church of SS Peter and Paul, New Brighton when they were fighting closure. Thanks to its prominent position on the mouth of the Mersey it was known as “the Dome of Home” to seafarers returning to Liverpool. As a result of this determined campaign the church has reopened with three Lottery (GPOW) grants for the roof, dome and brickwork.

Another key example is St Augustine’s, Ramsgate. When the Archdiocese of Southwark took on the church from the religious order which had run it since the mid-19th century, there was serious dry rot in the roof. If EH (as it then was) had not immediately offered a repair grant to stop the rot and fix the roof the church would not be in the position it is now with an enthusiastic parish priest and Friends Group implementing a scheme for the repair of the interior and for an exhibition with the help of the HLF Heritage Grant. Without a strong focus on repair it is hard to see how some of these important endangered churches can turn the corner.

We urge the HLF to continue to place a strong emphasis on church repairs. Historic places of worship rank among the finest works of architecture Britain possesses, acting as landmarks in town and country, and representing a remarkable diversity across a millennium and more, as well as the character and aspirations of communities great and small. The trustees of the HLF must continue the work they have done with increased, not diminished, vigour and effectiveness.

The church repair grants introduced in 1977 – 40 years ago – have been amazingly successful in supporting historic churches of all denominations as well as notable places of worship belonging to other faiths. An impressive body of specialist architects, engineers, contractors and craft workers has been built up. It is vital that grants continue to draw on and sustain this expertise.